IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Understanding the Undergraduate Student Experience at the University of Toronto

– July 2010 –
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Significant gains in enhancing the student experience have been achieved over the six-years of the Stepping Up Academic plan – with many new initiatives having been launched across the three campuses. In spite of our successes, however, results of recent surveys – including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Globe and Mail Campus Survey – indicate that we continue to lag behind our peer institutions with regard to co-curricular student engagement, creating a supportive campus environment, and student satisfaction with the overall experience.

Although these survey results identify areas of concern related to the student experience at the University of Toronto, they do not offer explanations of the underlying causes. Recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of some of the priority issues highlighted in these surveys and the ways in which the University could respond, in February 2010, Vice-Provost, Students Jill Matus initiated a tri-campus, qualitative assessment project to drill down into some areas of the undergraduate student experience that seemed to warrant further exploration.

Avoiding the known limitations of having a central office conduct the focus groups, the project plan called for the Council on Student Experience to help identify local units which would develop the project with the coordinating support of the Office of Student Life, St. George Campus.

A standardized focus group protocol, including the questions, was developed by the Office of Student Life, with feedback from members of the Council on Student Experience (see Appendix A.) In total, 38 focus groups took place involving 367 students from first and second-entry faculties on all three campuses. Findings have been grouped using the relevant NSSE benchmarks for effective educational practice, which provide a contextual framework for understanding and applying the results.

STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION
Participants clearly identified that the degree to which they have interaction with faculty outside of class can vary greatly among faculty members. However, three key factors did emerge which students felt influenced the frequency and quality of their interactions with faculty outside of class time:

- Class size
- Student initiative
- Opportunities for social interaction

SUPPORTIVE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

Orientation to the University
Within the Faculty of Arts & Science, UTM & UTSC, a clear theme emerged with respect to the welcome & orientation experienced by students. They reported an apparent disconnection
between orientation activities and the student experience once classes begin (e.g. Lack of opportunity to meet other students in their programs, limited academic orientation, etc.)

Across the University the success of small group seminars and mentorship programs was evident – and many students expressed the desire for more such opportunities (e.g. First Year Learning Communities, Track 1, Step One, Student Mentorship Program, etc.)

Physically navigating the St. George Campus was identified as a challenge by students across the University. Key suggestions for improvement included:
- Increased numbers of campus/building maps and directional signage – both inside and outside of buildings
- Enhanced online maps
- More slowly paced / expanded campus tours during orientation

**Academic & Personal Support**
Among students in first-entry programs concerns over grading practices emerged as a strong theme. Participants often connected lower grades with a feeling that student success is not a priority for the University.

College/faculty registrars were identified as the primary source of academic support. However, within the Faculty of Arts & Science and at UTM, concerns were raised about long wait times at peak periods and a lack of coordination among registrar’s offices, program offices and Admissions & Awards.

Students identified friends and family as a strong source of personal support. For on-campus support they most often turn to upper-year students in leadership positions (e.g. residence dons, FLC peer mentors, orientation leaders, etc.) and/or student services. Participants identified a desire for more opportunities for peer mentorship.

**Infrastructure**
The two keys issues students identified in this area were: (1) Food Services and (2) IT.

Participants indicated a dissatisfaction with the food services offered on-campus. The key issues identified were the price, quality and variety of the food available on-campus.

IT was a key issue for students at UTM and UTSC, who expressed concerns about their ability to connect to the internet wirelessly and a lack of electrical outlets for use by students with laptops.

**Pride & School Spirit**
Overall – students expressed a great deal of pride in the University of Toronto – particularly the University’s academic reputation. However, participants also identified a lack of school spirit and indicated a desire for more opportunities for interaction with students from other colleges, faculties and campuses, as well as the development of spirit related to the University’s athletic teams.
ENRICHING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Students described three primary motivations for becoming involved in co-curricular activities at the University:

- Opportunities to meet friends and find community on campus
- The desire to learn something new or gain experience in an area of interest to them
- Incentives (e.g. food, scholarships, prizes, certificates, etc.)

The primary barriers to participation identified by participants were:

- Lack of time due to coursework or commuting
- Challenges with becoming involved after first year
- Campus groups that are unwelcoming to new members or not as active as they claim to be
- Financial barriers due to costs associated with participation in certain campus organizations.

COMMUNICATION

A key theme that emerged throughout the focus groups was the need for enhanced two-way communication between the University and its students. Despite the variety of communications media available – Blackboard, email, websites, etc. – students were largely unaware of institutional commitments to improving the student experience. Many students expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to voice their concerns and felt the University needed to better understand the reality of their daily lives in order to make improvements.

KEY DIRECTIONS FOR THE COUNCIL ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The focus groups served to both reveal some of the underlying issues related to areas of the student experience and lead to some priorities for further discussion and action. In particular, the Council will want to address:

- Ways to reduce the intimidation factor, particularly in large classes, to encourage student-faculty interaction
- Innovations to orientation, including the grouping of students by academic program
- Better tools for navigating the campuses
- Building on the success of mentorship programs where they exist
- Quality of service across the divisions, and across food service operations
- Messaging to encourage co-curricular participation and institutional pride
- Enhanced, and consistent, two-way, communication between the University and its students.
INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT
In 2003 the University of Toronto identified the goal of enhancing the undergraduate student experience as the institution’s top strategic priority under the academic planning framework *Stepping Up*. The ensuing six years saw dramatic expansion and innovation in programs, growth and refurbishment of student facilities and a shift in culture throughout the three campuses. The University’s new long range plan *Towards 2030* challenges us to maintain that momentum and deliver an excellent experience to our students both inside and outside of the classroom.

Using the National Survey of Student Engagement as a general benchmark in measuring our progress, the University saw gains in four of the five NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice over the course of the *Stepping Up* years. (See 2008 NSSE Report: [http://www.provost.utoronto.ca/public/reports/NSSE.htm](http://www.provost.utoronto.ca/public/reports/NSSE.htm)) Despite our incremental progress broadly, both NSSE and other survey instruments such as the Globe and Mail’s University Report Card (URC) point to some problem areas – facets of the experience that our students perceive as particularly negative or below their expectations.

Blunt survey tools like NSSE and URC fail to provide us with sufficient depth of understanding on some of these more intransigent factors, rendering solutions more elusive. Recognizing the need for a deeper analysis, Vice-Provost, Students Jill Matus commissioned the University’s most comprehensive qualitative assessment of the student experience in recent history. *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Undergraduate Student Experience at the University of Toronto* was launched in February 2010 as a project of the Council on the Student Experience, a standing body of faculty and staff chaired by the Vice-Provost, Students. The results of this project are intended to suggest a course of future action for the Council.

ABOUT THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS
*In Their Own Words* was executed over the course of several weeks in February and March 2010. The project was led by the Office of Student Life (St. George), in collaboration with the Department of Student Life at the University of Toronto.
Scarborough and Office of Student Affairs at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Over 50 staff and faculty assisted in the execution of 38 focus groups across three campuses and in 8 different faculties on the St. George campus. A total of 367 students were involved.

A standardized focus group protocol, including the questioning line, was developed by the Office of Student Life, with feedback from members of the Council (see Appendix A). The questions were specifically designed to unveil some of the underlying issues behind previously identified problem areas of the undergraduate experience. These were largely issues related to the campus environment and the non-academic experience as issues of curriculum, teaching and learning are being addressed through other means. The protocol was field-tested and refined based on feedback from the test group participants.

Each participating division in the project provided a Divisional Liaison who acted as the point person for that faculty or college, responsible for the logistics and recruitment of participants for their focus group(s) (see Appendix B). Several divisions exceeded the expectations in terms of the number of focus groups held, often in response to student interest.

A team of over 30 staff were recruited and trained as facilitators and notetakers for the project. For each focus group, the assigned notetaker and facilitator were from outside that particular college or faculty. This strategy both protected the confidentiality of participants (who might know staff from their own division) and gave staff insights into other faculties or colleges. (Note: UTM and UTSC staff conducted focus groups at their respective campuses, on the assumption that the size of those divisions meant that students would be unlikely to know any of the facilitators or notetakers personally.)

Participants in the focus groups were offered refreshments and a $20 gift card to the U of T Bookstore as incentives. In all cases, the target of between 6 to 15 participants per focus group was met.

Confidentiality of the student participants was maintained in the project by the use of first names only (or the option of a pseudonym) during the focus groups. Students were asked to self-report demographic information, which can be used for aggregate data analysis.

**ABOUT THIS REPORT**

Analysis of the focus group data was conducted by Melinda Scott in the Office of Student Life using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss.¹ The

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<th>Participant Demographics</th>
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<td><strong>Year of Study:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1st year – 28%</td>
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<td>2nd year – 28%</td>
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<td>3rd year – 20%</td>
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<td>4th year - 18%</td>
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<td>5th year- 2%</td>
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<td>Other – 3% (incl. not specified, non-degree, exchange year, etc)</td>
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| **Median Age** - 21 |

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<th><strong>Enrolment Status</strong></th>
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<td>Full-time – 95%</td>
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<td>Part-time – 5%</td>
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<td>Living in residence – 25%</td>
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<td>Not living in residence – 75%</td>
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¹ For an explanation of the constant comparative method, see Merriam’s Qualitative Research: a guide to design and implementation. (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco: 2009)
analysis distinguishes between findings that pertain to the broad categories of the divisions participating in the project: UTM, UTSC, Faculty of Arts & Science, first-entry professional faculties and second-entry professional faculties.

The findings have been organized under the three key NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practice that relate to this project: Student-faculty Interaction, Supportive Campus Environment, and Enriching Educational Experiences. (The other two benchmarks: Level of Academic Challenge and Active and Collaborative Learning were considered out-of-scope for this particular project.) The NSSE benchmarks represent a convenient and empirically tested set of practices that have been shown to lead to high quality learning experiences for undergraduate students.

Quotations from students throughout the report have been selected not necessarily as typical or representative but as the most illustrative of the issues raised. Many of the focus group participants made note of particular interventions, projects, or changes that, from their perspective, were having a positive impact on the student experience. These are noted as “Promising Practices” throughout the report. Students also generated new ideas and proposals for change that are positioned in the “Suggestion Box” in each section. And, inevitably, participants made comments and suggestions that reveal a lack of awareness for programs, services and interventions already in place. This issue is dealt with under the Communication section at the end of the report.
STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION

From NSSE, we have learned that the opportunities to interact with faculty at U of T are comparable to those experienced by students at our peer institutions in Canada. However, students at U of T rank the quality of their relationships with faculty less positively than students at peer institutions. The Globe and Mail’s University Report Card assigned our three campuses letters grades of a C (St. George), C+ (UTSC) and B-(UTM) on student-faculty interaction. This led us to conduct a line of questioning regarding where and when positive interactions with faculty had occurred so that we could build upon those successes.

Just as faculty are not a homogenous group – students clearly identified that the degree to which they have interaction with their professors outside of class can vary greatly between faculty members. However, throughout the focus groups students did identify a few key factors which influence the frequency and quality of their interactions with faculty outside of class time.

**Class Size**

By far the greatest factor identified by participants as influencing student-faculty interaction was class size. Class size affects interaction in two tangible ways: students described feeling significantly more comfortable approaching a faculty member outside of class time when they felt that they had already connected with the professor in the class – and this is significantly easier to do in smaller classes. But students also expressed an understanding that faculty members teaching very large classes may not have time to meet with every student in their course – and indicated that in these courses they have more frequent interactions with Teaching Assistants (TAs).

**Student Initiative**

Among those students who described having a satisfactory level of student-faculty interaction, a common theme emerged: many opportunities are available but there is a need for students to initiate the contact. These students often described faculty office hours as a helpful and untapped resource and spoke about the positive experiences they had when they used a professor’s office hours not just to ask questions about the course, but to also learn more about his/her research and background.

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**In their own words…**

“Actually, I have never really spoken to any of my professors. I have spoken to a lot of TAs. I think it’s impossible for me to speak to one of my profs because I have [names course] and we have 1100 people in that class.”

-1st Year, FAS Student

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**Promising Practices**

“Women in Science and Engineering Association (WISE) provides chances to speak to women professors outside of class and learn about their experiences.”

- 1st Year, 1st Entry Professional Faculty Student

“In [names program], the profs invite the students to meet at an off-campus café for conversation, board games, casual interaction. They publish this on the listserv and on Blackboard.”

- 4th Year, FAS Student
However, a significant number of participants did indicate that they had limited interaction with faculty and expressed a desire for more. These students often described a hesitation about approaching faculty out of a fear of not knowing what to say and many indicated an interest in having more opportunities for small group Q & A sessions with faculty outside of class time. These students were also much more likely to express a desire for more electronic communication with faculty through email, Blackboard discussion groups, or social media (e.g. facebook, twitter, etc.).

Social Interaction
Across all of the focus groups a clear theme that emerged was the desire for social interaction with faculty members outside of class time. Many participants shared extremely positive experiences of interacting with faculty in a variety of settings including: luncheons, speakers series, in student groups or through course unions, at coffee houses and in residence, to name a few. Students strongly indicated a desire for more such opportunities.

In their own words...

“If you show you care they (faculty members) tend to be more helpful and giving with their advice. They are supportive in that way. If you are consistent in attending office hours and asking questions then they see that and promote that even more by being helpful.”
- 2nd Year, UTM Student

Suggestion Box

- Small group Q&A sessions with faculty (to provide peer support to students hesitant to interact one on one)
- Greater use of online interactive tools for out-of-class discussion
- More opportunities for semi-structured social interaction between students and faculty
SUPPORTIVE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

Quantitative data about the student experience points to a number of issues affecting students’ sense of support and community on campus. NSSE results indicate our students perceive the institution as less supportive in meeting their academic and social needs and experience lower quality relationships with staff, faculty and other students than those reported by students at peer institutions. An Orientation Benchmarking Survey conducted every two years identified that we fall below peer institutions in providing an orientation that prepares students to meet social, and, particularly, academic expectations. And issues such as food – where U of T received a letter grade of D in the Globe and Mail – continue to affect the quality of the experience.

Despite very popular programs such as the traditional orientation week, and the wide range of services and supports available – both divisionally and centrally – there appear to be gaps and barriers that need to be addressed. The focus groups included a set of questions regarding the transition process for new students and their perceptions around the support the University provides, including food services.

WELCOME & ORIENTATION

Across the focus groups, participants who attended their divisional orientation week programming described it as a welcoming and enjoyable experience. Students appreciated the opportunities to meet other first-year students in their college, faculty or campus and interact with upper year orientation leaders. However, as positive an experience as orientation was for these students, a common theme emerged that many participants felt a disconnection between orientation activities and their experiences once classes began.

At UTM, UTSC and within the Faculty of Arts & Science on the St. George Campus students expressed frustration that they generally did not have classes with the people they met during orientation week because their orientation did not include components that were program-based. Participants also discussed the challenges they experienced selecting courses and learning to use ROSI. Many students indicated that they would have appreciated having more time devoted

In their own words…

“In Frosh Week was really welcoming but after that, it all falls off and you’re overwhelmed and on your own”
- 4th year FAS Student

Promising Practice

“I am part of the Student Mentorship Program. I was a mentee in first year and that helped me to get to know information that I wouldn’t have known how to get to. Now I am a mentor and giving back to others”
- 3rd year UTSC Student
to academic orientation prior to the start of classes and more opportunities for peer mentorship. These findings are consistent with the results of the 2008 Orientation Benchmarking Survey, which found that U of T students are more satisfied with their social orientation to the University than their academic orientation, but that we are lagging behind our peer institutions in both of these areas.

Students who participated in small group seminars or mentorship programs such as First Year Learning Communities (FAS), Track 1 (Eng), Step One (UTM), and the Student Mentorship Program (UTSC) often described their transition to the University more positively than participants who did not have the opportunity to engage in similar programs. Students who lived in residence also described more comfortable transitions to the University due to their experiences at residence orientation, the support of residence dons and/or the sense of community in their building.

**NAVIGATING THE CAMPUS**

On the St. George Campus, participants shared some of the difficulties they encountered learning to navigate the campus – with many upper year students indicating that it is still something they are learning to do.

Within the first and second entry professional faculties, students often described feeling comfortable in the one or two buildings that they visited frequently, but somewhat isolated from the rest of the campus. Students in the Faculty of Arts & Science described the challenges of having classes located all over the campus.

At UTM and UTSC students had less difficulty physically navigating the campuses because of their smaller size. However, participants at these campuses expressed frustration with the room numbering systems inside certain campus buildings and hesitation about their abilities to navigate the St. George Campus when needed in order to attend classes or co-curricular activities.

Participants shared a number of strategies that they employed in order to learn to navigate the campuses.

**Suggestion Box**

- Increased opportunities for peer mentorship
- Expanded academic orientation
- Increased opportunities for students in the Faculty of Arts & Science to meet other students in their classes prior to the start of the term

**In their own words...**

“What I found missing from the orientation and information session was information about the rest of the campus. There was nothing about the U of T campus, about the gym or about Hart House”
- 2nd Year, 2nd Entry Professional Faculty Student

**Suggestion Box**

- Increased numbers of campus maps and directional signs
- Enhanced online map / i-phone application
- Slower pace to orientation tours
including: carrying a campus map, asking family members who attend U of T or are recent alumni to assist them, stopping upper year students to ask for directions, and “wandering the campus”.

Many students expressed an interest in having access to enhanced campus maps that include the locations of food service operations, study spaces, lounge spaces, student societies, student services, etc. Participants indicated that they would also appreciate improved directional signage on the campuses, and expanded campus tours during orientation.

ACADEMIC & PERSONAL SUPPORT

When asked about academic and personal support services and the degree to which they felt student success is a priority for the staff and faculty of the University, a strong theme emerged among students in first-entry undergraduate programs on all three campuses. In focus group after focus group, students described a feeling that their success was not an institutional priority due to what they described as unfair grading practices – particularly in large first- and second-year classes. There was a strong perception that grades were “curved” down to maintain a lower class average and a belief that this is not the practice at other universities. Participants found it very challenging to separate the roles of staff and faculty, and to define “success” in terms other than course grades.

Interestingly, participants from second-entry professional programs who also attended U of T for their first degree shared similar experiences – despite having had high levels of academic success in their programs. These participants expressed a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the grading practices in their current programs.

Within the Faculty of Arts and Science there was also a feeling among many students that the introduction of “flat fees” represented a lack of concern for their academic and/or personal success.

In their own words...

“I had a professor who had to explain to a department head why his marks were so high and he was instructed to mark harder next term. I don’t understand how this can be fair and equitable. I think that work should be graded based on performance not some pre-set grade range.”

- 2nd Year, FAS Student

“As an undergrad they definitely didn’t care if I passed a course or even if I graduated – now in [names 2nd entry Professional Faculty] they do care. We are very much supported and there are so many programs in place to make sure we get through this.”

- 1st Year, 2nd Entry Professional Faculty Student

Suggestion Box

• Assign students to specific members of registrarial staff (perhaps by program specialization) to personalize the support experience
• Increased ease of access to information on scholarships and bursaries.
• Extended office hours in Registrars Offices during peak times
• Increased ease of access to Writing Centres (i.e. less lead time required for students to get an appointment)
• Additional Teaching Assistant support in 3rd & 4th year courses (UTM, FAS)
Sources of Academic Support
For academic support, participants identified their college/faculty registrar or program coordinator as their primary source of support, with many students indicating that they are also likely to seek out support from a faculty member, teaching assistant (TA), writing centre or math aid centre.

However, students within the Faculty of Arts and Science and at UTM also shared frustration with long wait times at registrars’ offices at key points in the year, restricted office hours, and a lack of communication among registrars, program offices and Admissions and Awards that resulted in students being sent back and forth among these offices numerous times to answer a question.

Within the professional faculties, students were often able to identify a specific staff person by name to whom they could go for support, and overall there was a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the level of support received.

In their own words...
“ I have been to the Writing Centre…but it’s hard to book. You have to book one month in advance. It’s hard to know if you need the writing centre that early or not.”
- 1st Year, FAS Student

“I would like more information about when I should go to my program office and when I should go to my Registrar. Sometimes I have been bounced between the two and it should be clearer who I go to for academic advising.”
- 2nd Year FAS Student

“Joe [name changed] is the go-to guy for academic support. It’s beneficial to have someone trained in student support right here in the Faculty.”
- 3rd Year, 1st Entry Professional Faculty Student
Sources of Personal Support
Family and friends provide a great deal of personal support to our students. It was a common theme for students to seek out the support of parents, siblings or other family members who are U of T alumni and/or to speak to friends in times of need. Many students indicated that they have friends from high school who also attend the University and to whom they turn for personal support.

In terms of on-campus personal support, the two most common sources were upper year students – particularly those in a leadership role (e.g. residence dons, FLC peer mentors, orientation leaders, etc.) – and student services (e.g. counseling services, career services, accessibility services, etc.). However, some participants did express concern over the wait time to see a counselor or a physician. In addition, students who had not had access to an upper-year peer mentor expressed a desire for more such opportunities.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Food
Across all three campuses it was clear that there is a general dissatisfaction with the food options offered at the University. This is consistent with the results of the Globe & Mail campus survey which found that over 40% of U of T students are dissatisfied with on-campus food services.

Overall, participants indicated a desire for greater access to reasonably priced, nutritious food on campus and extended hours for some food service operations. Students expressed frustration that in some cases food sold on-campus cost more than the same food sold at an off-campus location, but felt that the food was of a lower quality on-campus (Starbucks and Pizza Pizza were the primary examples cited by participants). There was a perception of a lack of healthy food choices available on-campus and a feeling that more options for vegetarians and vegans should be offered.

The ability for students to access food on-campus when needed was a strong theme which emerged from the focus

Promising Practice

“When I need advice I go to my commuter dons. I feel like they know everything and if they can’t answer my question directly they have the resources available to direct me to the right place.”
- 3rd Year, FAS Student

In their own words...

“In Frosh Week, they had leaders who were mentors. We need something like that. They do have mentorship programs but not everybody gets a chance.”
- 1st Year, 1st Entry Professional Faculty Student

In their own words...

“You might think I’m really nerdy but if I’m on campus on the weekends, the few things that are open close early – so if I’m late studying there are no real options to eat.”
- 2nd Year UTM Student
students expressed frustration that many food service operations are closed on evenings and weekends when they have classes or are studying in the libraries. There was also a desire for students to be able to pay with debit cards, credit cards or gift cards at more on-campus locations.

On the St. George Campus, residence students shared that they were often forced to purchase food outside their residence despite having a meal plan because they were unable to get back to their dining halls for meal times due to the size of the campus. They were also disappointed that they were unable to eat with friends from other colleges because meal plans do not transfer between dining halls. This was a particular issue for students in first-entry professional faculties living in residence.

Among students who primarily bring their own food to campus, there was a desire for more microwaves on campus and increased communication about their locations.

**Promising Practice**

“Sammy’s at Hart House is excellent. That should be replicated across campus.”

- 3rd Year FAS Student

**Suggestion Box**

- Meal plan cards that can be used across a variety of food service provides (residence and non-residence)
- Extended operating hours, particularly on evenings and weekends
- Expanded awareness among commuter students of availability of residence food options
- Ability to pay with debit, credit and gift/loyalty cards

**In their own words...**

“There are no outlets. You have to search vigorously to find an outlet. Sometimes you have to wait until someone leaves and take over their outlet.”

- 3rd Year UTSC Student

“About the wireless – I’ve been in different places and people have told me different passwords and it’s hard to know how to get the actual password.”

- 1st Year, FAS Student
PRIDE & SCHOOL SPIRIT

U of T Pride

U of T students are very proud of their University. In focus group after focus group, students shared their pride in the University of Toronto’s reputation – both in Canada and abroad. Many participants discussed how they had always wanted to attend U of T, and the sense of satisfaction that they felt because of the work they had done in order to be accepted, and the work they continue to do in order to excel in their courses. Overall, the University of Toronto’s reputation for academic and research excellence was a strong source of pride for participants across all of the colleges, campuses and faculties.

Interestingly, although students expressed frustration with the level of academic challenge – specifically course marking schemes – it is also a source of pride. This apparent contradiction may warrant further assessment.

On the St. George Campus, many students also spoke of the history and architecture of the campus and there was a strong feeling that these should be maintained. Across all three campuses participants discussed the connection they felt to the green spaces at the University and the importance of preserving them.

School Spirit

Despite the strong sense of pride that students feel for the University – across the focus groups participants drew a clear distinction between pride and spirit. There was a feeling among the students that U of T is lacking in school spirit.

Students described identifying more closely with their college, faculty or campus than with the institution as a whole. While a strong connection to their division was important to them – students also indicated that they felt that the University was too divided and expressed a desire for more opportunities to interact with students from other colleges, faculties and campuses.

In their own words...

“We have lots of pride as a world-class University. I’m enrolled in [names department] and the department is doing ground-breaking research.”
- 2nd year, FAS Student

“I am proud that they (the University) offer so much academically. I guess I want the degree. I know I have to work really, really hard to achieve a good grade on a test. And, nothing worth having comes easily I guess.”
- 1st year, FAS student

“We have lots of pride as a world-class University. I’m enrolled in [names department] and the department is doing ground-breaking research.”
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- 1st year, FAS student
Students suggested that U of T is missing athletic pride. There was concern that not enough students attend Varsity athletic games and there was a lack of awareness that U of T has a mascot or any University-wide cheers.

Participants from UTM and UTSC described feeling as though their campuses are looked down upon by students on the St. George campus. Interestingly, students from the East and West campuses also indicated that they felt there was more spirit, pride and opportunity for on-campus involvement at St. George – but the themes that emerged related to these topics were strikingly similar across the University.

**In their own words...**

“That’s the whole thing with U of T. They think you got rejected from St. George. The misconception is that this campus is easy, but it’s really not. It’s a misconception that a lot of people have.”

- 2nd year, UTSC Student
ENRICHING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

We have learned from both NSSE and the Globe and Mail survey that far too many students at U of T are missing the benefits of full participation in the life of the campus by choosing not to attend events or engage in co-curricular opportunities. The focus groups helped to identify the primary motivations of those who do participate, the barriers for those who do not, and the perceptions of the value of participation beyond classes.

CO-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT

Motivation
Across the University students described three primary motivations for becoming involved in co-curricular activities at the University: (1) opportunities to meet friends and find community on campus; (2) the desire to learn something new or gain experience in an area of interest to them; (3) opportunities to receive incentives such as food, scholarships, prizes, certificates, or other forms of recognition.

Barriers
By far the greatest barrier that students identified to their participation in co-curricular activities was a lack of time due to coursework and commuting. While this is not necessarily new information, the discussion did lead to some interesting options for addressing such fundamental and pervasive challenges, such as a place for commuter students to stay overnight when they are participating in activities on campus late at night.

Participants also identified getting involved after first year as a challenge and expressed frustration that some groups were not welcoming to new members or were not as active as they were led to believe. The cost of participating in certain groups was also identified as a barrier for a number of students.

Promising Practice
“I appreciate the Leadership program because you get credit for participating. With certain credits you get a certificate which proves my involvement. It looks good on my resume.”
- 1st Year, UTSC Student

In their own words...
“We have Clubs Week for first year students the first week in September and then it disappears. We need more clubs fairs. I just learned about Sussex this year and wasn’t sure how to get the right information when I was there since they (the clubs) have select office hours.”
- 2nd year, FAS Student

Suggestion Box
• “Crash pad” on or near campus for commuter students to use if on-campus late at night.
• Hold a second clubs fair at the start of 2nd term.
• Provide students with information about the activity level of clubs so they can make an informed decision before joining.
PREPARATION FOR CAREERS, GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

Aside from marks, first-entry students across campuses and divisions identified four primary areas of experience that potential employers, graduate and professional schools will be looking for when they graduate: (1) professional experience in their field; (2) leadership and community service work; (3) relationships with faculty and faculty references; (4) communication skills.

Overall, students indicated that they felt reasonably well prepared for graduation and many had received support from the career services offered on their campus or in their faculty. However, the area where students felt that the University could provide greater support was in the provision of opportunities to gain professional experience.

Promising Practices

“U of T Scarborough is well known for its Co-op program and employers are looking for work experience.”
- 2nd Year, UTSC Student

“I am applying for PEY (Professional Experience Year). I also take a lot of experiences from my team projects in the last few years to put on my resume.”
- 3rd Year, 1st Entry Professional Faculty Student
Throughout the focus groups if there was one clear theme that emerged it was a need for enhanced communication between the University and its students – with an understanding that communication must flow in both directions.

Students often described being overloaded with information from a variety of sources (email, Blackboard, posters, websites, etc.) but still finding it difficult to access the information that they needed when they needed it. Overall, students were unaware of institutional commitments to enhancing the student experience and much of the progress that has been made to this end over the past several years.

Many participants expressed appreciation about the opportunity to participate in the focus group project and indicated a desire for more opportunities to share their thoughts, opinions and experiences with University staff and faculty. There was a general sense that as a whole the University does not have a thorough understanding of the U of T student experience – particularly with regard to the impact of very long commutes to campus, heavy course loads, and financial strain.

**NEXT STEPS**

The results of the student experience focus group project will be presented to the Council on Student Experience (CSE) on May 27th, 2010. The CSE will utilize these results along with pre-existing data from surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), The *Globe and Mail* Campus Report and the Orientation Benchmarking Survey (OBS) to inform the Council’s next steps with regard to enhancing the student experience at the University of Toronto.

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**In their own words…**

“*I think it’s hard to fix. If the University made more processes easier and if there was better communication people (students) would be less apathetic.*”

- 4th Year FAS Student

“*I think that the University should be more responsive to students needs. I often feel that the University does things that don’t meet students needs and they should listen more to students*.”

- 1st Year, FAS student
FOR MORE INFORMATION

In The Own Words is a project of the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students of the University of Toronto. This report was prepared by Melinda Scott, Coordinator, Assessment & Special Projects in the Office of Student Life.

For more information on the Student Experience Focus Groups, contact:
Melinda Scott
Office of Student Life, St. George Campus
416-946-7747
melinda.scott@utoronto.ca

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- Dale Mullings: Student Housing & Residence Life
- Sushmita Ramachandran: Career Centre
- Rachel Tennant: Physical Education, Recreation & Athletics
- Elisabeta Vanatoru: Department of Philosophy
- Clare Westgate: Career Centre
- Ian Whyte: Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre
**ST. GEORGE CAMPUS**

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asim Ashraf</td>
<td>Office of Student Life</td>
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<td>Magdalena Rydzy</td>
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<td>Jude Tate</td>
<td>Office of LGBTQ Resources &amp; Programs</td>
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APPENDICES

A. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

B. INFORMATION FOR DIVISIONAL LIAISONS
In Their Own Words:
*Understanding the Undergraduate Student Experience at the University of Toronto*

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

**Introduction**

- Upon entering the room – welcome participants and offer refreshments
- Take participant names and check them off the registration list
- Ask participants to take a seat, write their first-name (or pseudonym) on index card at their seat and complete the consent form
- If demographic information has not been collected, ask participants to complete demographic questionnaire

**Background**

Good (morning/afternoon/evening) and welcome to our session.

[Introduce self & Co-Moderator]

Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion. This focus group is about your overall experience and impressions at the University of Toronto. We want to talk to you about your transition to the University, the services available to support students, and your out-of-class experiences. We are going to focus on some areas where we have some sense we need to improve. There are no right or wrong answers, because everyone experiences things differently. We are interested in the full range of experiences, so please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

**Discussion Group Rules**

Before we begin, let me suggest some guidelines that will make our discussion more productive.

- Please speak up—but only one person should talk at a time. We're recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If you have trouble hearing any of the comments, please let the group know.
- In the discussion, we'll be on a first-name basis. In later reports no names will be attached to any comments. Your name will be kept confidential. We also ask that you respect the confidentiality of everyone here. Please do not repeat who said what when you leave the room. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you just to help us remember each other's names during the course of the discussion. You may feel free to use a pseudonym if you choose, please just ensure that it matches the name you entered on the demographic questionnaire.
- My role here is to ask questions and to listen. I won’t be actively participating in the conversation, only guiding it. I want you to feel free to talk to the group and not just to me. I'll be asking some specific questions. We are interested in your experiences, but because this is an assessment project, it is important that you link your comments back to the questions. I'll move the discussion from one question to the next to try to keep us on track so that we can finish by [insert time]. If at any point you would prefer not to answer a question, please feel free to pass.
• Just so you know, the bathrooms are [point out directions]. Once we start, we will not be taking any breaks for the next 90 minutes. If you need to go to the bathroom or want to get up and get more to drink please feel free to take care of your needs.
• We will present your $20 gift cards to the U of T Bookstore to you at the conclusion of the discussion.
• Sometimes, people in focus groups think of things they want to say after the discussion has moved on to other questions. If you would like to add to your comments after the group, we will be around to talk with you privately.
• Any questions before we begin?

Focus Group Questions

1. Let’s begin with introductions. Please tell us your first name and your program of study.

2. (a) Now that we have all been introduced, we would like you to think broadly about your experience here – about your classes, your outside of class time, the services, your college/faculty as well as the campus as a whole – and complete the following sentence. “My U of T experience is/has/feels ____________________” You can insert either one word or a phrase to complete the sentence, but the idea is to get as many different descriptors on paper as possible in 2 minutes. [DISTRIBUTE STICKY NOTES & WRITE QUESTION ON FLIPCHART/CHALKBOARD]

(b) Now we would like you to work together to group all of your words/phrases into categories by theme.
[MODERATOR COLLECTS STICKY NOTES KEEPING THEM ORGANIZED BY THEME]

3. Thinking back on your first year at the University [or in your program – for pro-facs] – how welcome did you feel? How did you learn how to navigate your way through the University – the physical campus, your classes, involvement opportunities, student services? How long did it take? What, if anything, could have made it easier?

4. When you need advice or support – either personal or academic – where do you get it? What, if anything, do you think the University should provide that we are not already?
[IF UNCLEAR WHAT FORM OF ADVISING IS BEING DISCUSSED, MODERATOR PROMPT TO IDENTIFY]

5. In a recent survey, U of T students indicated that they would appreciate better opportunities for student-faculty interaction. Do you share their perspective? Where, outside of classes, have some of your most positive interactions with faculty occurred? Can you describe how you might like or expect to have interaction with faculty?

6. In that same survey, over 40 per cent of students say they were dissatisfied with food services on campus. Why do you think they said this?

7. To what extent do you feel that you and your success are a high priority for the staff and faculty who work here? Are you aware that the President of the University has made improving the student experience a priority for U of T? What changes, if any, have you noticed in your time here?
8. What do you think motivates students to get involved in groups or activities on campus outside of classes? And what factors do you think deter them?

9. To what extent do you feel a sense of pride at being a U of T student? What are you most proud of? How do you think the level of school spirit at U of T compares to other Universities in Canada? Do you think that we need increase the level of school spirit at U of T, and if so, what suggestions do you have for doing this?

10. [FOR A&S, ENGINEERING, UTM, UTSC ONLY] Thinking ahead to your life after you graduate, what do you think, other than marks, potential employers or graduate and professional schools will be looking for? To what extent has your experience as an undergraduate given you opportunities to develop those skills and attributes?

11. [SUMMARIZE SESSION] We wanted to get lots of perspectives on the experience here at U of T. In thinking about what we've talked about today, is there anything we didn't address that you thought we would talk about? Is there one thing you feel passionately that we should change at U of T? Is there one thing you feel passionately that we should preserve about U of T?

Conclusion

• Thank participants for attending
• Distribute incentives
• Allow space for any participants who would like to speak to you privately to do so.
• Debrief with co-moderator; record any key themes that emerged from the discussion and any issues with the protocol or facilitation methods that should be resolved before the next focus group.
• Check the tape to ensure that the discussion was properly recorded.
• Collect tapes and any notes from the focus group, clearly label them with the date/time of the focus group, and move them to a secure location immediately (e.g. locked file cabinet).
In Their Own Words: 
*Understanding the Undergraduate Student Experience at the University of Toronto*

**Background**

Significant gains in enhancing the student experience have been achieved over the six-years of the *Stepping Up* Academic plan – with many new initiatives having been launched across the three campuses. In spite of our successes, however, results of recent surveys - including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Globe and Mail Campus Survey - indicate that we continue to lag behind our peer institutions with regard to co-curricular student engagement, creating a supportive campus environment, and general student satisfaction with the overall experience.

Although these survey results identify areas of concern related to the student experience at the University of Toronto, they do not offer explanations of the underlying causes. Recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of some of the priority issues highlighted in these surveys and the ways in which the University could respond, Vice-Provost, Students Jill Matus is initiating a tri-campus, qualitative assessment project to drill down into some areas of the undergraduate student experience that seem to warrant further exploration. Rather than conducting a series of focus groups from a central office, the idea is for local units to develop the project with the coordinating support of the Office of Student Life, St. George Campus. The Council on Student Experience is well poised to help mobilize the project.

**Divisional Liaisons**

Each division has been asked to appoint a Divisional Liaison who will act as the primary point of contact between the division and the Office of Student Life. The role of the Divisional Liaison includes:

- Recruitment of focus group participants
- Reservation of space for the focus groups
- Arranging for refreshments
- Where possible, acting as a facilitator or note-taker

**Recruitment of Participants**

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater depth of understanding of the undergraduate experience at the University of Toronto – with an emphasis on the priority issues identified in surveys such as NSSE and the Globe and Mail Campus Report. Therefore, participants should represent a broad cross-section of the undergraduate population.
Each focus group should have a minimum of 6 participants and a maximum of 15. Ideally we would like all focus groups to have between 6 and 10 participants. In cases where you have more than 10 participants we would be happy to arrange to hold two focus groups in your Division. If at all possible, please create a pool of prospective participants and randomly select from the pool.

When recruiting participants for the pool, please consider the following:

- Participants should be full or part-time undergraduate students registered in a degree program at the University of Toronto.
- Participants should not be selected by memory, as names that can be readily recalled can differ in substantial ways from the general population.
- Participants should not be chosen because they have expressed concern about the topic.
- Participants should not be chosen because they are highly involved students (i.e. please do not recruit exclusively from your Divisional Student Society, Residence Dons, etc)
- Participants should not be chosen on the basis of convenience (i.e. please do not recruit exclusively from the residence population, office workstudy students, etc.)

**Invitation Template**

Included below is a sample invitation for this project. While we are not asking you to use this exact template when contacting students to invite them to participate, we do ask that all information in **bold** is included.

Dear [Student],

I am writing with a request for your assistance.

In recent years the University of Toronto has participated in a number of surveys, including, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Globe and Mail Campus Report. Although there are sectors where our results are very positive, these surveys do identify a number of areas of concern related to the undergraduate student experience at the University of Toronto.

Recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of some of the priority issues highlighted in these surveys and the ways in which the University could respond, Vice-Provost, Students Jill Matus has initiated a series of focus groups with undergraduate students across the University of Toronto. I would like to invite you to participate in one of these focus groups.

**Focus groups are facilitated discussions among up to 15 students; the discussion is audio-taped but participants are not identified on the tape nor in the accompanying notes. The focus group session is about 90 minutes in length. Students who are selected to participate in a focus group are provided refreshments and given a $20 gift certificate to the University of Toronto Bookstore. Your participation is completely voluntary, though I hope you will respond.**

Focus groups for [INSERT DIVISION] will be held at the following time(s):
If you are interested in participating please email me with the following information:

Name
Email
Year of Study
Do you have any accessibility needs? If so, please describe any accommodations you may require in order to participate in a focus group.

Should you have any questions about these focus groups or our interest in using the results please feel free to contact me. I can be reached at [INSERT CONTACT INFORMATION]

Thank you for your participation!

Sincerely,

[INSERT YOUR NAME]

Reservation of Space for Focus Groups

When reserving space for focus groups, please consider the following:

• There should be enough space for 6 – 15 participants as well as 1 – 2 facilitators and a note-taker.
• Participants should be able to see each other and speak directly to each other. The room should ideally be set up in a circle or square configuration.
• The space should be private.
• The space should be accessible.

If you are having difficulty arranging for a space in your division, or if you would prefer that a focus group is held elsewhere, please contact melinda.scott@utoronto.ca.

Refreshments for Focus Group Participants

It will be up to each division to arrange for refreshments for your focus groups. Should you have any difficulty arranging for refreshments, please contact melinda.scott@utoronto.ca.

Facilitator and Note-taker Training

Two training sessions will be held for facilitators and note-takers. All facilitators and note-takers must attend one of the following sessions:

Monday, March 1st, 2010
10am to 12pm
Koffler Student Services Centre, Rm 313
Thursday, March 4th, 2010
2pm to 4pm
Koffler Student Services Centre, Rm 313

Focus groups will take place from Tuesday, March 2nd to Friday, March 19th, 2010. While all support of this project is appreciated, if your availability is very limited during this time frame please do not volunteer as a facilitator or note-taker.

To register for facilitator and note-taker training, visit:

http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/research/assessmentprojects/Focus-Group-Project.htm

Project Timeline

- **February 10th, 2010**: The Focus Group Project was presented for discussion to Council on Student Experience.

- **February 12th, 2010**: Deadline for Divisions to identify Divisional Liaison. The role of the Divisional Liaison is to reserve space for focus groups to be held within your Division, arrange for refreshments, recruit participants, and in some cases facilitate focus groups. **If you have not done so already, please forward the name(s) and contact information of your Divisional Liaison(s) to melinda.scott@utoronto.ca**

- **February 17th, 2010**: Promotional materials designed by the Office of Student Life for use in the recruitment of focus group participants will be distributed to Divisional Liaisons.

- **February 26th, 2010**: Deadline for Divisions to submit the date(s) and times of their focus group(s). This information should be submitted to melinda.scott@utoronto.ca

- **March 1st & March 4th, 2010**: Training for focus group facilitators & note-takers. Wherever possible the Divisional Liaison will also be asked to act as a facilitator or note-taker. However, please be aware that in order to protect student confidentiality and encourage the free sharing of experiences, Divisional Liaisons will not be asked to facilitate in their own Division.

- **March 2nd to 29th, 2010**: Focus groups conducted. The Office of Student Life will arrange for focus group facilitators and note-takers. **Participant registration lists must be submitted to the Office of Student Life at least 48 hrs in advance of the focus group.**

- **March 30th to May 14th, 2010**: Data analysis. All data analysis will be conducted by the Office of Student Life.

- **May 27th, 2010**: Results reported to Council on Student Experience
Contact Information

If you have any questions, or if you need any further information, please contact:

Melinda Scott
Coordinator, Assessment & Special Projects
Office of Student Life
416-946-7747
melinda.scott@utoronto.ca