Highlighting the Student Voice: Co-developing & Piloting Research Protocols to Explore Student Perspectives and Experiences with Course Evaluations

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CONTEXT

75,582 undergrad students

21,484 graduate students

3 city campuses

20 faculties/divisions

About the **UNIVERSITY of TORONTO**

Canada's **LARGEST** university

COMPLEX & decentralized institutional model

15,111 faculty

Agenda

Study Background and Research Questions

Participants

Core Research Findings

Concluding Remarks

Study Background & Research Questions

Study Background

- Students provide invaluable information through course evaluations that capture their perspectives about a course experience
- Feedback from students can be influenced to be negative by a myriad of factors:
  - Perceived validity or utility of evaluations (Basow & Martin, 2012)
  - Non-course related influences such as instructor's verbal fluency (Carpenter et al, 2013, 2016)
  - Course grade (Tang, 1999)
- Explicit communication with students can mitigate possible bias (Peterson et al., 2019)
- Students' understanding of the purpose of evaluation can impact their willingness to provide honest feedback (McClain et al., 2018)
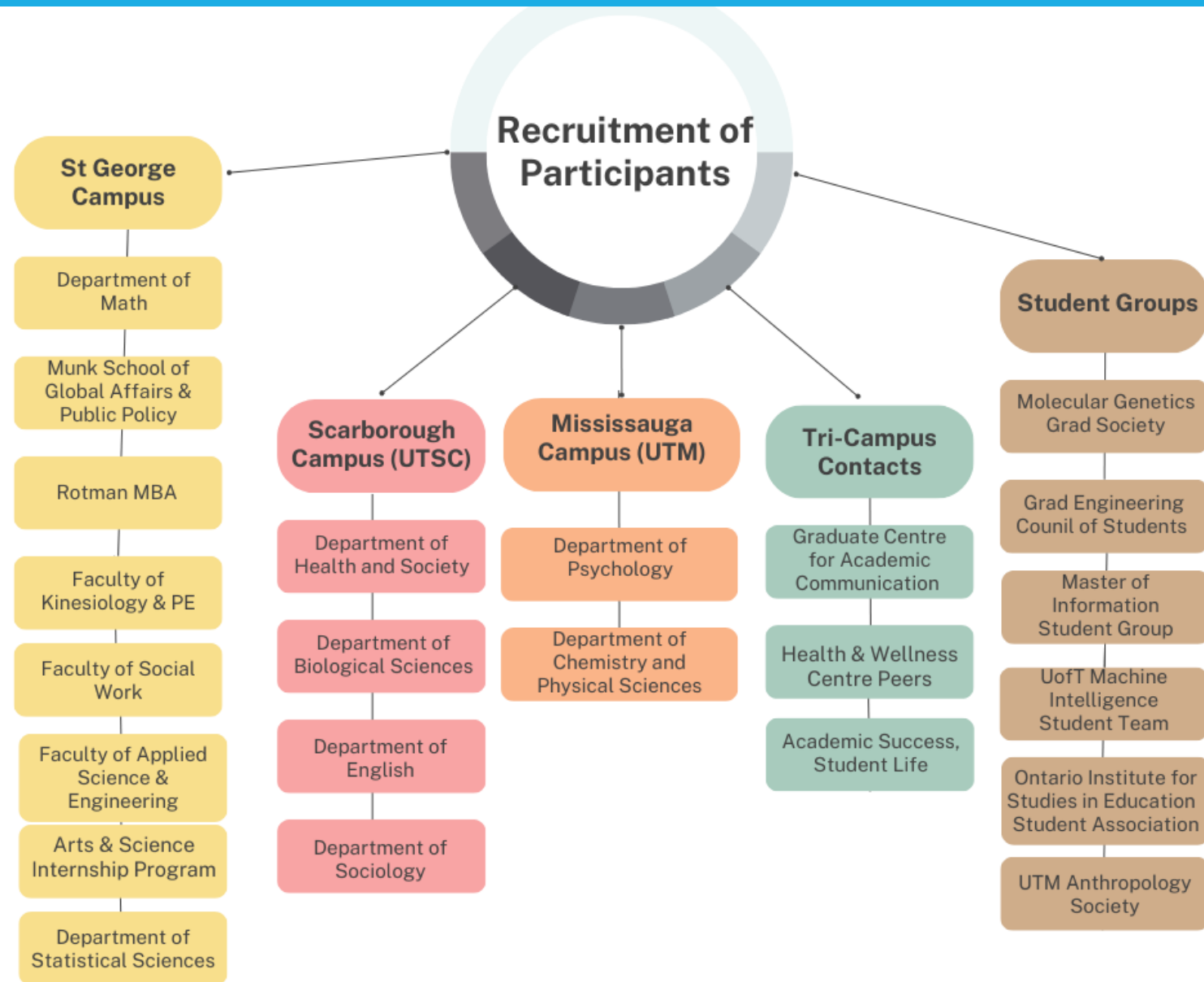
Students as Partners (SaP)

Respect

Reciprocity

Responsibility
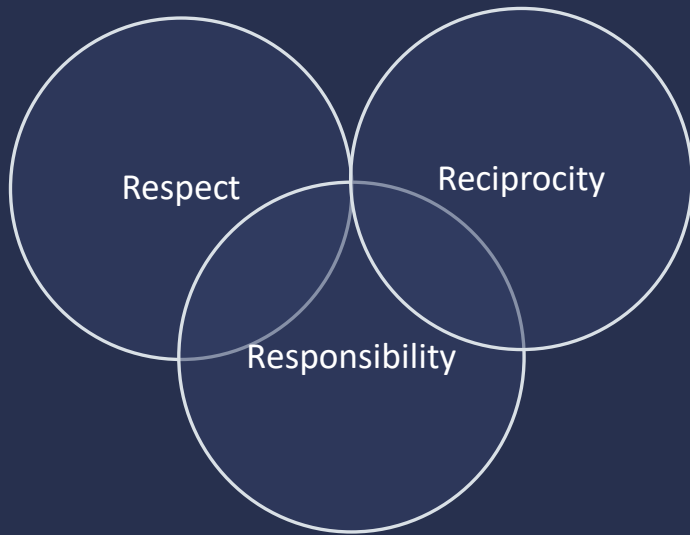
Cook-Sather et al. (2014)

- SaP is a framework that offers a general direction that "makes way for respectful, mutually beneficial learning partnerships where students and staff work together on all aspects of educational endeavors" (Matthews, 2017)

- By engaging with students in the focus group design process, the questions can be framed appropriately and better resonate with students' experiences in completing course evaluations.

Recruitment of Participants

St George Campus
- Department of Math
- Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy
- Rotman MBA
- Faculty of Kinesiology & PE
- Faculty of Social Work
- Faculty of Applied Science & Engineering
- Arts & Science Internship Program
- Department of Statistical Sciences

Scarborough Campus (UTSC)
- Department of Health and Society
- Department of Biological Sciences
- Department of English
- Department of Sociology

Mississauga Campus (UTM)
- Department of Psychology
- Department of Chemistry and Physical Sciences

Tri-Campus Contacts
- Graduate Centre for Academic Communication
- Health & Wellness Centre Peers
- Academic Success, Student Life

Student Groups
- Molecular Genetics Grad Society
- Grad Engineering Counil of Students
- Master of Information Student Group
- UofT Machine Intelligence Student Team
- Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Student Association
- UTM Anthropology Society

Research Questions

Utilizing a Students as Partners approach we explored:

1. What do students know about the purpose and use of course evaluations?

2. What motivates students to complete course evaluations?

3. What information do students share when they complete their course evaluations?
   i. Examples from a course they took to demonstrate the type of feedback that they provide
   ii. Factors they consider when they complete course evaluations.

Who are our Participants?

Focus Group Participants (n=28)

Participant Demographics	Number of Participants
Gender	
Female	20
Male	8
Level of Study	
Undergraduate	21
Graduate	7
Study Disciplines	
Physical & Mathematical Sciences	11
Life Sciences	7
Social Sciences & Humanities	10
Total Participants	28

Theme	Description	% of participants
Student Voice	An avenue for students to express their voice and thoughts to the University.	48%
Improvement	An opportunity to help improve courses and the course evaluation process.	48%
Curiosity	Students have curiosity about course evaluation and what other students have to say about the course evaluation.	34%
Enjoyment	Some students enjoyed similar experiences (i.e., student was part of a previous study that involved focus groups).	20%
Passionate	Students feel very strongly about course evaluations or passionate about sharing student voice.	10%
Make change	Students want to advocate for action and structural program changes at the University of Toronto.	14%
Support	Students wish to support meaningful research and give back to the research community.	6%
Gift Card	Incentive of $20 gift card motivated student to join study.	3%

Why do you want to participate in our Focus Group?
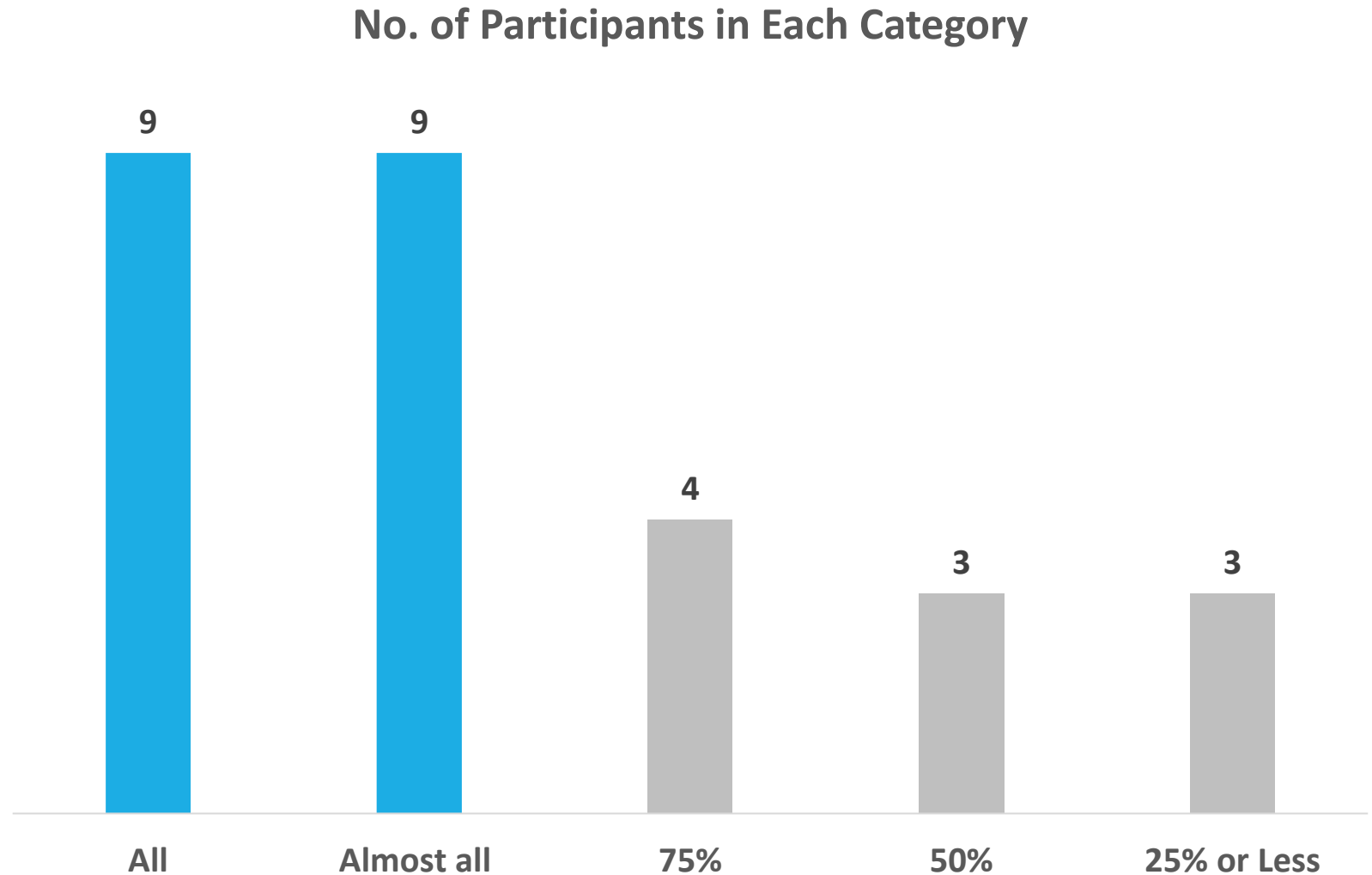
"What word or phrase comes to mind when you think of Course Evaluations?"

Chatterfall: Unfiltered responses in Introduction of FG (Chat function)

Per Semester, how many course evaluations do you fill out?

No. of Participants in Each Category

9 — All
9 — Almost all
4 — 75%
3 — 50%
3 — 25% or Less

Poll in Introduction of FG: anonymous responses

Core Findings

1. Purpose of Course Evaluations

2. Motivations to Complete Course Evaluations

3. Barriers to Completing Course Evaluations

4. Factors That Influence Students' Ratings

5. Students as Partners (SaP) Preliminary Reflections

1: Finding: Purpose of Course Evaluations

To Make Improvements in the Course and Teaching

*It's ….for the teacher to take feedback in terms of improving their **course content or course structure** when it comes to future classes* (FG8.P2.MBA.G)

*They look for the **major trends**. So if they notice, a lot of students are commenting on the **syllabus structure…..**on the way that professor lectures then that feedback will be taken into account, and what I would hope is…that they would begin to implement it in the next time they run the course* (FG4.P1.Bio.UG)

*It's a good way for the teachers if they check these to see like **how the students think of their courses*** (FG2.P4.CS.UG)

*My professor told me that he himself reads it, and he said he tried to see **what he can do better and how to improve himself*** (FG5.P1.Bsc.UG)

To Address Institutional Purposes

*I also like to say, probably to see which professors they want to like **grant tenure**, or to like which one they need to let go of* (FG3.P2.Phys.UG)

*And so I know when I took courses, for in this program, professors would really push for us to complete the course eval, because it seems **like their jobs really depended on it*** (FG1.P1.Manag.UG)

*And it helps to maintain. I guess the…I'm I'm losing the word right now, but I guess, like the **professionalism of the institution**, and the I guess the persona that it puts on to make sure that the quality of education that they're providing remains good quality, and that courses are being adjusted so that they continue to be of the utmost quality to maintain. I guess that and I'm losing the word. But the I guess the **status** or the perception of the universities* (FG4.P1.Bio.UG)

1: FINDING: PURPOSE OF COURSE EVALUATIONS

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2: Finding: Motivations to Complete Course Evaluations

Polarizing Views

*If I **really like** the professor, or if I really **don't like** them (FG7.P1.Psych.UG)*

*I usually just fill it out if I have **very strong**, whether it's good or bad feelings about the course that they need to be addressed or else no improvements can be made (FG4.P1.Bio.UG)*

*So in in that case I think it ties also back to the how much you like or dislike that course as well, because if you have **such strong emotions about it**, then you're most likely to remember to fill out that evaluation, at least in my case as well (FG8.P2.MBA.G)*
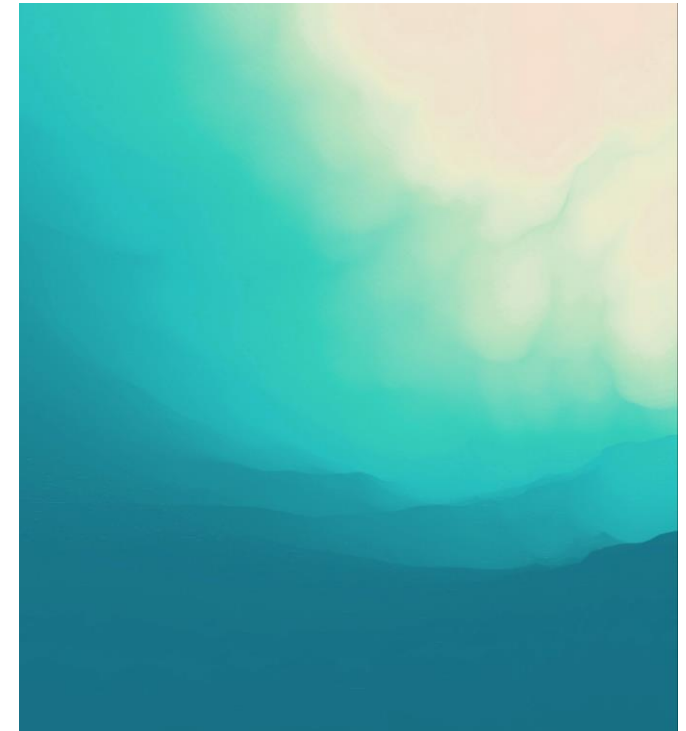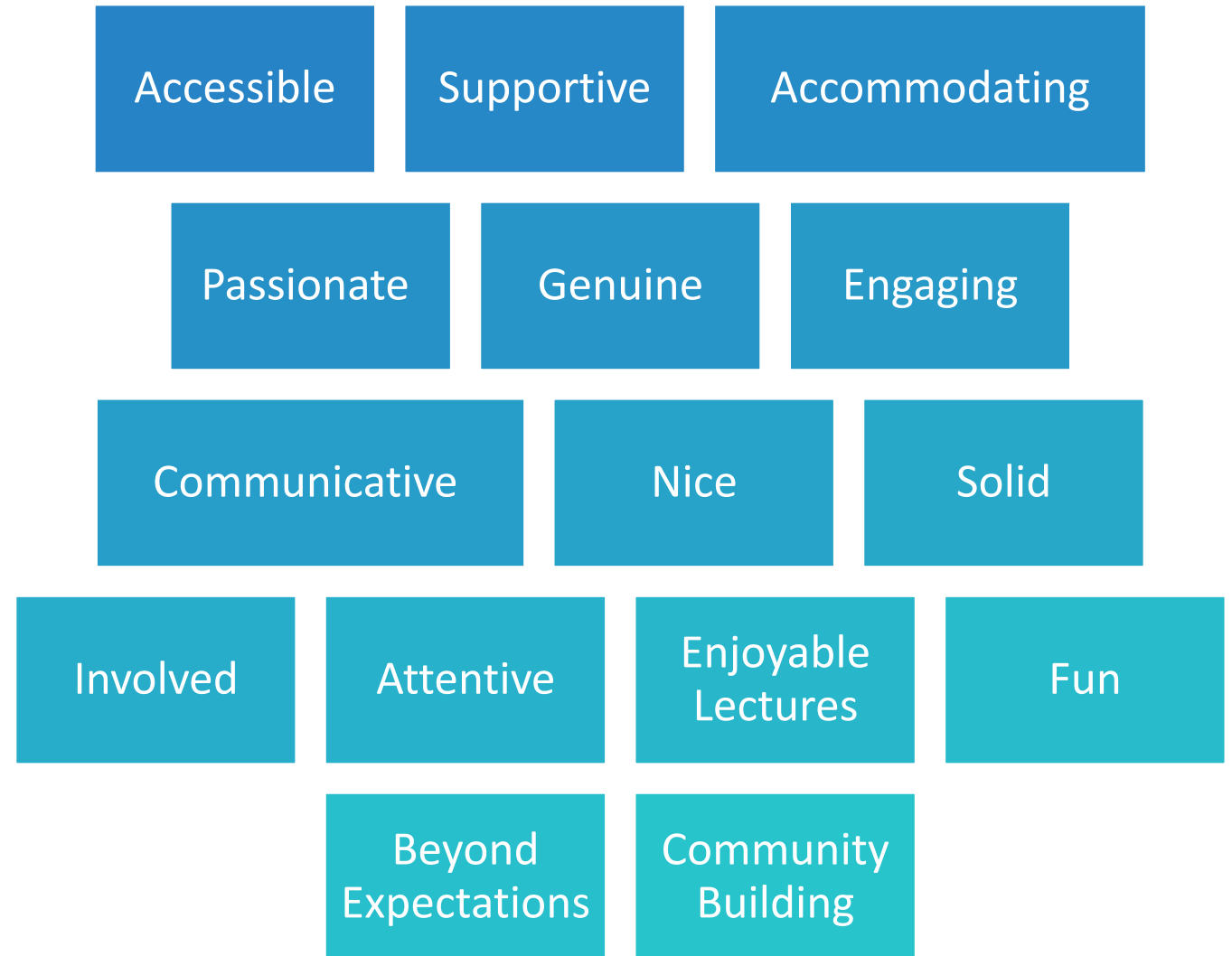
Motivated by a positive learning experience

*I think the course it comes to mind for me is [names course]. So, it was really a smaller class. And so, the Professor really got to spend time with each of us, and the TAs were there as well, and it was **really like a nice experience**. So, I wanted to make sure that, like it was a challenging experience, but really fun. so, I wanted to make sure that, like, I was able to reflect that and that the course was really well taught* (FG3.P2.Phys.UG)

*I fill out course evaluations **especially if I've had a good experience** with the course or professor - especially with departments such as political science and history were there's new courses being launched in recent years, I like to give feedback about it* (FG5.P3.BA.UG: Chat entry)

Student Descriptors of a Positive Learning Experience

Accessible

Supportive

Accommodating

Passionate

Genuine

Engaging

Communicative

Nice

Solid

Involved

Attentive

Enjoyable Lectures

Fun

Beyond Expectations

Community Building

Motivated by a poor course learning experience

*But I think if someone has a **negative experience** with the course, then they're more likely to complete them, because I know a lot of people kind of just use them to rant about the professors* (FG2.P5.Bsc.UG)

*And so, through my entire experience, taking the course I was just not pleased with the Prof. nor the content that we were learning....I felt that this information needed to be shared just because I was **discouraged throughout the course**, and but when a Prof isn't you know, using the right approach during lecture and information isn't sticking, and that this is room for to where changes can be made to adjust the course* (FG4.P1.Bio.UG)

3: Finding: Barriers to Completing Course Evaluations

Time and Timing

*Another barrier that I have is usually course, evaluations are the **end of the term**. So they're like a lot of tests and exams. And so kind of just, you know, limits me from, you know, taking like 5 min of my time, and just to write down my feelings towards the course* (FG5.P1.Bsc.UG)

*I think one of my barriers is time….Previously was doing my master's full time and working full time, so I really didn't have the time to do it. And **if I had been given time in class** it might have been a little bit better* (FG8.P1.M.Ed.G)

*But from a student perspective, it's again looking at like **effort versus what's the outcome**. So we fill this every semester or every term, but we've never really heard back as to OK, what was the outcome of that. So I think that also that reduces my, my want to fill it, right in terms of effort. I'm not going to put effort into this if I don't know what the outcome is. So I think that's also a barrier, right* (FG8.P3.MBA.G)

4: Finding: Factors That Influence Students Ratings

Reasons for Giving a High Rating

*She was like amazing. She like **accommodate students**...like even if it's not our office hour, she'd make time for you like she, was like unbelievable. I like gave her 5 for everything like she like perfect perfect. Because I've never got a professor that good... I liked everything about course, the assessment styles...like the assessments weren't easy* (FG2.P1.Bsc.UG)

*I'm not sure I got a really high grade in that course, but I think and it was I'm pretty sure, it was definitely because of like **the extra step** that professor took to ensure, like how we, everyone could succeed in his course* (FG2.P4.CS.UG)

*I had this one really great prof...I think I ended her class the 4.0 GPA. She would always ensure that her students are learning. She will **provide extra support**....additional lecture times, additional office hours. And just you know she would write her term tests in such a way, which reflects, you know the way she taught, and is very fair to us, and which can be achieved by, you know, sufficient studying and asking for help when needed. So I really really like that. She was very understanding* (FG5.P1.Bsc.UG)

Reasons for Giving a Low Rating

*I guess, in my first year, like I had a course I mean, I don't remember what I rated on each question, obviously. But In that course the Professor, like their lectures, weren't really that helpful? And it was, I mean, there's an element of independence to all university courses. But that course was like entirely, you're kind of **on your own**. And the questions were really out there, and you kind of just had to memorize every detail from the book. I gave lower ratings. And I think that was a common sentiment among students, who took that course* (FG2.P5.Bsc.UG)

*So I gave one of my courses, a low rating for one of the sections of the course evaluations. Just because I thought that the professor's lectures did not really reflect the material that we were tested on in the midterms and exams. So I felt that there was a **lot of self studying** that students had to do for that course, and that we weren't really prepared by the professor, based on their lecture content and lecture slides* (FG4.P2.HealthSci.UG)

*But I do think the low ratings are like punchier like it's like kind of **a way to speak like through the system**, or like, I really don't like this course by giving them a low rating because a lot of the time through these long answers like, it's hard for them to identify that if it's actually like....The ratings are a way to like. Tell them immediately that this course is not good or good* (FG1.P1.Manag.UG)

Defining "Quality"

*I think about the first question in a sense of like **the quality of the professor's lectures themselves**. So, if they are informative enough, they're like well-paced enough. So obviously, I think that something will not be conducive to my learning. If the professor is talking too fast, and many students can't, you know, hear what they're saying properly, or can't connect it to like what they have on the slides* (FG3.P1.Bio.UG)

*So, in this question, I don't really know how important like the word quality is. **I feel like you could substitute the word quality for a lot of other words** like experience, and I think it would pretty much mean the same question. I'm not a huge fan of questions like this because they're like, really, general* (FG3.P3.Bio.UG)

*So I've always thought of quality as a word to sort of like replace something like is there anything on your mind perhaps that you wish to mention or want to let us know or want to let the instructor know about the way the course was taught overall? **So I think that quality aspects just refer to overall what your thoughts about the course were, not just one aspect, but all of them*** (FG8.P2.MBA.G)

5: Finding: Students as Partners (SaP) Preliminary Reflections

SaP General Reflections

Guided by the P.O.W.E.R Framework (Verwood & Smith, 2020)

According to student RAs,

- they could feel "**a sense of power and impact**" of their work on the project and the university

- they had a chance to develop and review the FG protocols from the very beginning stage by **bringing their past experiences, materials, insights, and new tools into this project**

- echoing this part of the SaP framework **"nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection."**

SaP General Reflections

According to Team Leads:

- the intentional, scaffolded approach was effective in guiding and training RAs about course evaluations and focus group facilitation and analysis

- RAs shared their comradery and commitment amongst team members
  - were responsive to project demands and each other's time and skill sets

- the short project timeframe did work very well with a focused & concentrated approach
  - students could devote their time to the project
  - future SaP research would ideally be over a longer period to allow for more intensive team building.

Concluding Remarks

Remarks & Observations

- The FG itself was an educational activity for students

- This study gleans insights from students who are highly engaged in CEs and how to improve teaching – future work will need to focus on those who *do not* complete CEs

- Important insights to inform communications for students that may improve response rates and their understanding of how feedback is used

- For our faculty development roles, we can share with instructors, "What's resonating with students' learning"?

- We gained other insights that we did not present today as these are only relevant to our University of Toronto context.

Next Steps

- Continue analysis including the SaP reflections on their learning process

- Present at the University of Toronto Course Evaluation Institute (CEI) Conference in September 2023

- Share findings with senior leadership at University of Toronto (Vice Provosts and Divisional Leadership)

- Use results to inform potential student information campaign (another future project for consideration)

- Consider future projects based on these findings: this study clearly indicated strong student interest to share their CE insights, passion and commitment to improving and enhancing teaching at our institution.

Thank You!

- Co-authors not in attendance

- Derek Wilson, our CTSI colleague, for his coordination

- All the students who expressed interest and participated

- Explorance for this research opportunity!

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Project Acknowledgements

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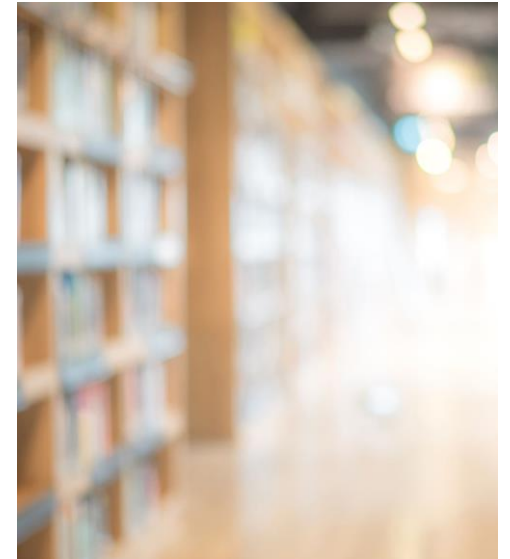
Questions?

Please contact us at
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if you have any questions
about this research project.