

OCTOBER 2023


# WHAT MATTERS TO U of T STUDENTS?

Understanding Students: A Qualitative Analysis of Innovation Hub Data  
2020-2023


# INTRODUCTION

At the Innovation Hub, we collaborate with U of T partners and students to gain a deeper understanding of university life. Our team uses in-depth qualitative research and design thinking strategies to foster rich data collection and elicit honest stories from students about their experiences.


We place our research within 5 Domains of Innovation that we co-created through community consultation during the Innovation Hub's first year in 2016. These domains articulate a vision of change that outlines aspirational goals fulfilled for every student. The 5 Domains of Innovation are:




**Access for Every Student:** All students have equitable access to programs, services, resources, and spaces.




**Fostering Connectedness:** Students experience a sense of belonging and connection within the UofT community.



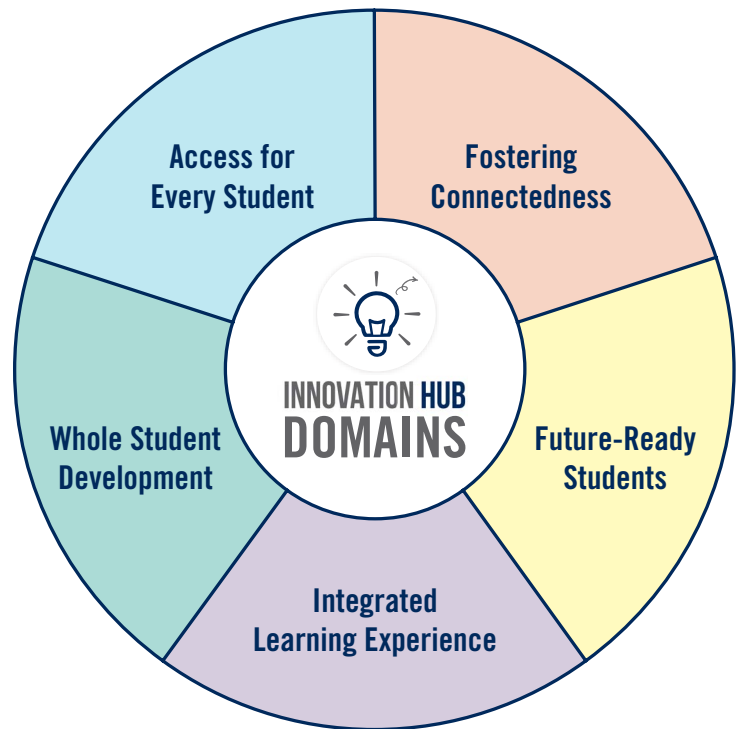
**Future-Ready Students:** Students have opportunities to develop their skills and build their confidence beyond academics.



**Integrated Learning Experience:** Students engage fully in learning experiences both within and outside of the classroom.



**Whole Student Development:** Students receive the support they need for their holistic well-being (physical, psychological, social, and emotional).



# METHODS

Looking at student stories and data collected over the last three years from 2020-2023, we sought to explore the question: **what matters to U of T students now?** Through a design thinking activity, we asked our team of students to generate hypotheses on sticky notes responding to this question as they reviewed research reports from the last three years and over 380 pieces of qualitative data.

From hundreds of sticky note responses, we refined the hypotheses to guide our data retrieval. The team searched through all archived student stories and experiences to test and refine the hypotheses and gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students communicated. As a result of this inquiry, we developed a vision to illustrate our findings about **what matters to U of T students** based on our insights.

# VISION

We found that students come to the University of Toronto hoping to explore and discover their identities, not only in academics, but also as community members and individuals. Students expressed an eagerness to connect with others throughout their journeys at U of T and shared their desire for their sense of self to grow and be validated as they learn more about themselves.

Our data revealed that self-discovery motivates students to self-advocate, build relationships, and uncover new passions. Exploring their constantly evolving identities feels challenging to students, but those who find comfort within the uncertainty feel freer and more confident. Newfound confidence allows students to make choices that connect them with others and expand possibilities for their futures.

**When students feel secure to explore their identities, they feel more connected to the university community.**

## DATA VISUALIZATION

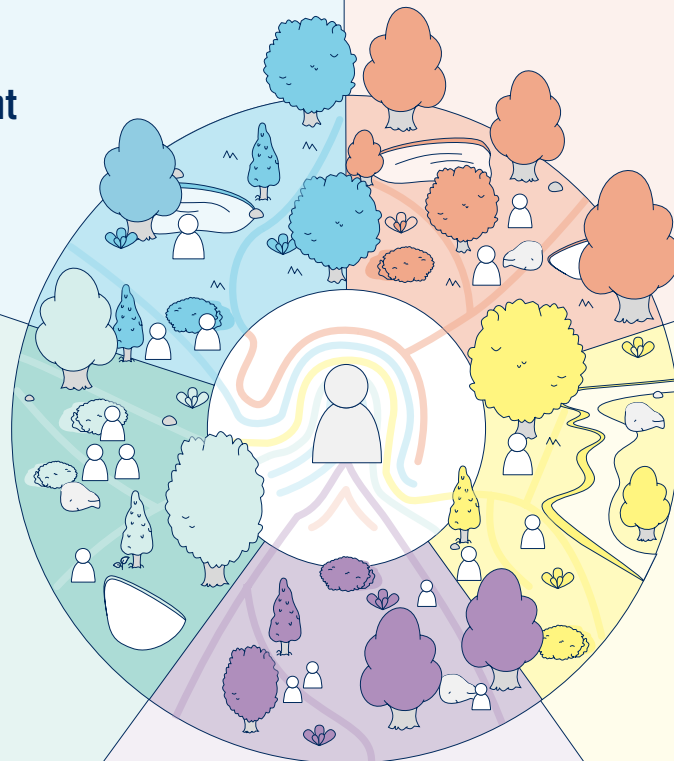
**Access for Every Student**

**Fostering Connectedness**

**Whole Student Development**

**Future-Ready Students**

**Integrated Learning Experience**



Our student graphic design team sought to visualize the data-driven vision in an original image. Inspired by the Innovation Hub's domains wheel, the team turned the wheel into an image of a forest, meant to show the U of T community with many paths in and out. An individual student is shown at the centre of the image, with the many paths into, out of and within the community surrounding them as they explore their identity. The image seeks to show the connection between each individual student and the university and how the community offers support for individuals to grow and evolve. The winding and interconnected pathways shown throughout represent the opportunities for exploration available to students within U of T.

# ACCESS FOR EVERY STUDENT



## RECOGNIZE ME

Students reveal that they want their **individuality to feel recognized and welcomed** in a university with a large and diverse student body. Students want to **celebrate diversity and challenge how the system promotes sameness**. Students want to feel that they can comfortably embody themselves at U of T, even when they might not fit the conventional ideas of a typical student.

- One student shared the inclusion of nonbinary options on university forms made them feel that someone “paid a little bit of attention or making space.” The student expressed that these choices encouraged them to acknowledge that they felt better not conforming to binary choices such as “female.”
- One student living in residence felt their religious-based dietary restrictions were overlooked. The student wished there were more halal food options in residence.
- One student expressed that some professors acknowledge accessibility needs on their syllabus but do not support students with disabilities in practice. The student felt that some professors impose expectations on all students that are “totally incompatible” with how students with a disability approach learning.

## CONNECTION FOSTERS ACCESS

Students shared **the importance of feeling connected to the people who provide services** because it makes the process less intimidating. Many students reported feeling hesitant to access support services because they felt overwhelmed by the complicated and lengthy process. Students expressed that when they felt a sense of care and compassion from staff, faculty, and peers, it felt easier to seek help. Knowing others intentionally work to support them helps students feel more comfortable advocating for their needs.

- One student expressed appreciation for a staff member who showed genuine care and effort while they applied for a financial bursary. The staff member checked in on the student’s progress, offered to review their application, and compiled a list of external resources for them. The student initially felt hesitant about applying for a financial grant but felt motivated after receiving supportive care from the staff member.
- Several international students shared that relating to students who experience the same stressors that accompany an international student’s experience helped them feel supported. One student shared that they felt grateful to find friends from similar cultural backgrounds because connecting through shared experiences motivated them to practice better self-care.
- Many students expressed difficulty accessing services when the communication takes place asynchronously. Many students reported struggling to understand the information provided because of the lack of free-flowing input, non-verbal cues, and context. Asynchronous services made interactions feel awkward and easy to misinterpret.

# ACCESS FOR EVERY STUDENT



## TRANSPARENCY GRANTS TRUST

Students expressed the importance of **feeling safe and secure when accessing resources and support services**. Reports showed that when a lack of transparency exists or a lack of understanding about how using services and resources would impact them, students felt distrustful and fearful. In some cases, students shared that they felt inclined to minimize their struggles and experiences when sharing them with university staff and faculty because of their uncertainty about any negative consequences they might face because they decided to be vulnerable and reach out for help.

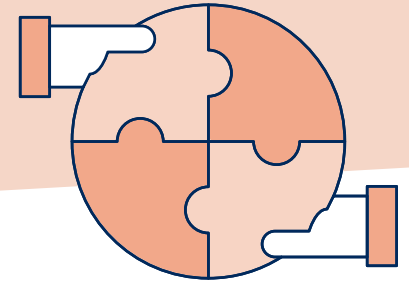
- One student shared an experience where they felt pressured to follow a mandate set by their affiliated college after receiving a mental health intervention. The student agreed to the terms because they felt uncomfortable during the intervention and feared that noncompliance would result in eviction from their residence. Following this experience, the student lied about their well-being because they felt uncertain about potential consequences. This experience led the student to distrust the ‘support’ from their residence.
- Another student expressed distrust about contributing to surveys that help inform policy changes at U of T. The student explained that as a trans person, they felt that interpreting their data would not acknowledge the nuances of trans and nonbinary experiences. For example, the differences between transmasculine and transfeminine experiences.
- Students shared that they felt anxious about what would happen to them if they disclosed their mental health situations and felt fearful that noncompliance would result in punishment for experiencing poor mental health.

## SECURE IN MY FINANCES

Students expressed the desire to **feel secure in their ability to meet their basic needs for living**. Students shared that they struggled to focus on academics because they felt stressed and worried about having sufficient funds to sustain themselves. When students feel confident in their ability to support themselves, they can focus on getting the most out of their education.

- Several graduate students expressed concern that their funding period for research did not reflect the realistic timeline to complete a graduate degree in their programs. The students felt burdened by the pressure to finish their degree and balance their search for extra work to make a living wage.
- Many students showed that they pushed their graduation date back to lighten courseloads to give balance to their academics, while maintaining jobs that provide the income to support basic needs.
- Several students expressed that feeling financially secure due to support from financial aid allowed them to take more care of their mental health. For example, a graduate student explained that when they did not need to worry about finances, they could focus on other hobbies that helped them cope with academic stress.

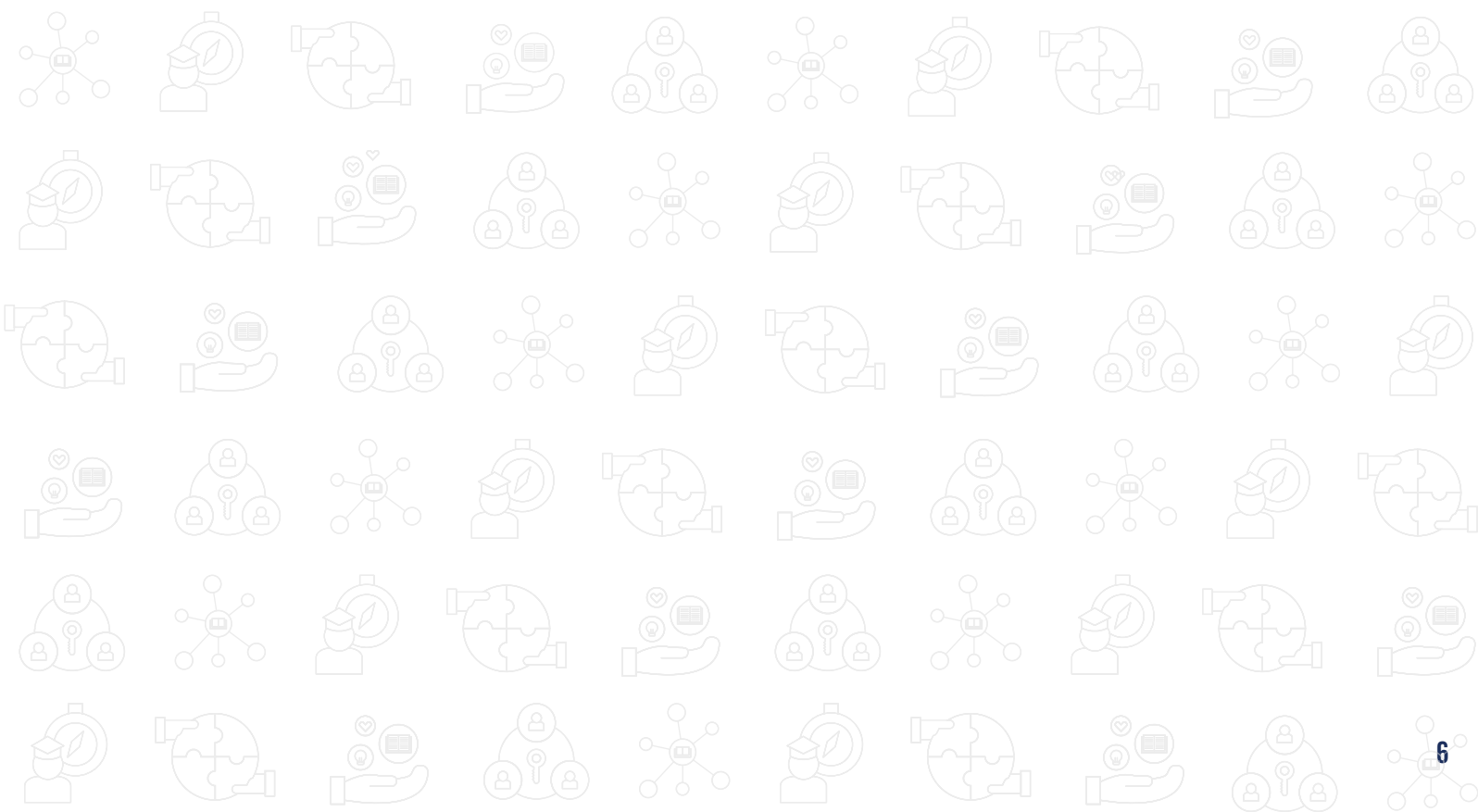
# FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS



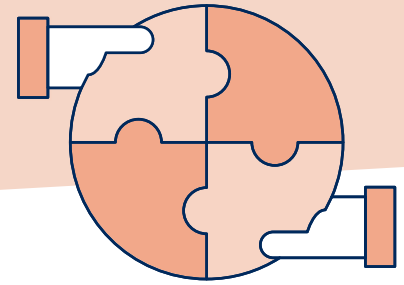
## MATCHED EFFORTS

Our data revealed that students **feel included in the academic community when their contributions are valued.** When students feel their collaborators value and respect their contributions, they feel more confident and invested in their work. In some cases, students shared that personal investment in their work motivated them to participate more deeply in academic spaces and try new opportunities.

- Many graduate students expressed that when their supervisors do not consider their ideas, their learning and creativity felt inhibited. Students shared that they lacked a sense of ownership over their work, expressing that their research often felt more like their supervisors' work than their own.
- One student shared gratitude for their instructor's enthusiasm when providing feedback. The student felt their instructor genuinely engaged in providing guidance and the student reported feeling happy for the opportunity to have fruitful conversations with their instructor. The student expressed that these conversations inspired them to pursue later work opportunities provided by the program.
- One student expressed that they felt motivated and inspired to learn from instructors who encouraged them to build experiences that reflected their personal goals and interests. The student described enjoying a course where they felt encouraged to collaborate on the syllabus and bring forward topics of interest. The student appreciated the opportunity to contribute to impactful class content and discussion.



# FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS



## GENUINE CONNECTIONS BUILD CONFIDENCE

Students shared the importance of **forming authentic connections** with collaborators in academic settings. The students expressed feelings of imposter syndrome when talking with peers and instructors who they perceive as more capable and deserving of recognition. Students reported appreciating how lower-stake interactions created a comfortable environment to get to know people beyond their academic achievements. When students can connect without the pressure to impress others with their achievements, they gain the confidence to navigate future academic interactions.

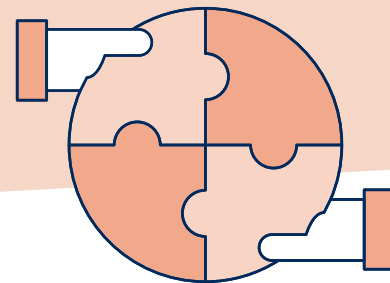
- Many students shared challenges establishing connections with their peers in highly competitive programs and classes. The students felt pressure to succeed in their academic and career endeavours. Students explained that when everyone aimed for the same objective, they struggled to reach out and engage with classmates out of fear of appearing less capable than their peers.
- One graduate student described how a dinner their supervisor organized for their students created a comfortable atmosphere for connection. The student shared that the casual environment of the dinner allowed them to meet their peers and supervisors in a way that felt safe and that the feelings of safety continued in their working relationships in the academic setting.
- Many students felt more comfortable speaking to their classmates and forming meaningful connections with peers after attending social events, such as coffee chats. The students shared that these events fostered a more close-knit community within a program full of highly focused students. During these events, students had a chance to socialize with their peers in a more personal and fun way.

## SPONTANEOUS CONNECTIONS

Student stories reveal the need for spaces that **facilitate spontaneous connections** with other community members at the university. Students shared that small daily moments of interaction felt highly impactful because they formed opportunities to relate to others on campus. In some cases, when students have places that consistently allow them to meet others in the community, they can form long-lasting connections.

- One student expressed their enjoyment of small daily moments, such as talking to a classmate for the first time in the lineup at Second Cup about their lecture.
- A commuter student shared their struggle to make friends and build community because they could not find places to interact with their classmates. The student reported that the lack of spaces to congregate with others near classes hindered their ability to get to know their peers before and after courses.
- One student shared that attending an equity-focused movement program helped them build confidence in their journey with movement. The student shared that participating in a program with others that share their identity made them feel supported and part of a community.

# FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS



## STUDENTS HAVE SPACES TO BE THEMSELVES

Our data revealed that when students **feel welcomed to take up space**, it helps them embody their authentic selves. Students shared that they feel encouraged to participate in the U of T community when they feel comfortable being themselves without pressure to hide or minimize parts of their lived experiences. When students feel like they will not be judged, they feel respected and a part of the community.

- A trans student shared that they felt unsafe participating in a movement program because they felt judgement from other users of the space.
- Another student expressed feeling uncomfortable in class when they received discouragement from commenting on a historical event that impacted their family. The student explained that they felt silenced when told that their comments would hinder other students' learning. The student felt that this event minimized their lived experience, and they felt singled out as one of the only people of colour in the class.
- One student shared that they felt connected with others in their program because their instructors showed consideration of the unique experiences that many students from their identity group face. The student shared that their interactions in the program made them feel comfortable and welcomed as a student from a particular ethnic background.

## REPRESENTATION IN SPACES

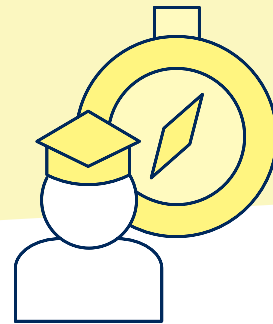
Students shared that they want to **feel represented and acknowledged** within campus spaces. When spaces welcomed and celebrated diversity, students felt included and valued as members of the U of T community. In some cases, these spaces can provide opportunities for students to learn about and embrace parts of their own identities and the identities of others.

- Several students shared that Pride-themed decorations across campus made them feel welcomed and represented in their departments.
- Some Indigenous students expressed the importance of increasing the number of U of T spaces that promote Indigenous culture and knowledge. Students felt that greater visibility of Indigenous representation would encourage Indigenous students to embrace their culture. It would also motivate non-Indigenous students to learn more about Indigenous cultures.
- One student described the importance of feeling represented in student groups to feel a sense of community in campus spaces. The student desired to see more diverse student representation in leadership roles across campus. Specifically, they wished to see more inclusion of commuter, BIPOC, and international students.





# FUTURE READY STUDENTS



## WHO DEFINES SUCCESS?

Students want to **challenge and broaden definitions of success** in the university context. Students shared that they often associate success with obtaining good grades and job-related achievements. In some cases, when students did not achieve their desired goals, they felt discouraged from pursuing their interests. When students redefined what it meant to be successful, they felt validated in their learning, which inspired them to continue exploring their passions.

- One graduate student explained that the time spent in their studies and the time spent working full-time made them realize that “success” came from engaging in activities that made them happy. While the student found this realization challenging, they viewed it as a valuable lesson from their education.
- One student who changed majors reflected on the validation they felt after finally finding an area of study that they truly felt passionate about. The student shared that they initially felt inferior to others in their former program, but developed a sense of validation after they found a program they enjoyed. The student resonated with the type of thinking used in their new program, which made them feel confident that they could perform well at what they studied.
- One student described how feeling engaged with the course material helped them develop a passion for the subject. This passion eventually felt more important than achieving high grades. The student felt so invested in the teaching material that they felt inclined to do their own research and write their own paper, which made learning about the topic fun and easier to understand.

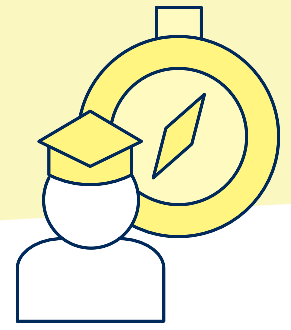
## LEARNING BY DOING

Our data revealed that students desire opportunities to **contribute to solving “real-world” problems**. Students reported feeling fulfilled and inspired about their future careers when participating in applied learning opportunities outside of the classroom. The students felt excited when they saw the impact of their work on real issues. When students had the chance to explore their interests beyond the classroom context, they could deepen their knowledge of their interests and values.

- One student shared their appreciation for the community research partnerships in their program. The student shared that the opportunity to work on a real-life issue felt rewarding and they felt happy that they built the confidence to translate their academic learning into real-world contexts.
- One student credited their experiential learning course as the best experience in their program. The student described feeling invested in a group project, which allowed them to dive deeper into their field. The student felt that what they learned during this opportunity went beyond what they could have learned by writing an essay or taking a test inside a classroom.



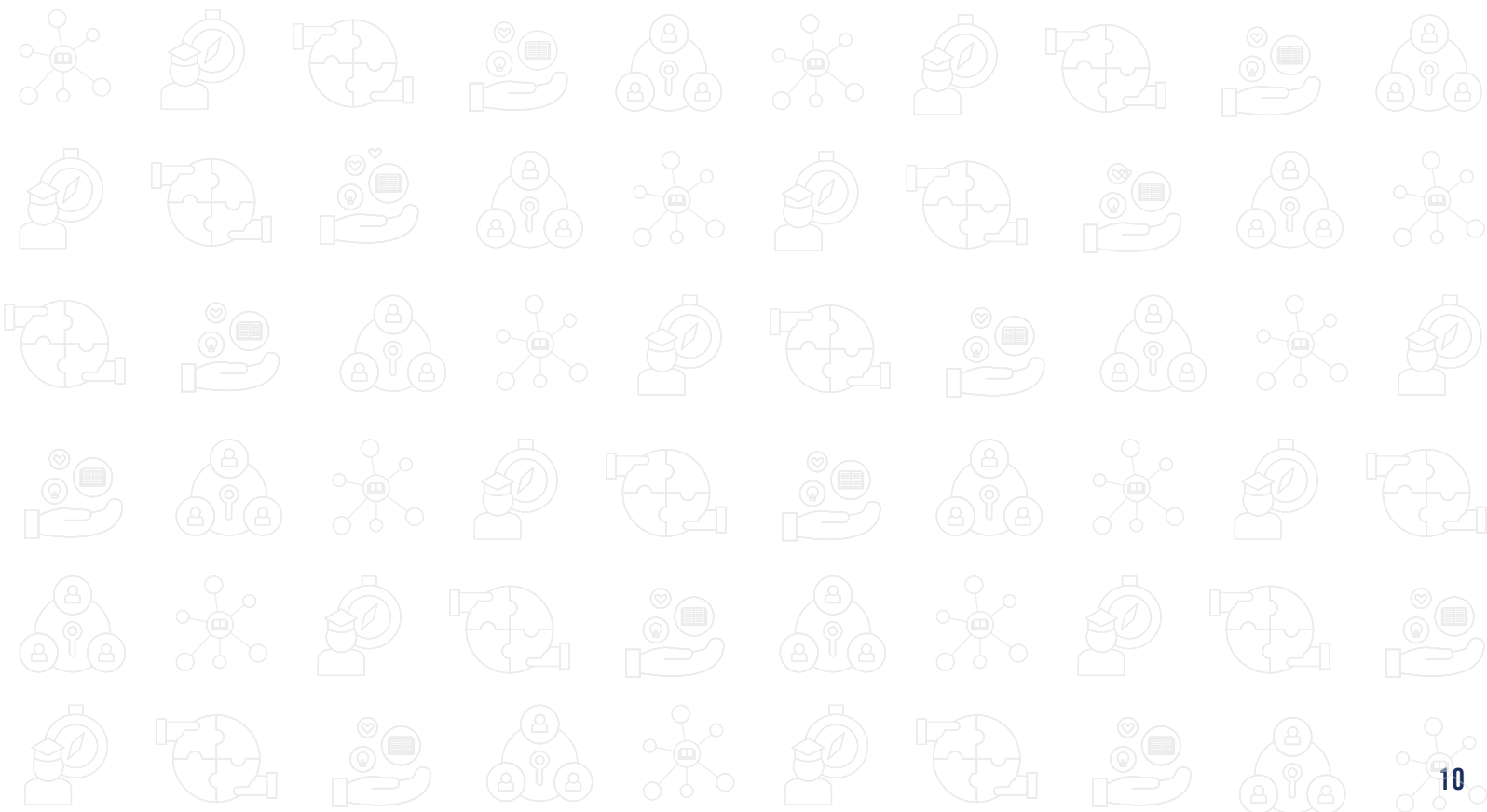
# FUTURE READY STUDENTS



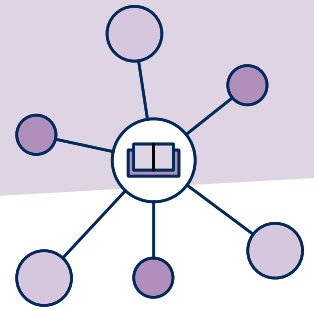
## HOLISTIC WORKSPACE SKILLS

Student stories highlighted the **need to prioritize workplace competencies** in coursework and programming. Students expressed feelings of anxiety about the transition from university to the workforce. The students felt concerned about practicing their knowledge in a real-world setting. Students shared that they feared not having sufficient soft skills and up-to-date knowledge of their field to succeed in their careers. When students felt adequately prepared with career skills and theoretical knowledge, they felt more confident entering the workforce.

- Some students in an experiential learning program shared that they felt overwhelmed when learning outside of the traditional lecture format. Specifically, they felt nervous about meeting clients and facilitating meetings in a professional environment because they felt that their soft skills appeared underdeveloped.
- One student shared their frustration about a perceived disconnect between the skills they learned in class and the workplace requirements when applying for a job. The student expressed feeling that, since the program's methods of evaluation focused on exams, they were not gaining skills necessary for success in the workplace, such as problem-solving and collaboration.
- One student expressed a desire to explore emerging methods and contemporary topics in their program to stay up to date with their discipline. The student emphasized that embracing new trends made them feel more connected to the developments in the field.



# INTEGRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE



## DEPTH THROUGH CROSSING DISCIPLINES

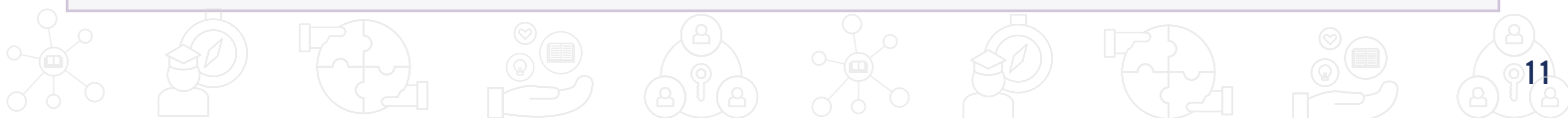
Students expressed the need for **flexibility and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning** to connect academic content to their diverse interests. Students' stories revealed their appreciation for opportunities that allowed them to explore their interests through new perspectives and build on existing passions. When students had opportunities to explore beyond the traditional academic boundaries of their programs, they felt more invested in their learning. Students also felt inspired to discover their identities as learners and individuals.

- One student shared their desire for opportunities to incorporate and explore topics that complemented their PhD research. The student emphasized that moving past the “rigidity” of traditional research would allow them to explore their interests and make them a more well-rounded scholar.
- Several students described how their faculty helped encourage them to explore their research interests and work with faculty members who have varying expertise. Students shared that these opportunities helped them learn from diverse intellectual perspectives across disciplines.
- Many students mentioned their appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of their faculty. The student expressed their excitement for learning about the innovative and interesting work done across disciplines. The students also felt excited that the interdisciplinarity nature of the faculty allowed them to explore various topics and relate them to their own lived experiences.

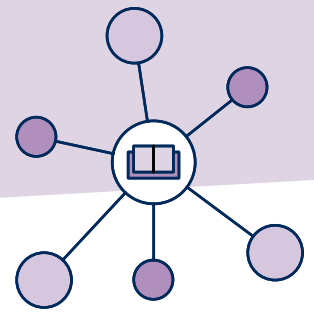
## ROOM TO GROW

Student stories revealed the value of learning in an environment that **acknowledges their ongoing growth and development**. When students feel they have access to continual personal development, rather than feeling an expectation to arrive at the university “fully formed,” they feel more open to exploring their identities. Students reported feeling that they have room to grow when the university community normalizes the process of ongoing growth and development.

- One student described how completing mindfulness reflection logs from a campus service proved useful for discovering their own values. The student shared that the activity helped them develop a better understanding of their own identity and their future.
- Another student discussed the value of a career preparedness program as a safe space for learning professional skills. The student felt comfortable participating because the facilitator's understood they might need to practice their new skills, rather than assuming all participants already had a strong foundation.
- One PhD student shared their appreciation for their program encouraging them to find a mentor before discussing their research goals with an official PhD advisor. The student expressed that the flexibility of their program allowed them to explore and learn about their interests without feeling “locked down” by a set research path.



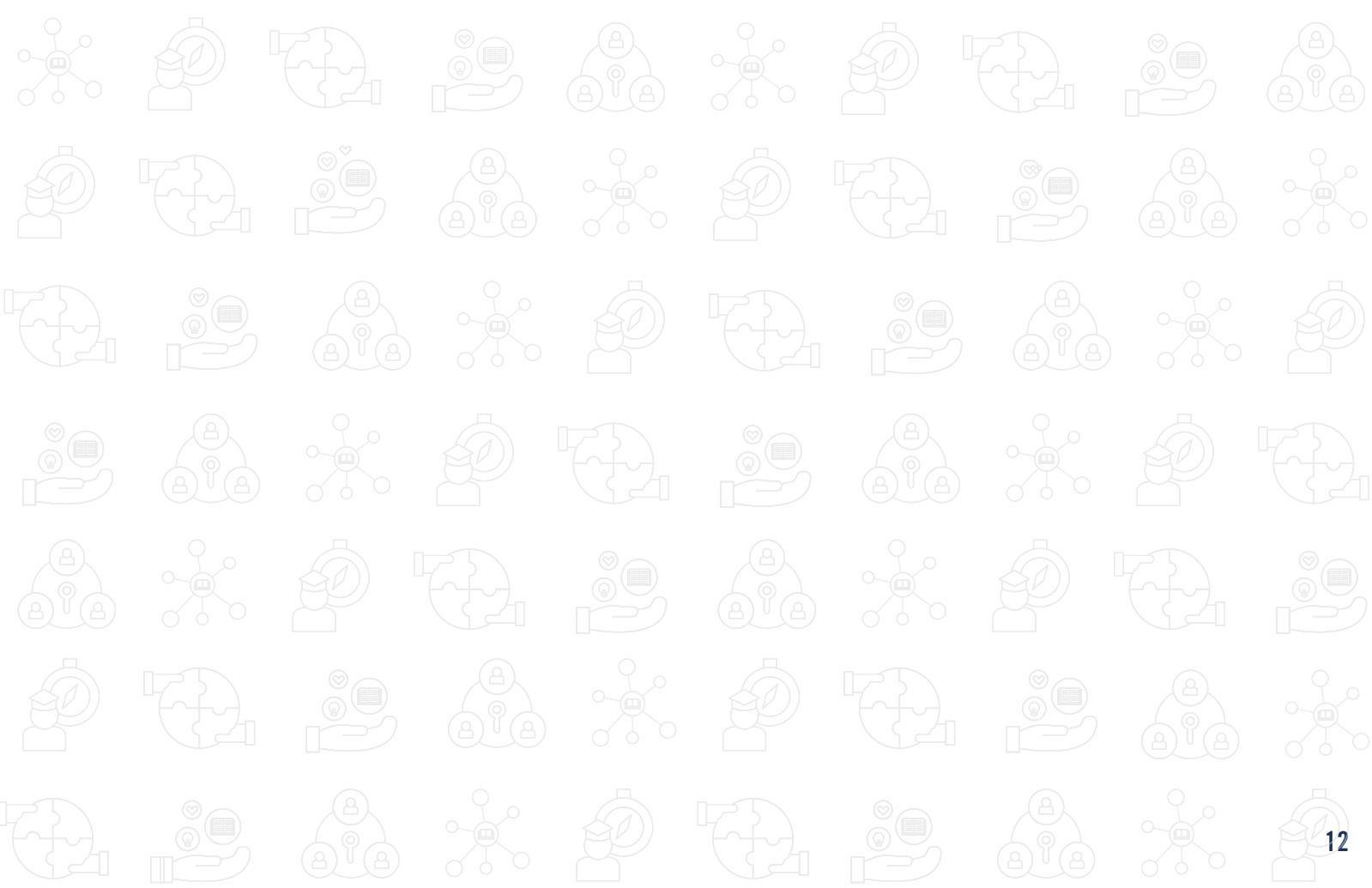
# INTEGRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE



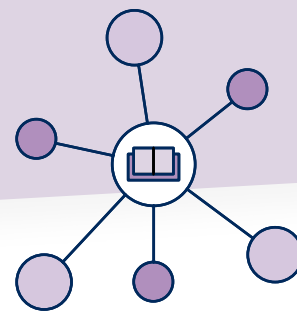
## EMPOWERED TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF

Students revealed they want to **feel empowered to engage in self-care as a part of achieving academic success.** Students expressed they felt overwhelmed and unable to balance their responsibilities alongside their academic obligations. The students reported they had no time to do the activities they enjoyed. When students incorporated self-care and managed their competing obligations, they felt a greater sense of clarity and motivation to take ownership of their learning journeys.

- Several students shared receiving academic accommodation allowed them to ensure their learning needs felt met. As a result, they felt balance between their academics and self-care. The students stated their improved emotional state empowered them to try their best in their studies.
- Students expressed appreciation for instructors who worked flexibly with assignment deadlines. For example, one student shared some instructors provided one-week extensions with no questions asked, which allowed them to better manage their time and focus on producing high-quality work.



# INTEGRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE



## INSPIRED TO EXPLORE

Students' stories revealed the **importance of feeling comfortable to engage in learning about new topics**, especially subject matter beyond their existing knowledge or where their perspectives felt challenged. Students shared when they felt their personal experiences and perspectives felt valued, they are inspired and excited to explore new topics and get out of their comfort zone. When learning spaces felt welcoming and fostered meaningful discussion, students reported gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

- One student described their courses as “eye-opening” because they encouraged students to view history from a different perspective. The student felt inspired to learn more about history outside of the eurocentric context often taught in Canadian high schools.
- A student who self-identified as being racialized reported their experience in classes felt “mentally draining” because their classmates looked predominately white. The student wished their instructors considered challenges racialized students experience when participating in discussions in predominantly white spaces.
- One student found comfort and safety in their religion-focused program. The student shared they had previously felt uncomfortable speaking about their religion on campus due to negative reactions from others. The student reported that the supportive environment fostered by their classmates encouraged them to ask questions and share their concerns about aspects of their faith without the fear of being judged or scrutinized about their values.
- One student reported feeling they had to used much emotional labour to educate non-Indigenous students about their culture. The student expressed they wished campus spaces included more Indigenous pieces to encourage self-learning and discussion without putting the onus on Indigenous students to constantly provide that knowledge.



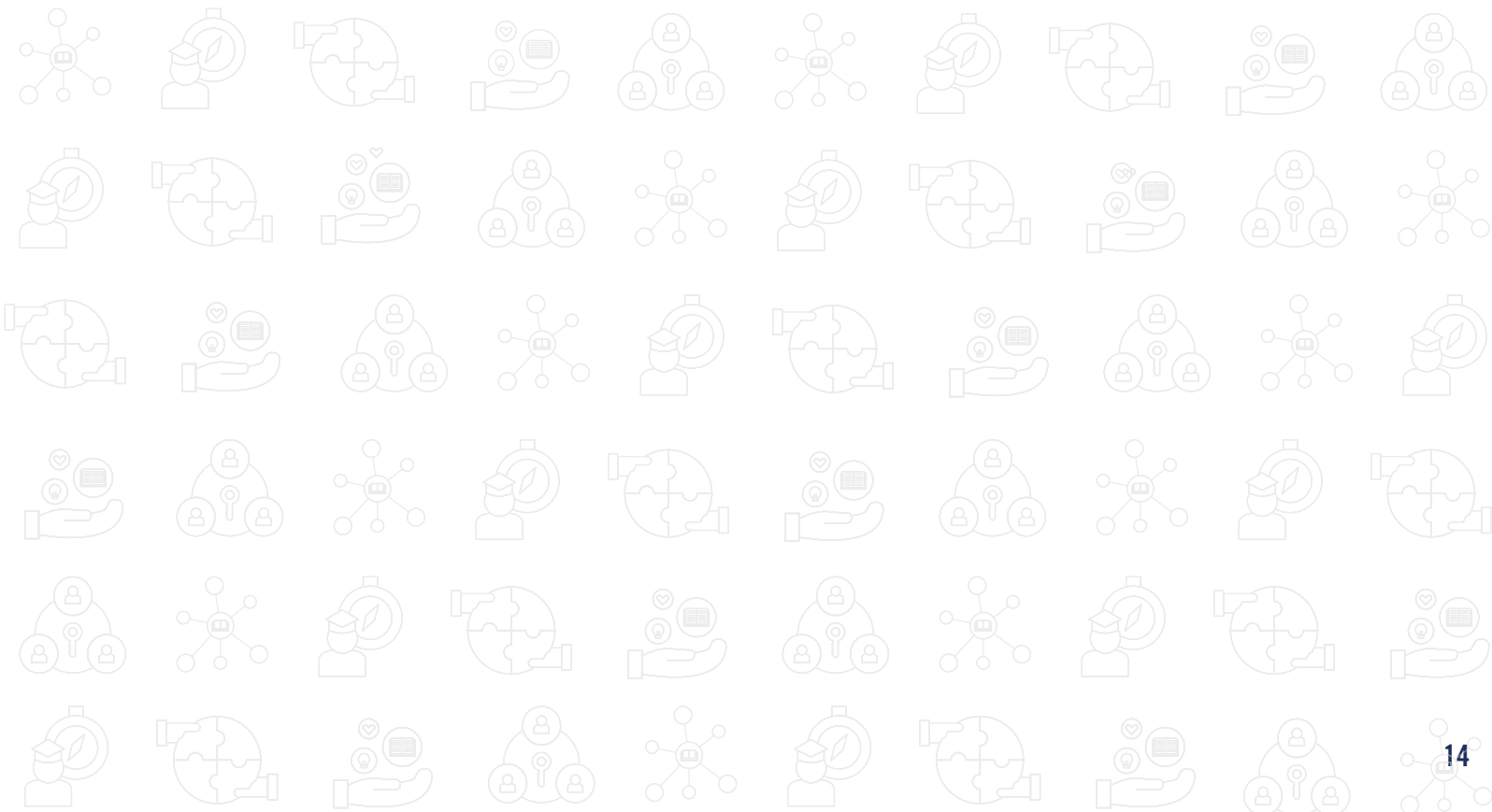
# WHOLE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT



## HEALTH IS HOLISTIC

Throughout the data, we noted students view health as 'holistic' and want to **prioritize their wellbeing**. Students stories showed activities that helped them take care of themselves contributed to their academic success. Oftentimes, asking for help or finding the courage to reach out proved important in securing the support students needed to remain physically and mentally well.

- One student shared joining a student club improved their mental health because the club provided a space for them to take a break and feel supported by their peers. Through bonding over shared experiences, such as commuting to school and navigating school-life balance, students felt supported.
- A student expressed their appreciation for an instructor who supported their request for an extension. The student revealed they initially felt anxious and guilty for needing an extension. After the professor granted the extension, they felt relieved to have the necessary time to rest and work on their assignment.
- Some students expressed taking gym breaks encouraged great mental resets and relaxation because they could momentarily shift their focus from their responsibilities to their workouts.
- One student revealed accessing time management resources helped them learn how to effectively incorporate activities for rest and social connection, which they felt contributed to their improved mental health.



# WHOLE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT



## PERMISSION TO FAIL

Students shared when they had **permission to fail**, they gained more self-compassion and increased their ability to manage failure. Many students reported that they often internalized failures and feared managing thoughts of insecurity, incompetency, and embarrassment. In some cases, when students recognized failure as part of their learning process rather than a reflection of their identity, they could cope better with uncomfortable feelings and focus on their learning.

- Many students described feeling hesitant to attend instructor office hours because they feared that their questions were “not good enough.” Students shared they did not want to waste their instructors’ time, which led them to avoid asking question at all.
- A graduate student expressed frustration with themselves because they had to repeat steps of a lab experiment several times before getting it right. The student described how their success in undergraduate research created impossible standards that they could not measure up to in their graduate studies. Failure felt difficult to cope with since they did not anticipate making mistakes this far into their studies.
- One student shared while they felt failure proved necessary to their learning journey, they found it hard to navigate constant feelings of failure. The student reported that when they could identify learning moments from their experiences, they felt “liberated” from the negative feelings of failure.
- One student expressed their perception that failing a course at university should be talked about more. The student reported that they internalized failing a course as a self-criticism that they did not try hard enough. The student emphasized that vocalizing real failure stories would make them feel more secure about their experiences.

## PERSONAL EXPLORATION IN ACADEMICS

Student stories revealed the importance of **fostering self-exploration alongside academic growth**. When students incorporated self-reflection into their academics, they discovered meaningful personal connections to their areas of study. Meaningful connections helped them better define their sense of purpose and find learning opportunities that aligned with their passions.

- A student recalled a class where they wrote a journal to explore their values, interests, and needs. The student stated that “understanding more of who I am” helped them connect these new insights to their studies.
- One student shared taking courses in a religion-focused program helped them grow into a more socially involved and aware person. The student revealed that learning more about the history of a religious group encouraged them to reflect on ways in which they have behaved carelessly about the experiences of marginalized groups. Ultimately, the student expressed that they felt more inclined to engage in dialogues about the world around them after reflecting on what they learned in class.

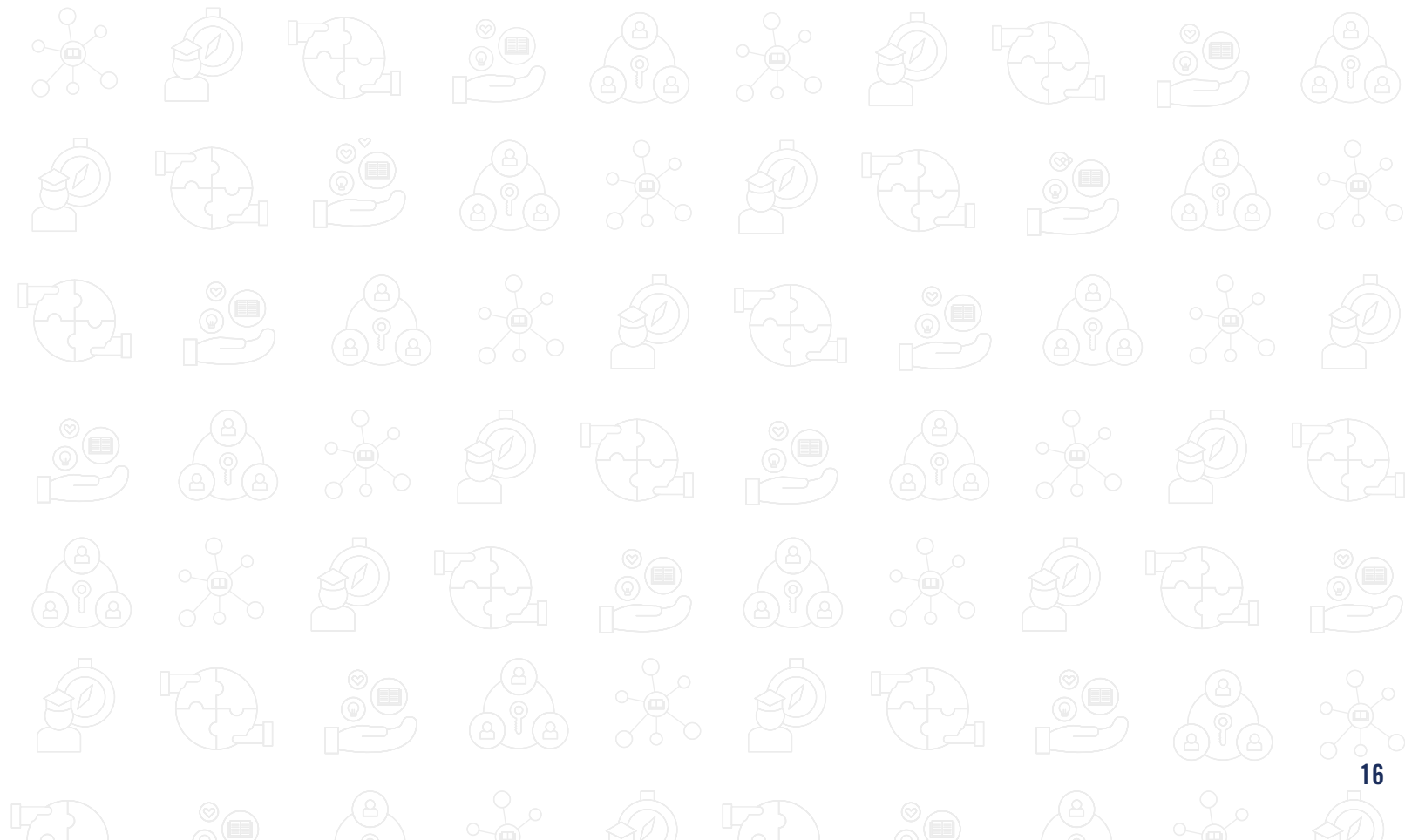
# WHOLE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT



## PRIORITIZING MOVEMENT

Our data revealed students' desire to **prioritize movement in their daily lives** to help them find balance within a busy academic schedule. Student stories showed that engaging in movement provided a way to unwind from the stress of school while finding a sense of community, reconnecting with their passions, or trying something new. In some cases, students expressed that while engaging in movement, they felt a sense of fulfilment which made them feel more confident about who they are and their individual strengths outside of academics.

- Some students described taking walks to recharge and relieve stress. They shared that walks gave them a time to feel more grounded and connected to their surroundings.
- One student shared that they felt self-conscious about joining a dance drop-in class because they worried about keeping up with other participants. The student revealed that after attending the class, they enjoyed the challenge and felt more confident.
- Several students shared how participating in movement activities gave them an opportunity to spend time connecting with their friends. The students explained that attending movement programs and spaces with friends encouraged them to build confidence and work on goals together.

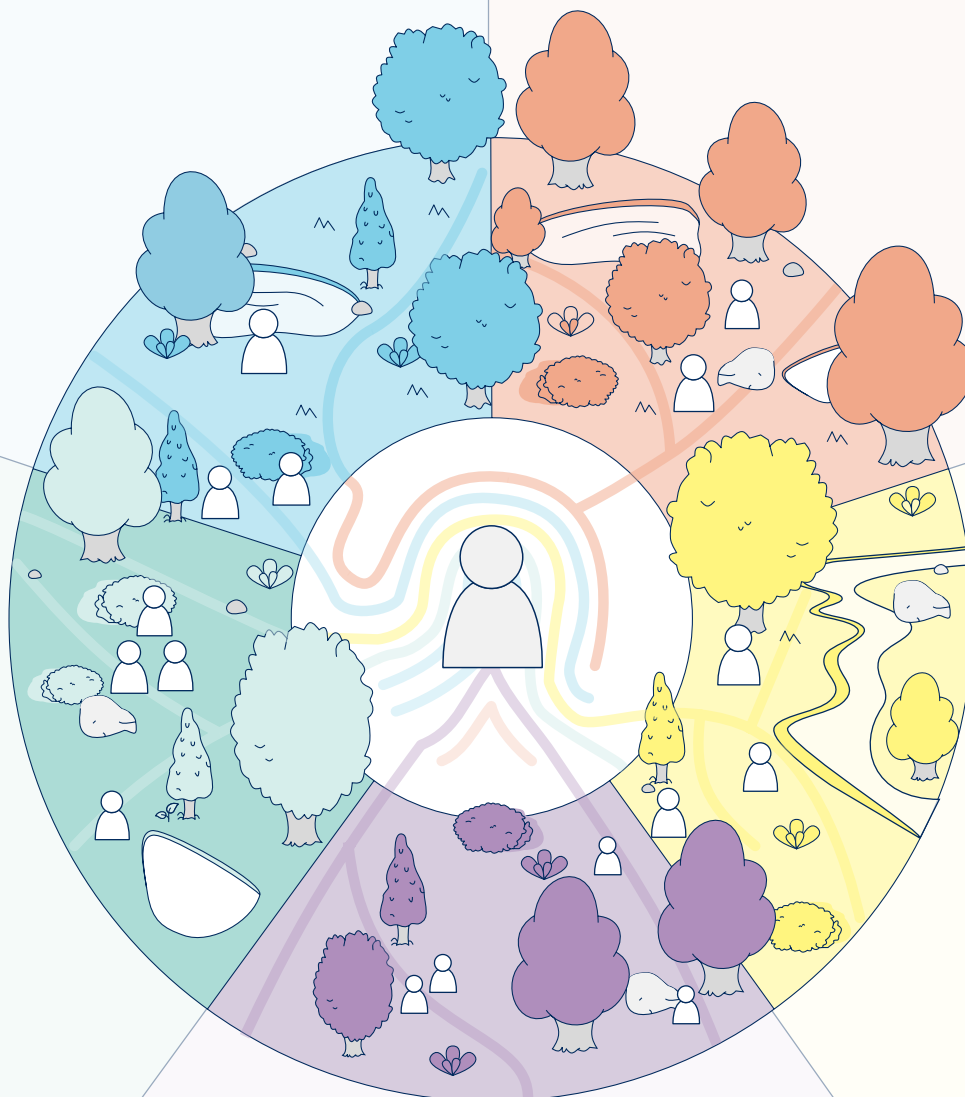




# CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Our insights highlight the need for spaces and opportunities that welcome self-growth among students at U of T. Our data revealed that students wish to discover themselves throughout their journeys at U of T as a form of encouragement to build community, find their passions, and feel validated in their changing identities, in addition to the experiences and choices that accompany their self-exploration. We found that, **when students feel secure exploring their identities, they feel more connected to the university community.**

We strive to bring this expertise, empathy, and in-depth understanding of what matters most to U of T students into future work with our partners and toward co-creating a university that works for everyone.



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