The Resilience Project

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
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introduction

Over the past year, the Division of Student Life has been reviewing literature concerning resilience in students. This review is meant to inform the creation of material to foster resilience in students and to improve program design. In conjunction with this ongoing work, the Innovation Hub undertook a design thinking project utilizing long-form empathy interviews with students on the topic of resilience. We wanted to better understand what resilience looks like at the University of Toronto and what is being done to support it.

Speaking with students from a variety of backgrounds, our team determined that **resilience appears as self-management skills and critical self-reflection, both of which can be honed through participation in much of the extra-curricular programming available on campus.** This report contains a summary of the three key themes, the insights within each theme, quotes that bring the insights to life, and questions that emerged out of the findings. Students' stories will be told through 'personas,' which are used in the design thinking process to understand someone's needs and experiences. This helps guide the ideation process and ensures that the end product meets student needs. The personas included in this report are characters created based on the data we gathered; they allow us to share student stories while maintaining anonymity.

theme one:
Managing the Self

In challenging circumstances, students described a series of practices or techniques for self- management. These are less concerned with productivity, explicitly, than self-reflection and informed decision-making within a process of personal discovery.

Key Insights

1) **Self-worth:** Some students need to feel valuable and deserving of positive outcomes, which helps them feel self-reliant and self-confident.

2) **Self-awareness:** Many students are looking for means to take calculated risks about their future by understanding their abilities, motives, and desires.

3) **Self-control:** Students need to use willpower and set limits to monitor themselves and understand when help is required.

Key Quotations

"I began to define [personal health, fitness, and values] as my worth or success instead of arbitrary outcomes of scientific pursuit.... But focusing so much on failures in school and letting it influence and be the basis and definition of who you are and how much you're worth isn't healthy, because there will always be lows during your time at school, and if you don't have buffers to help buffer your self-worth during these times...if performance in academics is your only definition of self-worth, then it becomes a problem. If services that are extracurricular, like fitness classes, friendships, and other things that are outside of school, are also part of your self-worth, then it doesn't become so bad when you fail at the one thing."

"Choosing a program usually requires people to consider their interests.... If it doesn't work, some no longer feel confident in choosing a major based on their interests. I didn't know much about my strengths, weaknesses, and myself as a person. I chose biology. I'd get emails for business opportunities but nothing else like, for example, physical sciences. I was desperate for people to pitch programs to me and state their opinions."

"It comes down to realizing what your limitations are. That you have limitations. And that's okay. You can't expect to tackle everything, to load yourself with five challenging courses and expect to do extremely well in all of them without struggle." [...] "I said to myself: what do you do in [the] face of difficulty? You tough it out. You do whatever is necessary to survive the year. Finish your courses. Try not to lose small grades on assignments, which add up. Try your best even if you don't fully understand the material.... I discovered that you need to not just know."

theme two:
Self-Advocacy

For students, demonstrating resilience means speaking or acting on behalf of their personal, emotional, and physical needs.

Key Insights

1) **Acceptance:** Students succeed when they are shown—and show themselves—tolerance and trust while embracing their needs.

2) **Agency:** Many students want personalized learning options and channels for advocating on their own behalf.

3) **Persistence:** Despite difficulties, students who persevere continued to find ways to express their needs.

Key Quotations

"Things got better in fourth year, because I knew how to ask for accommodations and better balance my schedule around my appointments. Just trying not to compare myself to others and focusing on using my way of learning [visual] to help me understand the material."

"It's difficult to suggest to professors how to structure their courses, but I think it's important, and professors should keep analytical discussions more towards the end of the course rather than at the beginning." [...] "We need to have student advocates— that's the best thing. Advocates for these needs in every class, and then get anyone who has gone through something...force them to share with one friend and then everyone will know. Word of mouth. Via friends."

"Change your ways of learning by yourself. Even if there are people telling you about the difficulties they've experienced, you wouldn't know unless you've experienced it for yourself. You need the motivation to make those changes, and it needs to come from a very personal space. Also, you can't expect the same strategy to work for everyone. You have to develop strategies yourself. See what works for you."

theme three:
Involvement as Resiliency

In difficult times, many students find stability and meaning in their engagement in co-curricular social activities and/or academic pursuits.

Key Insights

1) **Co-curricular and social:** Many students actively seek out co-curricular opportunities to connect with peers, contributing to a positive student life experience.

2) **Barriers:** Key barriers to engagement include a lack of awareness of programs on offer, a reluctance to dedicate time to something other than course work, and challenges in navigating the processes as new students, international students, students with disabilities/mental illness, etc.

Key Quotations

"One major point of transition for [me] was last semester, when I went to a BSA [Black Student Association] event. It was an event where students would come together and talk about things like discrimination on campus and the need for creating interaction spaces for black-identifying students on campus. Without these kinds of spaces, we are not able to congregate as much as we should and need to."

"I was less concerned with science being my definition of self-worth and more focused on defining my self-worth on these things that I could control myself. As opposed to being controlled by the bureaucracy and individuals around me. This is why it's so important for students to have access to fitness classes and services that help them achieve their full potential."

"I never grew up here; I wasn't aware that I had to look for resources. I didn't even know they were available. I thought you just studied by yourself. We never had anything at my school in Dubai. The way our Don would do it was nice, because every week, she would tell us what was happening for the week rather than everything is thrown at your face all of a sudden. I know it's hard because [the] university is so big, and there's so much going on."

"It's just that some students don't realize or don't think enough about how much these things can help them. Like 'how is focusing less on school going to make me better in school?'"

persona one:
Challenged Chelsea

Domestic Student
3rd Year Women + Gender Studies
Identifies as racialized and as having a disability

"We need to make U of T a safe space for minorities and those with accessibility needs. As a minority with accessibility needs, I don't feel as safe as a lot of other students do."

I'm passionate about equity, and I know first-hand what gaps there are in how U of T supports students who are diverse. For example, I know that there are resources available for students with disabilities, but there are just so many barriers to accessing them.

I mean, "being sick in itself is a barrier. You're already tired and going through so much, so it's really hard to find the time and energy to go to Accessibility and talk to all these people."

I also get inconsistent results when I ask for accommodations from professors. Sometimes they just don't understand, or they're openly hostile. I once sent an email to a professor to explain my needs, but I got no response, so I approached the prof in person. He responded abrasively and said my email was too aggressive. It made me feel ashamed to have asked in the first place, and I kinda suspect his reaction was related to my being a woman of colour.

I find strength to deal with these challenges because I know I'm not alone, and I have connections with my cultural community. I went to this event where other students from my racial background shared their experiences of discrimination, and we talked about the need for intentional spaces where our community can interact. It's really heartwarming; I'm often in tears when we talk about experiences and support each other.

But the community isn't everything: I still face challenges when I talk to my peers about my accessibility needs. Like, I brought this up with a friend once, and he over-reacted, thinking my life was threatened, and began to panic, which made me feel really uncomfortable. I've decided it's safer not to talk to my peers about my accessibility needs anymore.

persona two:
Intimidated Iman

International Student
1st Year Math
Afraid of going outside his comfort zone

"If I was more aware of the resources on campus, I would've had it easier, but everything was intimidating. I just wasn't aware of a lot of these resources. We never had anything like those where I'm from."

It's my first year as an international student, so I'm new to Canada. Back in my home country, student support services aren't a thing, so when I came here, I didn't know I could go to all these places to get support. I still feel intimidated at the thought of reaching out, and I'm tempted to spend most of my time studying by myself.

I faced a major academic challenge when I first came here: they told me that my high school grades back home—where the grading standards are quite different—weren't high enough for me to stay in a required course for my program. Being taken out of this course made me feel like things were out of my control. But I went to the Math department to advocate for myself, so I ultimately retook the course and passed.

I also failed a midterm for a different course, which made me reconsider my decision to come to Canada and study at U of T. I felt that I should have listened to my friends back home, who were telling me that this international program would be too difficult. But when I thought about it more, maybe I failed because I didn't approach the class the right way. That was my first trial, and when I retake this class, I'm going to try again with new study strategies.

It was difficult to make friends at first: I moved to Canada alone, and I was placed with difficult roommates. But my don helped me get involved in a Reading Week community service program, which was *the* best thing about first year. I got to meet people outside of my residence whom I really clicked with, and we all decided to apply for Work-Study positions so we could continue working together.

persona three:
Healthy Hannah

Domestic Student
Master of Science
Values health and balance

"I needed to learn to make parts of my life that I thought were secondary to school work (like physical fitness) my focus. They are part of the process of learning."

I'm a graduate student, and I also did my undergrad degree at U of T. I love learning and scientific discovery, but after starting grad school, my confidence just waned. I felt judged because there were so many failures in my experiments, and my advisor threatened to fire me for mistakes I made while collecting data. I felt unrecognized and underappreciated, because I was putting in all this effort, but I didn't have any resources or tools to improve my relationship with my supervisor.

There's really a "culture of seclusion" here. I didn't know that fitness classes could help me holistically at first, but when I started to concentrate on my health and fitness, I felt more in control, because I could use my energy in outcomes that *I* managed. So I stopped relying on authority to give me confidence and security and started concentrating on how dedicated I was to my academics, which was under my control and helped me feel resilient. Switching to a focus on "personal health, fitness, and values" made me more competent and more confident. I also started to look for services that improve my sense of wellbeing. This was relatively easy for me because I lived on residence, but I know that other students aren't as aware of what is available.

Finding balance and making time for other important things, like fitness and friendships, buffered me through times when I struggled with academics. They helped me see the academic problems as setbacks rather than reflections of my self-worth. And it was all worth it in the end: my supervisor turned into a mentor who helped me learn how to be persistent in research, but I had to change my attitude towards myself to enable that mentorship. My research also improved after I attended classes to improve my social and leadership skills. Now I feel like I'm "at a very high point…succeeding at both…extracurriculars and…school."

conclusion

Through this project, we "learn[ed] about our audience" by listening to the needs of students and "construct[ed] a point of view" based on those needs. After generating the student personas based on the interviews, we are better equipped to think about three core questions:

1) How might we illustrate the importance of engagement in campus life to struggling students who "don't have the time"?

2) How might we create a learning environment in which we acknowledge and value achievements outside of the classroom?

3) How might we encourage healthy and frank discussions about the struggles and failures everyone grapples with at U of T?

Having framed the challenge through these three questions, next steps would involve moving into the remaining phases of the design thinking process: generating, prototyping, and testing solutions through user feedback.

Student Contributors

Aishwarya Babu, 1st Year, Master of Science in Sustainability Management

Sarah Dolman, 1st Year, Master of Education in Higher Education

Nicholas Feinig, 4th Year, PhD Anthropology

Mia Sanders, 1st Year Undergraduate, Women & Gender Studies and Diaspora & Transnational Studies

Danielle Lum, 2nd Year, Master of Information in User Experience Design

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For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub, please contact Julia Smeed at <u>julia.smeed@utoronto.ca</u> or 416-978-8619, or visit our blog at <u>uoft.me/innovationhub</u>