

Student Experience Green Paper, Forum Summary

At the Planning Forum on November 2, 2009 six groups, with a combined total of 96 participants, shared their ideas in response to questions and suggestions presented in the Student Experience Green Paper. There was some variation in the top priority identified by each discussion group, but the top three priorities demonstrated considerable consistency across the groups. For a full appreciation of the breadth and depth of discussions pertaining to the student experience, it is recommended that this summary be read in conjunction with the report prepared by the Student Experience Green Paper Working Group.

Outside the setting of priorities, a recurring theme expressed by participants was the need for evidence-based research regarding our students' expectations and experiences. What do our students expect from their York experience? What do we want our students to experience? How do we wish to define the York U student experience? What can we learn from the best practices engaged in by other large, urban, diverse, commuter-based post-secondary institutions? There was recognition that we all (faculty, staff and students) share the responsibility to enhance our students' experiences.

In response to the question posed to the group participants, "**Having regard to the analysis in this Green Paper, what are the three key priorities that should guide the efforts of the University over the next decade in relation to this area?**" the priorities that emerged for Student Experience were:

- **Fostering student engagement through the conscious development of communities and connections**

The various communities available to students include college communities, recreational/team communities, club communities, and academic communities at the departmental and Faculty levels (some of which can be categorized as learning communities). Encouraging students to forge connections through community contacts provides a means through which the large institution can feel smaller and more personal, increasing the potential for students to be engaged and to experience a sense of "belonging." Offering "value-added" co-curricular and extra-curricular programming can contribute to student satisfaction, supporting successful/enhanced completion of their programs of study. Introduction of a co-curricular transcript can reinforce the importance of this aspect of student life. Participants referred to the culture shock experienced by some direct entry students in their first year of study. The need for regular faculty-student interactions outside the class setting was identified as a priority. Hiring more tenure stream faculty is desirable, but cultural and policy changes also are required in order to increase the quantity and quality of faculty-student interactions. Suggestions included elevating the value placed on teaching within the tenure and promotion process and promoting academic advising as an aspect of service to the university. The use of technology in enhancing faculty-student

interactions was identified as a possibility, but most participants believed that face-to-face meetings are more effective. Strengthening the role of the colleges also was suggested. Outside of the social realm, personal connections also can be made with staff members and peer mentors. Some of these connections can be associated with the second identified priority, advising.

Questions for students: What community(ies) do you belong to at York? (college, course, student organisation, department, etc)

What type of community would you like to be a part of at York?

Looking back to your first year at York, would you have benefited from being part of an organised learning community?

Looking back to your first year at York, would you have been willing to dedicate another two hours per week to be involved in a learning community on campus?

How can we build a greater sense of community at York?

- Offering a holistic approach to **advising** that includes efficient access to accurate information and referrals

Within the discussion groups there was consensus that the term “advising” needs to be broadly defined. We want advising at York to extend beyond form signing and the communication of degree requirements to include any aspect of a student’s experience that can influence academic performance and future aspirations. An individual’s advising interactions can vary depending on their year of study, personal circumstances, and advising contact. Possibilities include staff contacts in Faculty-wide advising centres, faculty and staff contacts in departments/units, college advisors and masters, and peer mentors/advisors. Additionally, advising can include sessions offered through the libraries, counselling, learning skills, the career centre, etc. Advising also can occur in informal settings with faculty members and peers, where the experience can shift from advising to mentoring. Education and professional development of faculty and staff will be required in order to enhance the advising experience. One suggestion was to provide information/PD sessions with a mix of participants, i.e., staff, faculty and peer mentors so that advising divides are not perpetuated.

Questions for students: Do you support the concept of mandatory advising?

Do you want a guarantee that you will have the opportunity to interact with a faculty advisor in your department at least once each year?

What kind of advising do you prefer (face-to-face, individual, small group, virtual)?

- Developing a welcoming environment that includes **adequate and appropriate spaces** designed for quiet study, group study, relaxation, and informal social interactions

For many forum participants, the quantity and quality of our physical spaces were identified as a key priority. Students are seeking dedicated spaces for quiet study as well as group work; they also need social spaces where they can relax and engage with others. Graduate students communicated the importance of access to office space and lounge space within their units to facilitate increased opportunities for interactions with faculty. Faculty members discussed classroom spaces, and how the nature of a space can inhibit or support innovative course delivery. Currently, students tend to congregate around the geographic centre of the Keele campus, adding to the congestion, while spaces on the campus periphery sometimes are under-utilized. Many of our residences at both the Keele and Glendon campuses are in need of updating if they are to be attractive to students. Students want a campus that feels “welcoming.”

Questions for students: What attributes do you ascribe to a welcoming university environment?

What changes to the York environment would encourage you to spend more time on campus?

What types of spaces do you need when they are on campus?

What types of spaces would you like to have on campus?

Other priorities that were identified include:

- Develop a First Year Experience program
- Increase the full-time faculty complement
- Improve the use of technology (e.g., how we communicate with students; create a web site for use by faculty and staff re: quick access to information needed when advising)
- Reduce bureaucracy; develop a “seamless” bureaucracy
- Require faculty members and TAs to complete a series of modules focusing on developmental and pedagogical theories
- Improve campus transportation, safety and security after dark