April 2024

Sport & Rec: Expanding Access in Beginner Programs

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

STUDENT LIFE

INNOVATION HUB

Introduction

Sport & Rec operates as a division of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education (KPE) at the University of Toronto, providing sport and physical activity programs for students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members. Sport & Rec is committed to designing spaces and programs that consider a diverse set of student needs, with a particular interest in the needs of students with disabilities and those from equity-deserving populations.

Sport & Rec continued its partnership with the Innovation Hub in 2023-24 to gather feedback on the project vision and 10 design principles that were developed from last year's findings as outlined in the ***Diversity in Movement: Expanding Access at Sport & Rec*** report. This report found that movement impacts every student's life in some way. When students engage in movement, they discover more about themselves beyond just their academics and studies at the university. Last year, we found that movement acts as an opportunity for discovery, human connection, and creates an equalizing space for students. We also learned that students experience barriers when deciding to pursue movement at the university, and the report addressed some of the specific challenges that they face, particularly when getting started. Of paramount importance across all stories was the idea that people need to feel safe when participating in physical activity, and when safety is created, students can find freedom in movement.

Building on last year's work, this year's project focused on experiences of students participating in beginner programs to better understand the factors influencing participation. We hope that the insights from this research can inspire new ways for Sport & Rec spaces and programs to be equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

Methods

Since 2016, the Innovation Hub has established an in-depth understanding of student experiences and expertise in designing feedback sessions across a variety of settings at the University of Toronto. Our team takes a human-centered approach, using in-depth qualitative research methods and design-thinking strategies to foster rich data collection, and elicit honest stories from students about their experiences. We translate the stories into themes that help us understand their diverse perspectives and reveal insights that will inspire the future design of programs and services.

In the fall of 2023, we hosted co-creation sessions in which we shared findings from the March 2023 report with students, staff, and faculty to listen to their reactions to the presented design principles. We engaged participants in ideation activities to hear their visions for making Sport & Rec more accessible, inclusive, and tailored to their needs. We spoke to **40 students** and **12 staff and faculty** across **5 co-creation sessions**.

In winter of 2024, we turned our focus to direct engagement in beginner programs at Sport & Rec. Our **Innovation Hub team members participated in 9 Sport & Rec beginner programs** and recorded their experiences through an in-depth journal activity. Additionally, we **interviewed 5 students** who had recently attended a beginner program or an equity-focused program to learn more about their experiences. Our data set was transcribed and de-identified and included interview transcripts, journals, and short answer responses. Finally, the data was supplemented with the Innovation Hub's archive of data for further analysis.

In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students communicated. This report contains a summary of the co-creation sessions, as well as a summary of our data analysis from journals and interviews.

Overall Findings
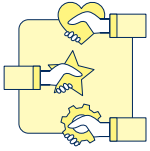
Students expressed the **importance of collaborative participation with others** when engaging with movement. Approachable and friendly peers and staff enhanced students' experiences and encouraged them to engage more within Sport & Rec.
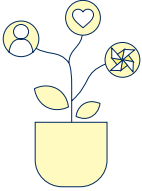
Students explained it would be **meaningful for them to move in new ways** they felt Sport & Rec might not be currently offering. Students cited activities like hiking, campus walks, meditation and mindfulness, or even attending a varsity game with other students as activities they would like to take part in. Opportunities to engage in movement in diverse physical environments, both indoor and outdoor and in individual and group activities, could help students find an activity they like and feel comfortable participating in.
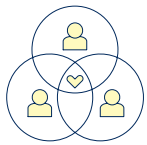
Students emphasized their desire for Sport & Rec to continue to **prioritize equity in programming**, voicing an interest to increase inclusion of diverse student populations. Students mentioned mature students, trans and nonbinary students, and students who are also parents participating with children as important populations.

Students told us **ease of access and greater visibility of information** about the options available at Sport & Rec were important to encourage participation. Students wanted an easy way to be informed about what to expect in movement activities to help them evaluate if the program aligns with their personal goals and movement preferences. Students requested more awareness and clarity about events through the Sport & Rec website, social media channels, and the presence of Sport & Rec at orientation events.

Students explained how important their **physical safety, security, and safety of their belongings** are to them. Students described feeling unsafe/uncomfortable commuting to and entering facilities during certain hours of the day such as the evening. Students voiced concerns about their safety and the safety of their personal belongings in lockers and change rooms.
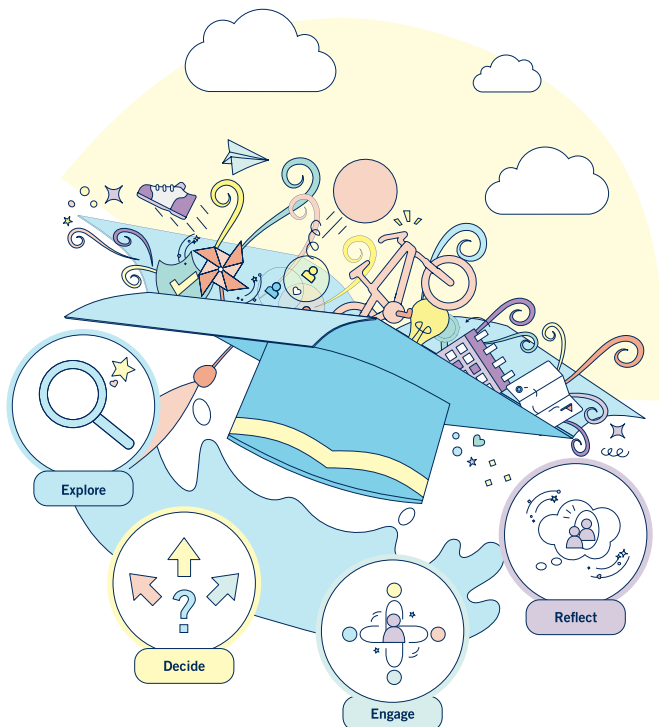
Data Visualization

Our student digital communications team sought to depict the data-driven vision with an iteration of the original graphic design image from last year's report which represented the original vision: *When students engage in movement they find freedom from the academic box.* The graduation cap opening represented the benefits of movement for students. Sometimes academia can create pressure to achieve and some students feel constrained by the pressure. Movement offers a temporary freedom beyond their academic demands. In this new iteration, we wanted to place 4 stages of engagement: *explore, decide, engage, reflect*, under the graduation cap to highlight the journey which allows students to participate in movement.

Explore

Decide

Engage

Reflect

Students Told Us...

What's Working Well

Students expressed appreciation for **movement spaces that made them feel comfortable and safe.** For instance, students felt that women-only programs helped create a more comfortable and supportive environment to engage in movement with peers who shared their gender identity and fostered a community that supported them through their fitness goals without judgment.

Several students felt **movement activities supported their mental health**. Many students shared they engaged in movement to take a break from academics, take care of their physical and mental health and learn new skills.
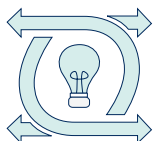
Students appreciated activities that provided **low stakes and flexible participation** such as MoveU and HappyU, which allowed them to participate in movement to manage their well-being in between academic commitments.
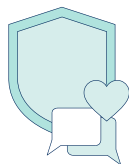
Students, staff, and faculty highlighted the importance of **knowledgeable and inclusive instructors who are considerate of diverse learning styles and needs**. Students shared how friendly and welcoming instructors made a positive difference to their experiences and acted as motivators to re-engage with movement. Sport & Rec staff expressed interest in equity-focused training and training around mental health to help them develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding toward students.

What's Challenging
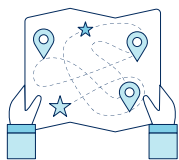
Students shared they want **beginner programs with lower levels of ongoing commitment offered at flexible times** to help them comfortably and conveniently engage with beginner programs. For example, some students described that they are unable to attend certain beginner programs like IMPACT training which requires a 30-day commitment due to their busy schedules.
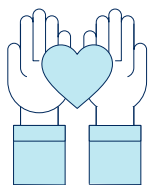
Participants expressed concerns about the **affordability of program costs and pricing** for rental equipment that exceeded their budgets. Students felt hesitant engaging in movement when rental prices were high or when they did not realize renting equipment was required to participate. Some students spoke about feeling surprised by unexpected costs when using Sport & Rec in the summer, bringing a child to a program, or renting a locker.

Students emphasized the need for **clearer and consolidated information about beginner programs** to better choose a program that best suits their needs. Students shared eagerness to learn about programming but spoke about the need for more awareness and advertising to learn about what is available. Many students only found out about programs when they were referred by a friend or from social media accounts of an unrelated student group.

Stages of Engagement

We heard from students about their journey participating in Sport & Rec activities and based on their stories we identified 4 key stages of engagement: **Explore**, **Decide**, **Engage**, and **Reflect**.

Stage 1: Explore

When students **Explore** the prospect of participation, they considered movement as an option for the first time or considered a new form of movement. In this stage, students were curious about how movement could benefit them and often their interest was sparked by something like a Sport & Rec program advertisement, recommendations from friends, or curiously visiting the Sport & Rec website or facilities to see what is available to them.

The **Explore** stage was a critical time when students opened their minds to the possibility of bringing a new movement activity into their routine. During this phase, students considered how movement could fit into their life and benefit them.

Stage 2: Decide
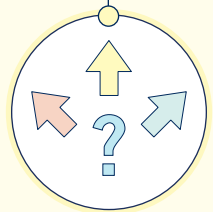
When students **Decide** to participate in movement, they first informed themselves on the programs and opportunities that interested them by identifying key factors that fit best into their goals and preferences. Students commonly considered information about the timing of the activity and if it fit with their personal schedule, the movement intensity, the skill level, and instructor availability. Once students decided to attend a program, they registered and prepared to participate by finding the location of the activity, arranging meetups if attending with friends, and determining what equipment and clothing they needed to bring.

The **Decide** stage was a critical time when students learned about available programs and made the decision to engage in a new movement activity. During this stage, students began to set expectations about what they wanted their experiences to be.

Stage 3: Engage
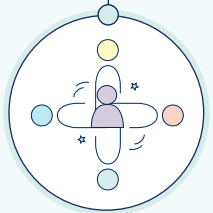
When students **Engage** with a movement activity for the first time, they interacted with the environment around them and decided their comfort level. In this stage, students navigated the physical space looking for their program and settling into the activity. Oftentimes, students interacted with front desk staff, instructors, and peers which helped them determine how they felt being in the space.

The **Engage** stage is a critical time when students participated in movement and ultimately evaluated and decided how they felt about the activity, and in the environment.

Stage 4: Reflect

When students **Reflect**, their focus shifted to processing their experiences engaging in movement. Students considered factors like if their expectations were met, how the facilitation of the program impacted their experiences, and what they enjoyed and did not enjoy.

The **Reflect** stage is a critical time when students decided how they wanted to re-engage in movement at Sport & Rec in the future.

Activators to Movement

We learned as students navigated through the 4 stages of engagement, they encountered activators to movement: enablers and barriers that contributed to their experiences participating in movement.

Enablers

Enablers are factors that encouraged students to engage with movement by providing them the support they needed to feel confident and comfortable participating in an activity. Enablers were context-dependent and varied by the personal preferences of students and the logistics of the programming they are interested in. Accessibility measures can be considered enablers, as they supported participants in their ability to engage in movement activities. These motivating factors and facilitators of movement promoted an overall positive experience for students as they strived to achieve their goals.

Barriers
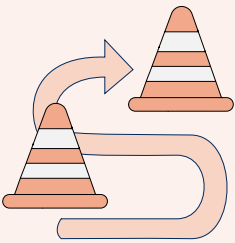
Barriers are factors that caused varying levels of difficulties for students to participate in movement. Barriers were context-dependent and varied by personal experiences. Barriers could be physical or mental factors that discouraged students from fully participating and were challenges they needed to overcome to continue their movement journey. If not addressed, barriers compounded over time and amplified the challenges experienced.

Enablers

Friendship Opportunities

Possibilities for new friendships motivated students to consider engaging with movement. From having a person to socialize with during a beginner program to having someone to push and motivate them, students emphasized the hope for making new friends as an enabler.

Chance Information

Encountering information about movement opportunities by chance, such as during Orientation or someone handing out a pamphlet enabled students to take a step to explore a new form of movement. Often suggestions from peers provided the information needed to prompt students to explore movement opportunities.

Health Benefits

Periods of stress and overwhelm and desire to improve physical and/ or mental health and wellbeing were intrinsic motivators for students to take the first step to explore movement. Some students began to explore participation opportunities after a period of high stress or poor health which prompted them to take care of themselves.

Something New

Setting a goal for themselves and/or a desire to learn something new or have a novel experience enabled students to explore new forms of movement. Some students had specific ideas about the type of movement they wanted to explore for a specific reason (e.g., martial arts for self-defense), while others enjoyed the idea of setting and achieving a new goal outside of academics.

Barriers

Information Overwhelm

The vast amount of information available about various ways to engage in movement and other activities caused some students to avoid exploring or stop exploring movement opportunities. Some students felt confused by the information provided or had a perception that the information would be confusing if they started looking.

Self-Doubt

Fear and self-doubt about many topics acted as a barrier to exploring new movement opportunities for many students. Students cited worries about the unexpected, insecurities around their lack of experience, fear of being alone, feelings of shyness, and concerns about how they might be perceived by others participating as reasons not to explore participation opportunities.

Perceived Lack of Time

Busyness and feeling that movement is something a student would like to explore but they did not have time acted as a barrier for students to explore movement. Many students prioritized academic commitments over extra-curricular activities like movement, causing them to decide against looking into participation opportunities.

Perception It Isn't for Me

Many students held perceptions about the type of people who participate in movement activities and feeling different from those people, prevented them from engaging in movement. For example, some students felt only athletes were welcomed in gym spaces, or only experienced participants could successfully engage with an activity. Perceptions that "someone like me" was not the appropriate participant caused some students to avoid exploring movement.

Decide

Enablers

Peer Recommendation

When friends and peers at the university suggested a student attend a movement program, their likelihood of participating was greatly increased. Having a friend to attend the activity with greatly enabled students to decide to take part. When a friend or peer had already attended an event and could help a student know what to expect, the information acted as an enabler.

Matches My Needs

Some students decided to attend a movement program for the first time because it was open to individuals from an identity group they self-identified with. For example, events such as women-only hours at the gym or queer focused activities, made students feel included and empowered amongst their peers to participate in movement. When a program was stated as a beginner program, many students felt comfortable to try it for the first time as they believed the program would cater to those with little to no experience with the activity.

Accessibility

Accessibility matters to many students and when the description or feedback from friends about a movement activity or program indicated steps taken to foster accessible participation, students felt more comfortable making the decision to attend.

Fits My Schedule

Scheduling is important to students. When events were low-commitment and offered the option to just show up, students felt they could more easily attend. Additionally, when activities were scheduled at times convenient to students, they felt empowered to attend.

Barriers

Costs

Students mentioned the cost associated with rental fees and paid programs acted as barriers for them to try out movement activities for the first time, especially for beginners. Students mentioned they knew there were services paid for in their tuition but were unclear about the scope of what these fees covered. Students felt transparency and a breakdown of ancillary fees would foster greater trust toward Sport & Rec services.

Information Confusion

Students sometimes found information on the website about activities to be unclear and confusing. At times, the information lacked details students felt were important, citing transparency around costs as a common issue. When students had difficulties deciphering the different types of activities that one could engage in and those that best suited their needs, they became frustrated and sometimes decided not to attend.

Perceptions around Inaccessibility
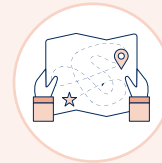
Students looked for information about accessibility when they made decisions about attending and if they perceived the activity might be inaccessible for them, they chose not to attend. For example, students who felt programming would not meet their needs due to confusing registration processes, unclear accommodations, or had concerns about wayfinding and how sensory friendly the physical spaces would be, acted as barriers to not attend movement activities.

Doesn't Fit my Schedule
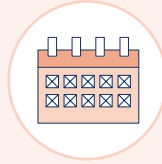
Students often considered if a beginner program would fit into their life schedule when deciding to engage in movement. Scheduling is very challenging when students are coordinating schedules with their friends to attend together. Infrequent events, and activities with low number of spots are other reasons why students may decide not to attend.

Engage

Enablers

A Welcoming Arrival

When students arrived at a movement activity, warm greetings from front desk staff, instructors, or others, made them feel more comfortable participating. Aspects of the facility such as spaces that are bright and open, adequate directional signage, and places to store belongings created a sense of welcome. When students perceived others in the class welcomed them, their participation was enabled.

Support from Staff

Instructors and other staff who helped new students find their activity, provided clear and easily understandable information during the activity, and who were knowledgeable about movement were important enablers to making students feel confident to engage.

Amongst Peers

Students felt most comfortable engaging in new activities when others participating were perceived as peers. Students sought to feel welcomed, and supported by others, looking for equity in their participant group in terms of skill level, and in some cases, their intersectional identity.

Expectations are Met

When a movement activity matched students' needs and expectations of what they felt they had signed up for, participation was enabled. Students who felt safe to express themselves and their abilities authentically, engage at their own skill level, and felt supported when they made mistakes, fully participated.

Barriers

Skills Mismatch

Some students attended activities where they thought the program was for beginners but other students in attendance had more advanced skill levels with the activity. Feelings of embarrassment or lack of confidence with one's skill level acted as a barrier to participation.

Overwhelming Environment

Some students became overwhelmed during engagement because of difficulties with wayfinding in the building, loud spaces, spaces that were too busy, or other challenges that made them feel overwhelmed. These kinds of circumstances were barriers to participation, and sometimes students left before the activity started.

Lack of Interpersonal Engagement

When students showed up to group activities and did not have a chance to interact with others, participation was limited. Additionally, low participant turnout was a barrier to students who believed they would be engaging in movement with their peers in a group activity. When there are too few people present for the activity, engagement cannot happen.

Perceived Exclusion

Sometimes students arrived at an activity and noticed others participating seemed to already know one another making it difficult for them to feel included. Students reported difficulties interacting with established groups, which became a barrier to participation.

Enablers

Feeling Inspired to Continue

Students who noticed an improvement in their mood after engaging in movements, felt inspired and empowered to participate in future activities. Students who felt a connection with a supportive instructor who went above and beyond to help them or stayed after the activity to chat with them also fueled their desire to continue.

Learning New Skills

Students felt happy and accomplished after learning a new skill through a beginner program. These feelings made students want to continue to engage so they could grow their skills in their movement of choice. For many students, the new skills they learned also helped them feel empowered and more confident in their daily lives, motivating them to continue.

Bring a Friend Next Time

When students enjoyed a movement activity, they thought about the opportunity to share their experiences with friends who might want to join them. Other students felt alone during their first time with movement and upon reflection, they saw an opportunity to invite a friend next time.

Hopeful for Future Programs

Some students tried a movement activity that they realized was not a good fit for them. Upon reflection, these students remained positive and investigated other program options that might appeal to them more. These students felt a sense of hope at the possibility of joining a different activity in the future.

Barriers

Self-Doubt/Indecision

As students reflected on their participation in the activity, some experienced feelings of second-guessing and doubting themselves. In cases where the program did not align with their skill level or where they blamed themselves for not having the appropriate skill level, they became unsure about whether they'd like to continue attending.

Slow Skill Development
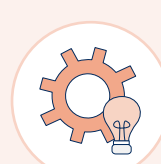
Some students attended programs where all participants started at a similar level, but some progressed quicker than them. As the class moved forward, the students whose skills were slow to develop felt frustration and lost confidence. When students felt they were not developing at the expected pace of the class, they felt like giving up.

Mismatched Expectations
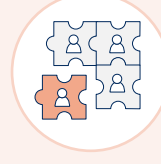
As students reflected on their movement experiences, some realized the expectations they had coming in were not met. For example, some students attended program intended for beginners but discovered the participants seemed more experienced. Other students found the activity was canceled after they thought it was confirmed. These experiences caused some students not to return.

Feeling Judged

Some students reflected on how they felt during their movement experiences and felt that others were judging them. In some cases, students felt rushed by others waiting to use the space after the activity was complete. Perceptions of being judged during an activity left students questioning whether they want to return.

Personas

Personas are data-driven aggregates of experiences that students and staff have shared with us brought together in a fictional character. Personas humanize the needs and reflections of people as shared in co-creation sessions, interviews, and journal responses

Alex (they/them)

- 1st year undergraduate student studying humanities
- Non-binary person
- Domestic student who grew up in a small town in Southern Ontario
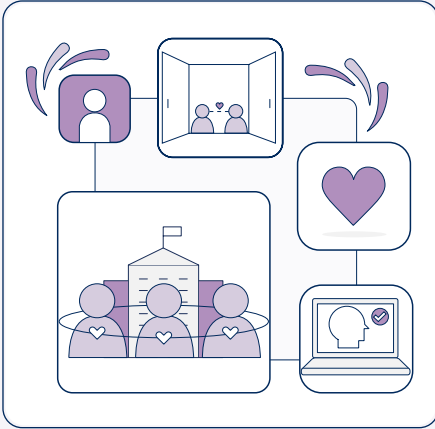
From moving into residence to starting classes, I've been going through a lot of turbulence since I moved out of my parents' place in my tiny hometown. I was really nervous about getting to meet people who would understand me well, since I've been exploring my gender identity for several years now. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to find a close group of friends at U of T who are part of the queer community and share many of my experiences. My friends and I have a lot of fun exploring the city, trying different restaurants and cafes around campus, and even studying together for our exams even though we all study different subjects. I'm wondering if there are other community-based activities on campus we could do together to stay in touch even as we all get busier because of schoolwork this year. I'd really like to find new ways to de-stress from the academic pressures of my program. It would be even better if we could find events that are queer-friendly so we can meet other people and expand our little group.

Yuki (she/her)

- 3rd year undergraduate studying social sciences
- Spends a lot of time on campus feeling stressed and overwhelmed with academic work
- Identifies as a person with disabilities (with sensory and a movement disorder)
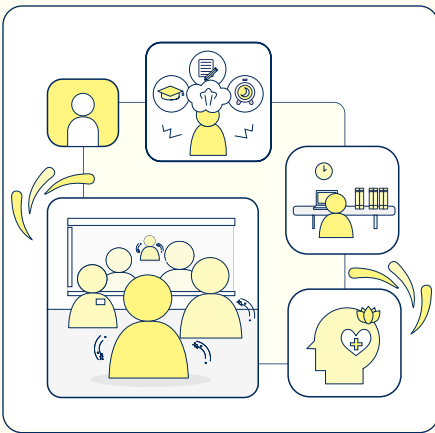
One of my favorite parts of my program is gaining a deeper understanding of the forces that shape our world and learning how to critically analyze current events. At the same time, all that thinking has left me super burnt out as exam season approaches. Every day I wake up, go to class, study, finish my assignments, study some more, and then finally fall asleep exhausted after midnight. Recently, one of my classmates asked me what I'm doing this weekend, and as soon as I told her that I'd be "studying at Robarts as usual", it was like a slap in the face. I realized I've been spending my entire university career just drowning in academics, which probably explains why my stress levels have been through the roof. School is important, but I know there's more to life than academics! I know I need to do more to take care of myself, physically and mentally. I want to find something to do in between studying and attending classes that isn't just sitting in one spot all day.

Personas

Yaro (he/him)

- 1st year PhD student in social sciences
- Working part-time while studying
- Mature student and an international student
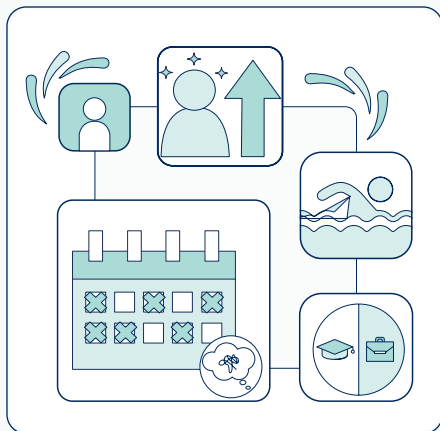
I've been thinking about going back to school for a long time, but it wasn't until this time last year that I finally made the leap and applied to almost a dozen different graduate schools. I was worried that I wouldn't be accepted anywhere, so I'm thrilled and honored to start my PhD at my dream school, U of T. I've been really enjoying being back in a learning environment and spending time on campus. Pursuing a PhD in my field has been my goal since I was in high school, so I'm determined to do whatever I can to make the most of my experience. I started working part-time to support myself while living in Grad House, so my campus commitments have to flex around my coursework and scheduled shifts. I've spent a lot of time around Sport & Rec facilities since the Athletic Centre is right across the street from my residence, so I often grab coffee and hang out in the area. Even if it might be challenging to find a time, I'm eager to try a program since I already pay for access to the facilities through my tuition.

Bernard (he/him)

- 2nd year undergraduate studying sciences
- Commuter student
- Feeling lonely and isolated at U of T
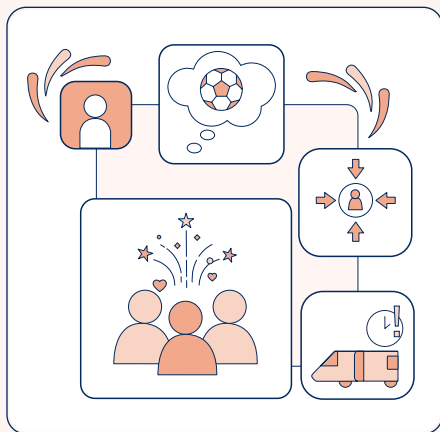
As a commuter, I spend a lot of time sitting on the TTC, and when I'm not commuting, I'm sitting in class or a library. While I'm enjoying my program, I feel like I haven't found that sense of community that everyone talks about. It's hard to admit, but there are times that I do feel lonely, and I wish I had someone else to hang out with and confide in. I've struggled with social anxiety for most of my life, so it's hard for me to push myself out of my comfort zone when it comes to meeting new people. Once in a while, when I'm feeling brave, I try to strike up a conversation with my seat neighbors in class, but everyone already has established friend groups or is too focused on their work, so the conversation never goes anywhere. On my way home from class, I always see students playing soccer on Back Campus Field. It makes me remember being a kid again and playing soccer every weekend with my teammates. I didn't feel any pressure to say the right thing; we'd just kick the ball around together and then we were friends. Maybe I could try joining a team sport to meet new people at U of T?

Explore

While in their residence's dining hall, Alex stumbled upon a "Move with Pride" poster, promising an LGBTQ2S+ event perfect for queer students like themselves and their friends—a rarity compared to their hometown. Unfortunately, they had missed the latest one. In search of a welcoming activity, Alex explored the Sport & Rec website for alternatives but found it challenging to find queer-friendly, community-focused programs.
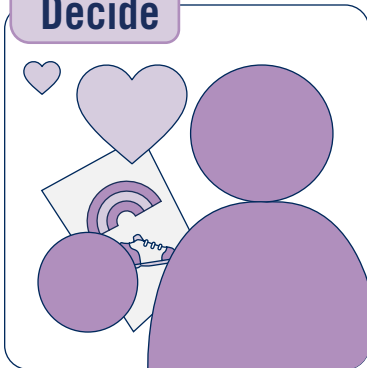
Perception It Isn't for Me

Alex began to wonder if there are Sport & Rec programs designed for LGBTQ2s+ individuals like them because it hasn't been easy to find an activity.

Decide

Alex found it challenging to sift through information for relevant programs, but through diligent research, they stumbled upon IMPACT Proud. Described as a drop-in session for and led by the LGBTQ2S+ community, its clear, queer-friendly information reassured Alex that they and their friends could comfortably engage, relax, and have fun in a welcoming environment. The program description advertised a community dedicated to inclusion and belonging, which made Alex feel confident that this would be a good fit for them and their friends.

Accessibility

Discovering IMPACT Proud felt like a miracle for Alex and their friends, offering a queer-friendly, clear, and safe space, perfect for a fun, recurring program.

Engage
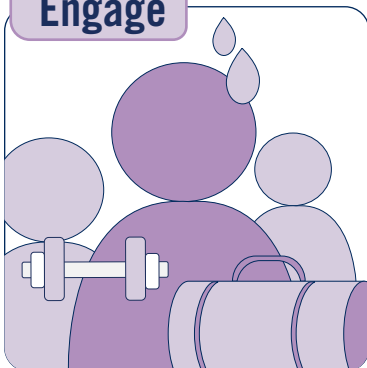
Arriving at the Athletic Centre for "IMPACT Proud", Alex and their friends felt a mix of excitement and nerves. As the class began, the instructor's focus on technique over community-building made Alex feel tense, longing for a more relaxed atmosphere to enjoy with friends.
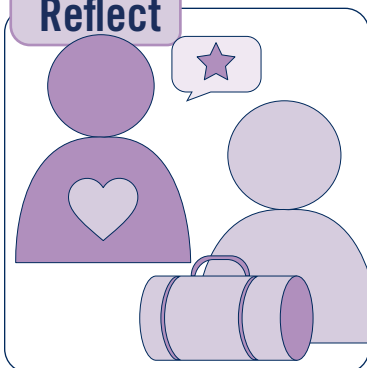
Overwhelming Environment

Expecting a relaxed day with friends and a chance to connect with the community, Alex felt overwhelmed by the session's intensity, focusing more on technique than fostering community.

Reflect

Reflecting on their IMPACT Proud session, Alex eagerly anticipates future Sport & Rec programs with optimism because this first experience gave them a glimpse of how they can engage in movement with friends. Despite challenges, it fuels their eagerness for new activities, like the "Move with Pride" event. These hurdles sharpen their appetite for adventure and community, encouraging resilience and teaching the value of unexpected experiences for growth and connection.
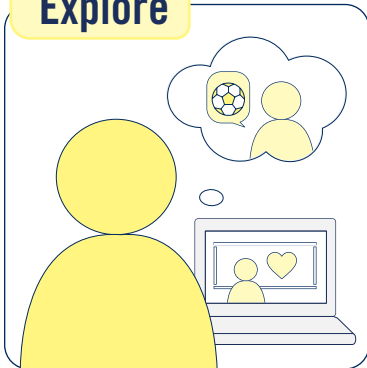
Hopeful for Future Programs

Reflecting on the experience, Alex realizes IMPACT Proud wasn't the right fit. They appreciate its benefits but seek a calmer experience. This has encouraged them to explore more, hopeful of finding their perfect program fit.

Explore

Yuki's friend spoke highly of a Sport & Rec drop-in soccer program, highlighting its enjoyable, refreshing nature and supportive facilitator. Seeking a study break for mental health, Yuki inquired about similar activities and discovered a variety of options on the Sport & Rec website.
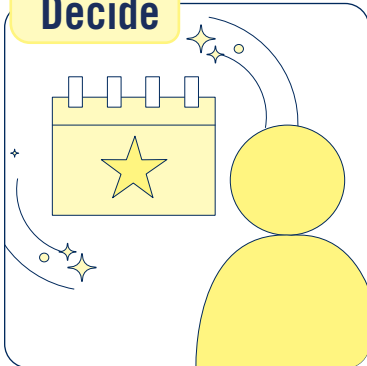
Health Benefits

Yuki, stressed from academics, seeks mental wellbeing, inspired by a friend's positive experience with a sport and recreation drop-in program.

Decide

Seeking a low-intensity, fun activity, Yuki chose Drop-in Vogue dance from beginner programs. The no-registration-needed aspect and her friend's positive experience heightened her excitement. Confident in its beginner-friendly nature and familiar with the location, she marked her calendar and prepared to embrace the new experience.

Peer Recommendation

Yuki, trusting her friend's recommendation, explores Sport and Rec drop-in programs, anticipating positive vibes from her chosen activity.

Engage
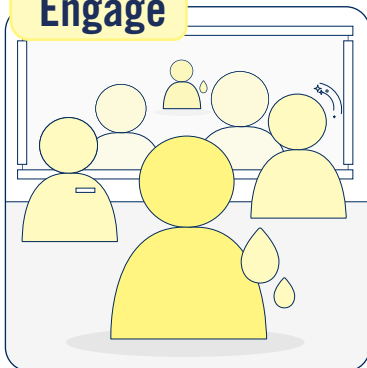
Feeling nervous, Yuki entered the dance studio, warmly greeted by the instructor and fellow participants. The class began positively with an encouraging start during the warm-up and initial dance moves. However, as the complexity increased and participants began to cheer and chat, Yuki struggled to keep up, experiencing sensory overwhelm and embarrassment, feeling discouraged as her movements were noticeably less coordinated and out of sync with the group.

Skills Mismatch

Yuki felt embarrassed and lost confidence in a beginner program when others displayed more advanced skills, diminishing her enjoyment.

Reflect

After the session, Yuki left quickly, feeling embarrassed and out of place among supposed beginners. The class, initially fun, quickly became challenging, not matching her expectations for a low-intensity, beginner-friendly activity. Yuki still wanted to dance but considered finding a program with fewer participants and more support.

Self-Doubt/ Indecision

Yuki, feeling her skill growth lagged behind peers in the beginner vogue dancing session, loses confidence and considers other programs.

Explore

Before Yaro graduates, he wants to make the most of his student experience by trying something new and has recently become motivated to learn how to swim after seeing people do laps in the pool at the Athletic Centre. He doesn't know what to expect and has so many questions before committing to a program.

Something New

Yaro is inspired and motivated to try a new activity and learn how to swim. He wants to capitalize on his experience at UofT and believes a new form of movement will provide that.

Decide
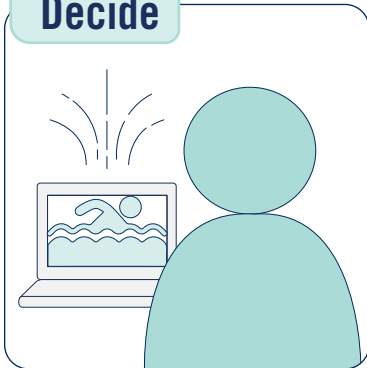
After weighing the pros and cons of each swimming program, Yaro decides to attend the Drop-In Learn-to-Swim Beginner Program. He found information on the Sport & Rec website that helped him envision the structure of the program and size of the class. Although the program description did not mention too much about the swim instructor, Yaro felt ready to learn something new and was eager to meet the person who would be teaching him how to swim.

Matches my Needs

Yaro finds a program that suits his needs in terms of commitment level, cost, and class size. This makes him comfortable to engage in movement and helps him explore his options.

Engage
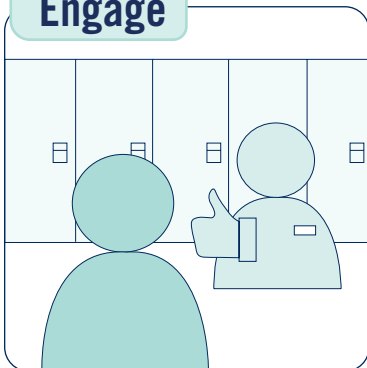
Yaro was off to a smooth start upon arriving at the Athletic Centre. Staff gave him directions to the changerooms and explained how to access the pool, they even wished him good luck since it would be his first time in a pool. By the end of the class, Yaro had felt a rollercoaster of emotions. He appreciated having such a supportive instructor but could not deny the fact that the other students were more skilled than him. This surprised him and even made him feel a bit embarrassed because he thought everyone would be at the same skill level.

Skills Mismatch

Yaro lost a bit of confidence while learning how to swim for the first time because the other students in the class looked more comfortable in the water.

Reflect

The instructor made a positive lasting impression on Yaro, and this led him to decide that private lessons would be a better fit. Through the low stakes of the Drop-In Learn-to-Swim Beginner Program, he learned that he enjoys personalized instruction but did not want to feel like other students were judging him as he learned how to swim. Yaro is ready to invest in a long-term program so that he can achieve his goal and make the most of his experience as U of T.

Feeling Inspired to Continue

Yaro reflects positively on his experience and instructor and now feels comfortable committing to a higher-commitment program.

Bernard (he/him)

Explore

Bernard is determined to meet new people even if that means stepping out of his comfort zone. He uses the Sport & Rec website to find an activity with a focus on community. Drop-In Basketball stands out to him as a popular sport that other students are also likely to want to try.

Friendship Opportunities

Bernard is pushed to engage in movement because it is an opportunity to make friends and form a community. This is especially true because outside of Sport & Rec, making friends in class is difficult and nerve-racking.

Decide
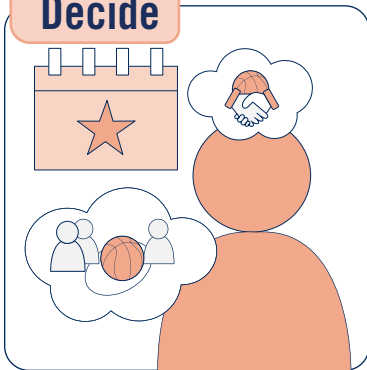
After seeing a picture of people having fun while playing basketball on the website, he checks the schedule to find a time that fits his schedule. He plans his commute and is grateful that he doesn't have to carry any equipment.

Matches my Needs

Bernard narrows down on the drop-in basketball program because it best suits his need for building a community through a team sport.

Engage
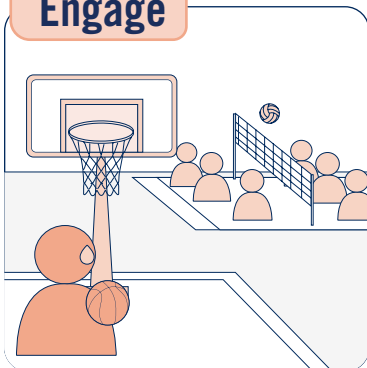
When Bernard arrived at the basketball court, he thought he was in the wrong place. Bernard didn't see anyone playing basketball, but he did see that volleyball was happening at the other end of the Field House. He confirmed with the physical activity facilitator that the beginner program was scheduled for today but that no students have showed up yet. This was totally unexpected, and he felt discouraged.

Lack of Interpersonal Needs

Bernard is faced with no turnout at the drop-in basketball. Now he has no way of forming the community with other students that he so eagerly desired.

Reflect
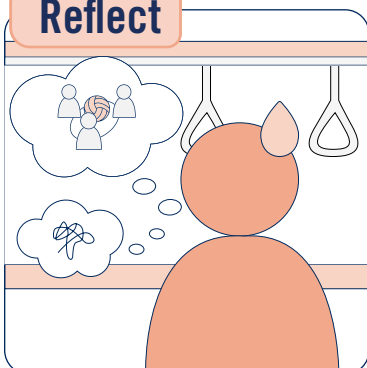
As Bernard was leaving the Athletic Centre, he began to feel annoyed that he wasted his time commuting to a program that couldn't even happen because there were no other students. Bernard could not help but blame himself for not being more outgoing. He could have easily gone over to the students playing Drop-In Volleyball but felt too shy. Bernard has some hope for the next program that he tries, but may consider a program with registration to guarantee that there will be other students.

Self-Doubt/Indecision

Bernard feels sad and disappointed his efforts to be more outgoing were futile. Bernard internalizes that he was the problem and something about his personality made forming friendships difficult, preventing him from engaging in movement.

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Design Principles

Design principles are data-driven guidelines to support designers in meeting people's needs with empathy. The principles suggest issues to keep in mind while prototyping solutions and offer criteria for refining and prioritizing design ideas.

Our initial conversations with students and staff informed the development of these design principles. To build on these ideas, we ideated with students and staff ways to bring each design principle to life and a summary of these ideas is included below.
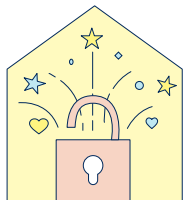
START WITH ACCESS

Prioritize accessibility in everything. Ensure that physical spaces are accessible and barrier-free with appropriate wayfinding and accommodate access challenges to encourage participation.

- Create digital maps of facilities that highlight accessible entrances/exits and all gender washrooms/changerooms.
- Include signage within facilities to improve wayfinding.
- Promote accessibility-related information on the website to help students plan and prepare to engage in movement.
- Offer students an easy way to provide feedback or voice their concerns about the accessibility of spaces and programs.
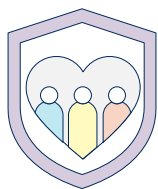
WELCOME EVERYONE

Go to great lengths to ensure students feel safe to participate in programs or spaces as themselves, without modification, and there is no one "model" they need to fit. Promote a variety of programming options to create opportunities for students to participate in activities that best meet their needs.

- Distribute badges with 'say hi' written on them to help foster interpersonal relationships and make it easier for students and staff to approach one another.
- Expand women-only and queer-friendly programs to increase inclusivity and promote a sense of belonging in movement spaces
- Implement pre- and post-program icebreakers or activities to help students make lasting connections beyond movement.
- Host equity-focused workshops or create a handbook guide to provide instructors with additional tools to deliver accessible, equitable and inclusive programs.

ONBOARD WITH OPTIONS

Create low-stakes, low-commitment opportunities for students to try Sport & Rec with bite-sized options. Design programs intended for students who have never participated and ensure additional support from caring and empathetic staff in these programs.

- Cater to diverse student lifestyles by offering trial classes and drop-ins for different skill levels.
- Design mentorship programs for students who are new to movement and create 'buddy' programs for students who value accountability and peer-to-peer connection.
- Include personalized descriptions on website so that students can get to know their instructor prior to attending the program.
- Meet students where they are; schedule pop-up booths in non-movement spaces to give students a short break from academic commitments.

Design Principles
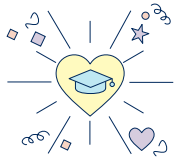
GIVE LIFE BEYOND LECTURES

Recognize and promote the need for students to engage in non-academic interests. Prioritize Sport & Rec as a space for students to let go of their academic stressors and have fun.

- Organize de-stressing movement sessions for students at libraries and around campus during exam season.
- Design spaces for studying within Sport & Rec facilities, so students can seamlessly integrate movement sessions into their lifestyles.
- Motivate students to make time for movement, e.g., photobooth at facilities, handing out stickers upon arrival, etc.
- Host educational talks to promote the value of movement and nutrition to students.
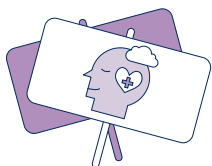
MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Actively promote the mental health benefits of movement to students. Create programs and spaces that intentionally support mental health. Spaces and programs should be designed to encourage taking care of ones' mental health with movement.

- Host social events and/or incorporate time for socializing during Sport & Rec programs for students to meet new people while engaging in movement.
- Increase the frequency of meditation and mindfulness activities within movement programming
- Place sunlight lamps in dimly lit spaces to make facilities feel more welcoming, especially during winter months.
- Showcase uplifting messages on posters or websites as a way to promote mental health awareness and create a positive environment.

AGILITY WITH AFFORDABILITY

Ensure students of all financial circumstances feel welcome to participate in programming and spaces they are interested in. Establish financial supports that make programs more accessible to students, and prioritize transparency in communicating these supports to ensure all students are aware of and can take advantage of the available opportunities.

- Provide more affordable options for programs, summer memberships and locker rentals.
- Consider offering various payment options such as pay in installments, subsidized programming fees, free guest passes or movement bursaries for current U of T students.
- Arrange events for students to purchase or trade gently used equipment.
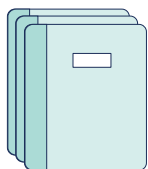
INFORMATION EMPOWERS

Prioritize sharing Sport & Rec programs, spaces, and opportunities with students in highly visible and accessible ways. Ensure that information reaches potential participants and includes messaging that promotes engagement with movement.

- Promote and advertise Sport & Rec opportunities during Orientation week by collaborating with U of T colleges and student clubs.
- Ensure information on website is easy to access so that students can find a movement activity that matches their needs.
- Encourage students to explore Sport & Rec opportunities and increase awareness about programs through social media.
- Support students by providing information about what to expect prior to attending a program.

Design Principles
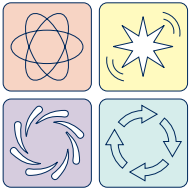
MOVEMENT IS PERSONAL

Recognize that students choose to move for different reasons. Offer options for both introverts and extroverts and ensure that variety in space options for movement are provided to acknowledge the wide variety of reasons why students choose to move.

- Personalize movement activities based on student feedback using tools like surveys.
- Offer movement activities, e.g., Tai chi, from different cultures to cater to U of T's diverse student population.
- Offer more outdoor movement options like sightseeing and hiking.
- Ensure students can engage in movement at their own pace and in a space that feels comfortable to them
    - Have private spaces to reduce feelings of judgement from others.
    - Provide both indoor and outdoor activities to engage in movement.

SCHEDULE FOR ALL SCHEDULES

Provide students with a variety of opportunities to engage with Sport & Rec, giving students the choice to participate according to their schedules. Students are more inclined to participate in programming when there are opportunities to engage without straining their existing lifestyle.

- Cater to diverse student lifestyles by offering trial classes and drop-ins for different skill levels.
- Design mentorship programs for students who are new to movement and create 'buddy' programs for students who value accountability and peer-to-peer connection.
- Include personalized descriptions on website so that students can get to know their instructor prior to attending the program.
- Meet students where they are; schedule pop-up booths in non-movement spaces to give students a short break from academic commitments.
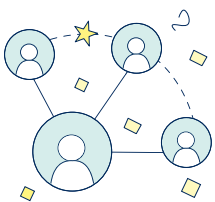
## CURATE CONNECTIONS FOR COMMUNITY

Foster opportunities for students to connect with each other through movement. Connecting like-minded individuals can help them form supportive smaller groups within the larger community at U of T.

- Create a 'gym buddy' program, where students with similar schedules are matched up so they can participate in movement together.
- Facilitate online forms of communication, e.g., Discord server, to help students find people with similar interests.
- Offer community-building activities that do not require movement, such as watching a varsity game or sports games with peers.
- Encourage instructors to get to know students and acknowledge the role of instructors in fostering connections among students.

Beginner Program Stories

Here we show student personas before and after design principles have been applied to their experiences.

Alex (they/them)

Current
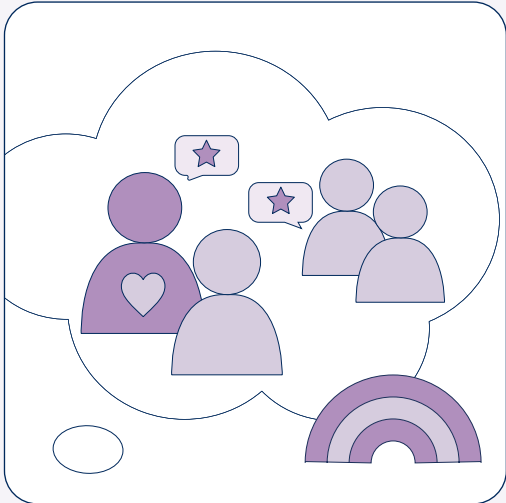
Alex wants an opportunity to engage in queer-friendly community-based activities on campus with their friends. Their experience in a helpful but strict movement activity leaves them hoping for more casual opportunities to connect with their friends.
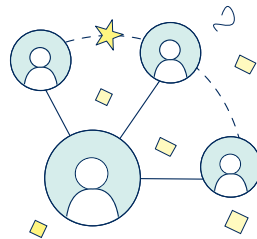
Curate Connections for Community

Alex joins a new chat channel for queer people and learns about new programs that are LGBTQ2S+ friendly.
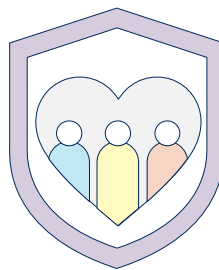
Future

Alex joins a new chat channel and connects with other queer students who recommend LGBTQ2S+ friendly activities. They are eager and confident their friends will enjoy attending the programs with them.

Yuki (she/her)

Current
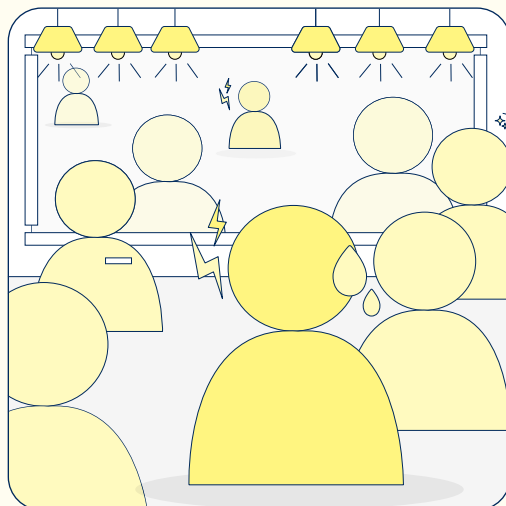
Yuki decides to explore a movement activity to destress but finds the dance class she attends overstimulating. She is hopeful to find a more sensory friendly program.
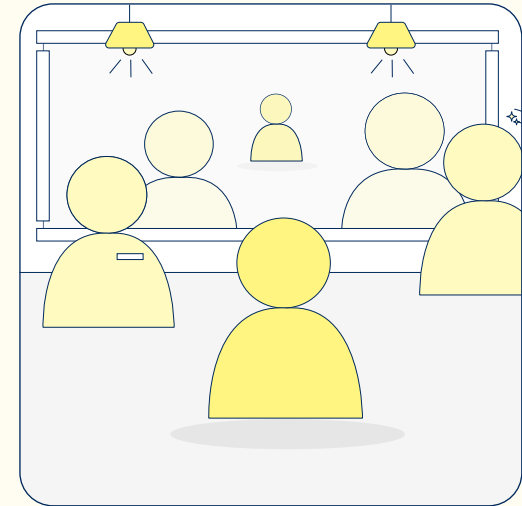
Welcome Everyone

Yuki learns about a dance class with a sensory friendly atmosphere with less people and dim lights.
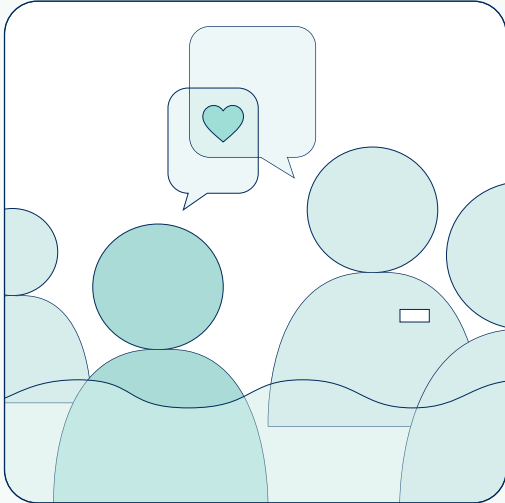
Future

Yuki finds a dance class with sensory friendly accommodations including less people and dim lighting. She feels more comfortable attending this event.

Beginner Program Stories

Yaro (he/him)

Current

Yaro attends a drop-in swimming class and learns a lot from a supportive instructor. He feels bad for relying on them so much because there are other participants in the class.

Onboard with Options

Yaro explores new movement options and finds a drop-in program with an instructor with a similar cultural background.
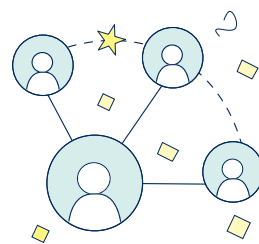
Future

Yaro reads the program description for a drop-in running activity and discovered the instructor is from the same country as him. The information about the program helps him learn more about the instructor prior to attending.

Bernard (he/him)

Current
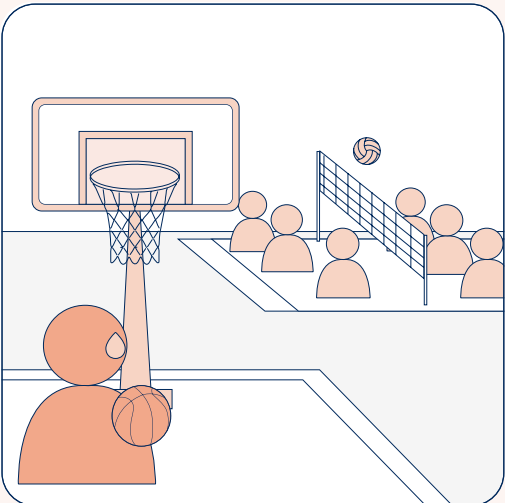
Bernard attends a drop-in program to meet others only to find no one attended. He sees another group of people playing a different sport but is too shy to engage.
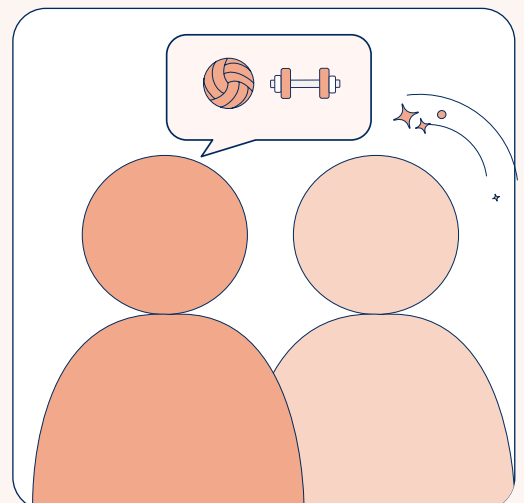
Curate Connections for Community

The Buddy program connects Bernard to other students looking to find a friend to engage in movement.

Future

Bernard joins a buddy program and befriends peers interested in engaging in movement activities. He feels excited and connected to his new friends.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Building on the work of last year where we found movement acts as an opportunity for discovery, human connection, and creates an equalizing space for students to find freedom from the stress of their academics, this year's project focused on experiences of students participating in beginner programs. We sought through immersive research to truly understand the mindset of students through each stage of participation in a new activity: explore, decide, engage, and reflect. We hope the insights from this research can inspire new ways for Sport & Rec spaces and programs to be equitable, diverse, and inclusive.
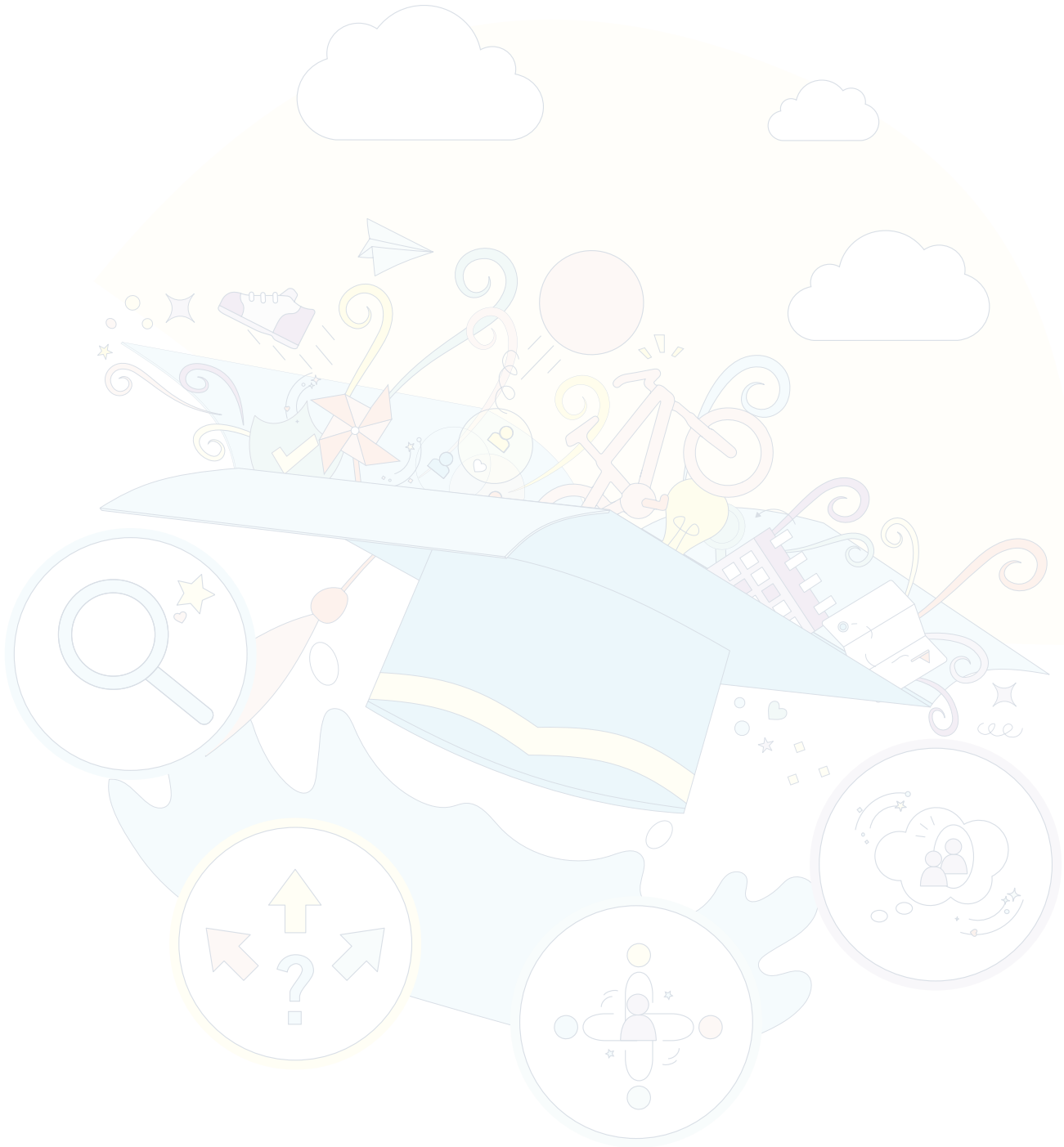
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