

# Welcome Home

## Commuter Student Centre Dons Forge a Community of Commuters

BY KATHLEEN SANDUSKY

Whether they need advice on academic matters, health and safety worries, or where to get the best pizza, students living in residence know exactly which helpful older peers have the answers: their dons.

Working as a team of student life specialists, dons at University College have training that runs the gamut from campus services to counselling, first aid to conflict management. And if the stakes are high and a student is in crisis, dons are among the first to know, intervene and provide assistance before matters escalate, as part of a crucial campus early warning system.

But where do commuter students go for such essential guidance? Well, beginning this year, they can seek help from their own dons.

As University College's inaugural commuter student dons, Madeline MacKenzie and Deena Dadachanji perform many of the duties of residence dons. They organize workshops and social events, and make themselves available as trained peer resources to students living off campus.

They work hard at getting the word out about UC events to commuter students, and spend many hours at the Commuter Student Centre (CSC) ensuring that every new face receives a warm greeting. "The best part of this job is when a student who was frustrated walks away happy because I could

answer the question posed to me," says Madeline, a third-year psychology and equity studies double-major.

"Commuter students are so used to having to fumble through and figure it out on their own, that being approachable and useful is very satisfying."

Deena and Madeline receive the same training as residence dons. Since this is the first year of the program, they've been working closely with the UC Dean of Students Nona Robinson, Coordinator of Student Life Renu Kanga and UC Lit Off-Campus Commissioner Arman Hamidian on meeting the needs of com-

muter students. "Everything is so new," says Madeline. "We're all defining the role as we go, which is challenging and

requires us to be imaginative and inventive. How do you tap into a community of commuters? We're figuring out what they need, who they are, and how to reach them and help them."

The two dons keep regular office hours at the CSC and make themselves available by phone at all times. They are vigilant hosts, circulating around the CSC,

making sure all students are welcomed and informed of upcoming events. "Students in residence have access to a lot of campus activities that off-campus students don't have," says Deena, a fourth-year double-major in criminology and equity studies, who once lived in residence herself. "All too often, opportunities to build a sense of community are lacking for off-campus students. We're filling that gap, making sure that all students, including off-campus students, have a chance to really feel a part of all that University College has to offer."



CSC Don Deena Dadachanji



CSC Don Madeline MacKenzie

# Unlocking Doors

## How Improvements in Space are Improving Student Experiences at University College

BY KATHLEEN SANDUSKY

**Q**uick: what do you remember about your days at University College? While your time spent in class may have set you on the road to your present career, chances are your mind flashed back to the hours you spent in the JCR or at a UC Lit event. But that's okay: students who participate in co-curricular activities have been shown to possess higher levels of engagement in a wide range of other activities, including academics, and report higher grades than their peers who do not participate.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing the important role that University College plays in offering its students a sense of community and personal connectedness at the heart of one of Canada's largest campuses, the College has pursued a number of avenues toward creating a richer overall student experience.

Above all, commuter students often find it hard to connect with the campus. University College has long battled this reality by offering extensive programming through the UC Lit. But without a home base, the 3,800 commuter students at University College have long lacked the essential locus that any thriving community requires. Until now, that is. With a generous lead gift by David Leith (UC '81) matched by the College Annual Fund and UofT's Student Experience Fund, University College this year opened the **Commuter Student Centre**, a home away from home with inviting study and



Mr. David Leith (UC '81) with students in the Leith Student Lounge, part of the University College Commuter Student Centre

social spaces, lockers, a kitchenette, two trained dons, and a host of social and academically enriching events designed to meet the particular needs of commuters. "I like coming here because it's a central place to hang out on campus," says Keenan Dixon, in her second year of International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies. "It's really friendly, you can come in and use the kitchen and it's a familiar space, quiet at certain times of the day so you can study, but then at other times it's really social and active so you get both worlds. My friends and I hang out here a lot."

The simple act of unlocking a door

went a long way toward popularizing the **University of Toronto Art Centre** as a space for students. While the Art Centre has since 1996 been a special place for students and alumni to visit and host events, it was off the beaten track. The newly opened art lounge, accessed from within the Laidlaw wing through a formerly locked door, is now an inspiring study and social space with a mixture of flexible seating and work areas, student art on display, and a student greeter on hand to welcome all with Diablos' coffee for sale. Visible through the enormous glass doors inside are the Art Centre's current exhibitions, including some impor-

<sup>1</sup> 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement, available at <http://www.provost.utoronto.ca/public/Reports/NSSE.htm>



The art lounge connects directly to the UofT Art Centre, providing students with a unique space to study and relax.

tant works by Canada's Group of Seven. "We see the art lounge as a friendly bridge to the collection in the Art Centre," says Maureen Smith, manager of programs and facilities. "Sometimes students can feel a little intimidated by art, so this is a way to draw them in and make it more accessible." Since the art lounge opened, student traffic at the Art Centre has increased twofold and will grow further with the appointment of a new Student and Education Coordinator, hired as part of the overall effort at UC to enrich the student experience.

Step through the little oak door that faces south directly below Diablos and you're in the midst of a very special community of minds, the **Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies**. Around the corner you'll find the Janet Tupper Underwood Room ("the Common Room"), where a gothic skylight and vaulted ceiling add to the sense that something sacred is going on in this space where bright young minds ponder ways to reduce conflict. At any time of

day, the room hosts lively cross-disciplinary discussions about a variety of topics in the international arena. The space is also a venue for Peace and Conflict Society's annual conference which each year attracts an impressive array of distin-

guished international speakers. "I spend a lot of time in the Common Room," says Joanna Mantello, a fourth-year specialist in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies, who last year was co-president of the program's student society. "If not for this space, there's just no way I would have become as connected with my fellow students and my program."

There are other facilities at University College that continue to await improvements. One such space is **Laidlaw Library**, where recent enhancements such as wireless access, increased web communications and the lifting of the traditional beverage ban have been popular with students. But librarian Margaret Fulford speaks longingly of a future when there will be a power outlet at every seat for students to plug in their laptops, and a relaxed reading area with comfy armchairs. And while the study space is popular with students seeking quiet carrels, Fulford notes that there is a pedagogical trend in universities toward increased groupwork, with students requiring sound-proofed rooms



UC Drama Program students display the results of working in the linoleum-tiled Performance Studio.



The Laidlaw Library at University College.

in which to meet and plan group assignments. The library has only one group study room, and it is often booked. “This library has great potential,” says Fulford, proudly indicating the enormous arched windows and high ceilings. “But we know that library use changes over time and we need to keep up with that.”

Hidden in the back corner of the library are the offices containing the **UC Writing Workshop**, where director Jerry Plotnick valiantly struggles to meet the burgeoning demand for one-on-one instruction. “The importance of writing skills is increasingly recognized across the disciplines,” says Plotnick. “We’re seeing increased demand from a diverse range of students. Our students represent many cultures. Moreover, they seek help in the full range of Arts and Science courses, and they vary considerably in their skills.” Frequently overflowing its offices, the Writing Workshop often must book the group study room belonging to the library, thus increasing the pressure

on a key library resource. The Workshop must regularly place students on waiting lists, and one week in 2007 turned away 89 students seeking help. “It’s been a challenge to keep up with demand,” says Plotnick who also cites the popularity of such programs as the Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor, with students clamouring for advice from 2007 visitor Michael Enright. “We want to continue with more of this sort of programming. We’re really going to need some enhanced space and increased resources if we’re going to fulfill and even expand our mandate.”

Also in need of facilities improvement is the **UC Drama Program’s Performance Studio**, where program director Ken Gass cringes whenever boisterous students pass through the hallway shared with the Commuter Student Centre. The space (affectionately known as “The Perf”) will require new soundproofed doors, and a new sprung floor to replace the current lino-

leum-over-concrete that is hazardous to students’ knees. “A wood sprung floor is a standard requirement for drama, movement and dance classes, and this would instantly repair the greatest liability of the space, which does have so much potential,” says Gass. “A moderate investment in improvements would bring the facility up to the professional and safety standards that our students deserve.”

Says Peace & Conflict Studies student Joanna Mantello, “You’re so busy with studying and all the other activities, it really helps that University College has all these things that make for a really comfortable space to work in. You’ve got the coffee shop, you’ve got the JCR, you’ve got a library, and meanwhile it feels like you’re Harry Potter at Hogwarts, walking around this incredible building.” But for this special community to continue to flourish in its co-curricular as well as academic dimensions, further improvements are necessary.

“We want students to make a strong connection to the College and the university,” says UC Dean of Students Nona Robinson. “A positive co-curricular experience is an important component of university life, and research shows it can make a big difference in a student’s academic success. We particularly want to emphasize reaching out to commuter students, so the Centre and commuter student programming are going to make a big difference.”

For more information on how you can support UC’s ongoing enhancement of student spaces, please contact the Alumni and Development Office at (416) 978-2968.