

Student Community meeting – July 7, 2021

Thank you to everyone who was able to join us for our Student Community Meeting on July 7. The purpose of this meeting was to provide students with additional insight into the factors that influenced our decision to hold the majority of fall 2021 classes remotely. In addition, we wanted to provide you with information on:

- The types of in-person and online co-curricular learning activities we hope to support in the fall
- How we will continue to support a high-quality academic experience and ensure academic completion
- Student mental health supports
- Insight into tuition costs

Logistical questions from new students have been shared with our registrar's office, who will follow up with you to ensure you have the answers you need. We also plan to have more targeted and separate community update meetings for incoming and returning given that the questions and needs of these cohorts tend to vary. We are corresponding with PhD students to address their inquiries as well.

We would like to acknowledge FIFSW's Graduate Student Association for bringing student questions and concerns to our attention.

We have compiled answers to your questions from the meeting, below, and organized them by theme. In cases where there was overlap, we merged questions to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Fall 2021 format

FIFSW has made a difficult and informed decision to deliver the majority of FIFSW classes online during the fall semester. Exceptions will include some classes in our ITR program and PhD program.

Although vaccinations are increasing and caseloads are currently in decline, public health experts anticipate that some restrictions on gathering size limits and physical distancing will remain in place in the fall. Social distancing requirements combined with the small classroom spaces in our building will likely impede our ability to have in-person classes. In addition, we are also managing our students' need to have timely clarity on fall class format so that they can begin organizing their lives for the fall.

Below are details that informed our decision.

Can we provide proof of vaccination to determine who is allowed in person vs not?

While it is strongly encouraged that all students, staff, and faculty (who are able) to get vaccinated, U of T has not made vaccinations mandatory. As such we cannot make this a requirement for in person classes.

The government regulations state that individuals who are vaccinated are allowed to be in a room together. Additionally, individuals that are not vaccinated can be in a room with masks on. How were the government regulations considered when making the decision for the upcoming academic year?

Public Health guidelines are informing all our decisions. [Physical distancing requirements and capacity limits are still required, even when individuals are wearing masks.](#) Given the size of our classrooms, we would not be able to accommodate a full class with these measures in place.

Is it possible for all classes to be remote for the Fall? Instead of doing some in person and others not? Can the Faculty just decide to go fully remote for the Fall?

We made the decision to hold two Indigenous Trauma and Resiliency (ITR) classes and four PhD classes in person. The ITR classes are one-week intensives. The PhD classes involve 10 students or less, making physical distancing within our building possible in these cases.

Could we just rent larger spaces at U of T to accommodate physical distancing?

We have looked into booking classes elsewhere at U of T and faced a number of challenges. First, classroom bookings are based on need, so larger classes within the university are have been given priority. In addition, with all faculties and departments across U of T searching for class space to accommodate physical distancing, the options are severely limited.

As the situation with the pandemic evolves and vaccinations increase, is there a chance that classes will resume in person during the Fall semester, or would we be online for the entire term regardless?

We will be online for the full term regardless. Switching from online to in person course delivery would require students who have made the decision not to move to Toronto to suddenly find a place to stay, adding extra stress and disruption to their semester. We need to provide some certainty so that all students can adequately plan for the semester ahead.

How will you support a high-quality academic experience?

Your success represents our success. Behind the scenes we have been supporting our instructors to provide quality pedagogical approaches to online learning. We will continue to seek and monitor your feedback and support our instructors with training. Despite our efforts, we understand that some students will still prefer in-person learning. The pandemic has introduced a difficult set of circumstances that affects everyone. We pledge to do all that we can to elevate the quality of learning we provide.

Will the decision for the fall change if vaccinations increase?

Given the preparations required for the fall semester, we are committing now to online classes. However, as restrictions are lifted, we will have opportunities to plan a wider variety of co-curricular activities. Public health experts anticipate that some restrictions on gathering size limits and physical distancing will remain in place in the fall, which is why we are now committing to remote learning.

Can students enroll in the fall and be 100% remote? Or are we still expected live in Toronto?

You are not expected to live in Toronto for the fall semester; however Year 2 or Advanced Standing students are expected to commit to the practicum that they start in the fall to the end of the winter semester. (Year 1 students start their practicum in the winter 2022 semester and will be informed of the process for practicum selections in October.)

Will our transcript indicate whether courses were taken online?

No.

I am in the Advanced Standing program; is this only offered online in the fall?

Yes. Two ITR and four PhD classes are the only classes being offered in person.

I am wondering what measures will be taken by the Faculty to ensure that in-person learning in Winter 2022 will happen?

We are hoping that restrictions will lift, and we will be able to resume in person learning in the Winter, and we are preparing for that possibility. Of course, we cannot predict the future. If some restrictions are still in place, we will build on what we have learned over the fall and work with our student community and faculty members to ensure a high-quality educational experience. We will notify students in the fall about format for the winter semester so that you can plan your semester and living arrangements accordingly.

Hybrid models

Can the classrooms at the faculty get a webcam to accommodate a hybrid approach where some people are allowed in-person vs online?

We explored this possibility last year and unfortunately it is not feasible for us due to cost, space, and availability issues. Faculties that are currently offering this hybrid approach tend to own their building, have their own dedicated IT staff, and had the necessary technology in place prior to the pandemic.

Last year, we looked into renting classroom space at U of T that was outfitted with the appropriate technology to accommodate a hybrid model for select classes. We also explored options off campus and found that costs are prohibitive. We looked at purchasing our own equipment as well. Unfortunately, demand skyrocketed. In short, faculties that don't own their own building, have dedicated IT staff or the appropriate technology already installed are unable to provide a program-wide hybrid model of in-person and remote classes. We are not alone on this front.

Job prospects after graduation

Will online learning affect our ability to secure jobs when we graduate?

We are in the process of devising a plan to collect post-graduation student satisfaction and employment data. We currently do not have robust data but on self-reported data we have seen that many of our students who graduated this spring have secured employment.

It is important to remember that all faculties of social work in Ontario are in the same boat. Some have even already indicated that their classes will remain online in the winter, which we are hoping to avoid. As FIFSW alumni, you may opt to receive weekly job postings in our alumni digest. As students, you have the opportunity to network with our many active alumni, through Alumni Association events and our mentorship program. (Our alumni association also has an active Facebook group where job opportunities are shared.)

Given the concerns expressed, this fall we would like to plan an information session with a panel of graduates from the 2020-2021 academic year who can share their experiences securing employment.

Co-curricular in person experiences

Could you provide specific examples of the types of in-person and online co-curricular learning activities we will see in the fall?

Our goal is to have as many in-person social events and activities as possible. We will also create parallel

online social gathering to ensure those who would prefer to socialize remotely are able to do so. Examples of events include pizza in the park and coffee and tea chat sessions. Our buddy mentorship program, which pairs second year and advanced standing students with first year students will continue, as will the alumni event series.

In planning these events and to ensure they meet the needs and interests of students, we will work closely with the GSA. We will also commit to holding regular student community meetings and provide opportunities for co-curricular learning and engagement through workshops. **On Wednesday, August 11 from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon** we will hold a **student engagement and community building meeting** for all students. At this community event, we will share ideas and discuss how we can build community in the fall term and beyond. More details along with the invitation to this community-building event will be sent closer to August.

To champion and operationalize further co-curricular programming and activities informed by your feedback, two work-study positions have been submitted for posting from August 16 to August 20 through the [UofT Work Study platform](#). These two positions will utilize the feedback received from the engagement sessions to act as community ambassadors to actively plan, develop, deliver and evaluate events and activities to build capacity for building a more connected network and community. If you are looking to be a community builder and leader within your different student cohorts at FIFSW, please review and apply for these positions when they are posted.

In addition to FIFSW-organized events, there will be opportunities to participate in activities in the broader U of T community, through organizations such as Hart House, the Graduate Student Union and U of T Student Life.

Will international students or those not present in Toronto in the Fall term be at any kind of disadvantage?

We are planning for parallel online social activities so that those who are not in Toronto or not comfortable meeting in person will not be left out.

Deferrals

Is the opportunity to defer the program to next year available, in case some would prefer to attend when there is a full in-person experience?

Deferrals are considered on a case-by-case basis and depends on the circumstances for each student. If you are considering a deferral, please contact David Burnes, our associate dean, academic to discuss this option.

Campus facilities

Do we have in-person access to libraries on campus?

[U of T Library access is currently limited](#). Some libraries are closed to in-person visitors over the summer (with the exception of curbside pickup service), while others, such as the Gerstein Science Information Centre, will be open. With the University committed to having as many in-person options available as possible in the fall, we expect library access to evolve subject to public health guidelines.

What in person opportunities (including social support, academic enrichment, group working space) will be offered? Likewise, how can students moving to Toronto access on-campus resources (gender/sexuality based spaces, health/wellness)? Will there be a registration or sign-up process for any of these on-campus in-person resources?

[Student Life on the St. George campus](#) has a wide range of programs and services that are available in these areas, many of which will likely occur in person as restrictions lift. The registration process will vary by program and each program will have registration processes in place.

Will the university support the students to be able to access the university facilities that were not available to us during the pandemic after graduation?

As a U of T Alumnus, you will have access to a number of benefits ranging from networking and mentoring opportunities, plus online events, special discounts, lectures, career support, and other exclusive perks. [Visit U of T's Alumni website to learn more.](#)

What about the gym?

Presently, sports and rec at U of T is reopening outdoor recreation spaces and programs while still providing online options. Hart House, for example is organizing outdoor Ballet Fit, Tabata Mash-up and Yoga in the Hart House Quad. We expect that gym restrictions will lift in accordance with provincial guidelines.

Tuition

Can we expect a lower tuition to accommodate the online learning format?

Our operational costs are not cheaper for online classes, in fact some require additional expenditures. We have incurred no savings by having online classes.

You may also find the following background information helpful.

In 2019-20, per the new provincial tuition fee framework, tuition fees for domestic students was cut by 10%, from the 2018-19 tuition rate, with a freeze at that level for two years, and including continuing students. The domestic tuition fee freeze has now been extended for one additional year to include 2021-22. Unfortunately, the tuition fee reductions imposed by the province mentioned above do not apply to international students. Starting in 2021-22, the annual increase rate for international students will be steady at 6%.

We understand that many students feel that they are getting less value for their money with online courses. Despite the challenges imposed by pandemic restrictions, we are striving to provide you with a high-quality educational experience, taught by leading researchers and instructors in the field. This year, unlike last, we are also planning to supplement your course experience with in-person co-curricular activities (with parallel online activities) that will enhance your learning and build your professional network. We are open to ongoing meetings to solicit feedback and ideas from students on how we can further enrich your educational experience while classes are online.

Can you elaborate more on how online classes cost the same?

The transition to online classes has required universities to invest in new technology and provide

additional training to our course instructors. These costs have offset any savings incurred from not being on site. Pandemic restrictions have also not affected significant operations costs, such as staffing.

Could incidental fees be cut from our tuition costs given building closures and the fact that our classes will be remote?

Non-Academic Incidental Fees (or Incidental Fees) are amounts charged in addition to tuition which cover the costs of services and programs not otherwise funded. They are determined by the Provost's Office and are not set by individual faculties.

These fees support services and programs that contribute to the student experience and [student wellbeing](#) and include fees for University-operated student services (such as campus [Career Centres](#) and [Hart House](#)).

Incidental fees also refers to fees collected on behalf of student societies (such as the [Graduate Student Union](#)). Student societies provide services to students and membership in a student society is tied to students' registration.

U of T services and programs and student societies have continued to operate remotely throughout the pandemic. As restrictions lift, we expect to see more in person events and activities and support programs offered.

Financial Support and funding opportunities

The [School of Graduate Studies \(SGS\) Emergency Grant program](#) aims to assist registered, full-time graduate students who have encountered an unforeseen, urgent, and/or serious financial emergency during the course of their program. The Emergency Grant is not intended to replace or make up a shortfall in OSAP, other funding sources or serve as routine or long-term support, but aims to provide short-term, immediate relief during a financial crisis and/or unexpected expenses due to COVID-19. Students submitting an SGS Emergency Grant are expected to meet with a member of the SGS Financial Advising Team to review the application.

[SGS also offers Emergency Loans](#). Loan applications are processed on an ongoing, continual basis throughout each academic session. Applications need to be submitted to the SGS Graduate Awards Office by 2 pm in order to be evaluated. A decision will be released within two business days upon receipt of the complete application by SGS.

[More information on financial support and funding opportunities is available on the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students webpage.](#)

Mental health support

How are you going to support people moving to Toronto to be in this program who have no support system in Toronto? Typically, you meet people through attending classes.

In addition to the co-curricular activities mentioned above, which will provide opportunities for students to meet and develop relationships both in person and remotely, students will be provided opportunities to make connections during orientation, in class, and in practicum and through work study and research assistant opportunities. Orientation and classes will include break out rooms for small group discussions

as well as group projects. Faculty will have online office hours and staff are also available to provide you with guidance and support and settle in Toronto.

Last year, we created a role for an **international student coordinator**. In her role, staff member **Megan Davies** (megancatherine.davies@utoronto.ca) works to ensure that our international students supported as they navigate services across the University and Faculty, and are adequately informed, oriented, advised, and supported to successfully execute their curriculum and practicum requirements. Her efforts include holding regular coffee chats with international students.

Staff member **Usra Leedham** (usra.leedham@utoronto.ca) also joined us last year to support **student engagement and success**. Students may reach out to her at any time with questions or to set up a meeting to discuss any challenges they may be facing. A recent graduate herself, Usra is familiar with the resources and support systems available across the university.

What options are available for students whose learning is impacted by declines in mental health?

FIFSW has an On Location Accessibility Advisor: **Hannah Jackson**, who can help direct students to available mental health resources and work with you to create flexibility in your academic experience. U of T's [Accessibility Services](#) team, which she is part of, works to provide a level playing field for students with disabilities through individualized solutions that meet the accessibility needs of registered students.

FIFSW students may reach Hanna via email at hannahw.jackson@utoronto.ca or by phone at (416) 978-7759.

What sort of mental health supports are provided for U of T students?

Last year, U of T launched [Navi: Your mental health wayfinder](#). Navi, short for navigator, is a chat-based service that acts as a virtual assistant for students wanting to learn more about the mental health supports available to them at the University of Toronto. [Click here to learn more about Navi.](#)

UTGSU, in partnership with the School of Graduate Studies, has also developed a hub of mental health resources on campus tailored to graduate students. [Click here to view the Graduate Wellness Directory.](#)

Last spring we created a page on FIFSW's website that lists mental health resources offered by U of T as well as other organizations and agencies. [Click here to view the full list.](#)

Would FIFSW consider adding a fall reading week as a way to address burn out and mental health during the pandemic?

Unfortunately, the course timetables and schedules have been set and it would be very challenging at this stage to integrate a reading week into the Fall semester. We would consider looking into this as an option in future years; however, this would require a broad consultation with students to ensure that we are meeting student needs. A consequence of adding a reading week, for example, may be extending the semester one more week.

Can you tell us how the course material will address the risk of burn out? For many of us being in courses/online placements for 6 or more hours a day plus having to do essays/group work online after this can put a strain on us physically and mentally. Will any course structure and course material accommodations be made?

The delivery and course content of each course is up to the discretion of each course instructor. Course

instructors are aware of these concerns and have received training around online teaching methods that address issues such as burn out. We also encourage students to raise these concerns with their instructors.

Practicum

I am in the advanced standing program. If my placement is online can I complete the program in my own province for the fall semester?

Practicums for Advanced Standing and Year 2 students start in the fall and continue to the end of April. Students must commit to their practicum for the duration of this time (September to April). If classes are in person in the winter semester, you will need to be in Toronto. This could prevent you from being able to commit to an out-of-town practicum unless it can be completed remotely in the winter.

How is the Advanced Standing program affected in terms of practicum. Should we wait before choosing our agency that we will work with?

The PAS system is now open and you must select your practicum choices by Tuesday, July 13 before 9am. Practicums for Advanced Standing and Year 2 students start in the fall and continue until the end of April.

Each partner agency determines the format of their practicums. Some will be completely online. Others will be completely in person. Some will be online until restrictions lift. This is indicated in the PAS. Please be sure make selections that work for you. Students must commit to their practicum for the two semesters, fall and winter, to April 1, 2022.

I start my MSW advanced program in summer 2021. I am expected to have a placement in Fall. If I decided to apply for leave for one semester. Could I start my practicum in winter 2022? Would there be financial implications for doing this?

Practicum II is 525 hours in length. If you have an approved leave for the fall semester and continue the 4702 Practicum II course from the winter semester into the spring semester, there is no increase in tuition costs.

For practicum students, if there is a delay in the immunization form being completed prior to the start of practicum in the fall, will there be expectations or accommodations for students who have full remote placements at a PHA location?

Immunization compliance is required for all employees and students in public hospitals in Ontario, whether the practicum is remote or in-person.