



Parents & Supporters Orientation Webinar 2024

English transcript

Trent Barwick: Alright, welcome, everyone. My name is Trent Barwick. I use he/him pronouns. And I'm the Lead Coordinator for Orientation, Transition & Engagement at the St. George campus here at U of T, and I represent the Office of Student Life, which you can see on the screen. And this is a central office of the university. This means we work with all of the different colleges and faculties here on campus.

So today I'm going to present some information to help you all prepare for not only the transition that is coming in September, but you know, for the rest of the school year as well. As I mentioned, I work for Student Life, again, on the screen, which we use here at U of T as an umbrella term for a number of different divisions and offices and services here at U of T St. George. Student Life programs and services are designed to support students across the entire university in all areas of their life, and we continue to adapt and grow as the needs of students change.

And as you can imagine, the needs of students change quite consistently. For folks in attendance today, you or someone you care about is beginning their first year at U of T, congratulations! Even if it feels daunting at the moment, that's okay because Student Life is here to help.

We aim to help students find their people, feel connected to the school. We also have Health & Wellness offerings to help students feel physically and mentally well during their studies. On top of that, we offer academic and learning supports to help students get the grades they want and their—and career advice or career support to make sure that once they graduate they have everything they need for their next steps. We do our best to reach students as whole people and we support them really wherever we can.

So before we begin and before I dive into, like, the big stuff that we're all here for, there are a few processes for today.

For one, all of your microphones have—are muted and they're going to stay muted. Just with so many people in the audience. We want to avoid background noise, folks accidentally talking, things like that. So your mics are muted, but you will be able to ask questions.



So for questions, there's a form which is in the chat and we'll have a QR code shortly on the next slide and this is where you can ask questions. So this goes into a form which we then go through at the end. We do our best to get to all of the questions, but if we can't, we will make sure we follow up as there is a place to leave your e-mail address. But let's—let's talk about what we're going to talk about today. So on our agenda for today, we'll talk about U of T and welcoming you here.

And as you can see, there is the QR code. Feel free to, if you have questions now, feel free to pop them into the forum already. But we'll also talk about being an effective support, support during the year, preparing for September. And then of course, questions, which I think is what everyone is very much excited for. And I would imagine we already have some coming in and at any point, and we'll put them in the chat a few times during the presentation but at any point, feel free to ask a question.

But first and foremost, welcome to the University of Toronto. We are so excited to welcome your students here this year. So for folks who are not familiar with university, we are located in downtown Toronto. The campus is really integrated within the city, which is pretty cool. It's a very unique campus. There's a ton of history and very old buildings, but a ton of modern structures and areas of campus as well. It's a really great combination of those ideas. U of T has buildings all across the GTA, but the main area of the St. George campus, for those who are curious, is marked by College Street to the South, Bloor to the north, Spadina to the West, and Bay to the east. And if possible, I really do encourage you all to visit. You can come check out the historic campus for yourself. You can look into booking tours through our admissions office and there is a link being—a link being dropped in the chat right now.

University of Toronto is the largest university by student population in Canada with over 97,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Fall 2023, 2022-23, and you know, that data may be updated even more as we look toward the new year. These students are divided across three campuses with campuses in Mississauga, a campus in Scarborough, and then the downtown Toronto campus. The St. George campus, which is the name for the downtown campus, is the largest of the three with an enrollment of nearly 70,000 students. As of Fall 2020, the University of Toronto offered 700 different undergraduate programs in things like humanities, social science, life science, physical and mathematical science, commerce, management, computer science, engineering, kinesiology and physical education, music and architecture. And yes, I have those all written down so I don't forget any.

We really do have a little bit of everything here, which is what makes U of T so special. Now, with such a large school and campus, it can feel sometimes challenging to create a sense of connection and community, as you can imagine. But one way we do this is through the college system. All of the students in the Faculty of Arts & Science at St. George campus are affiliated with one of seven colleges.

So let's talk about that now. The college system is one of the unique things that U of T has to offer its undergrad students. The seven undergrad colleges are Trinity College, Victoria College, St. Mike's,



University College, Woodsworth, New College, and Innis College. These undergraduate colleges have really, really deep roots in the university. The college system itself dates back to the very earliest days of the University of Toronto, back when they all represented their own distinct units. This—they then came together to form what we now see as the University of Toronto. So despite them all coming together, U of T wanted to maintain the elements of this college system because it creates an amazing sense of community within the larger community at U of T. This has become an identity of U of T to this day.

The way you can think about the colleges is that they're kind of a home base for students on campus. So a student's college provides them with the advantages of a closer-knit community feel. It also provides them with all of the support services they may need to access, such as academic advising and programming through their Dean's office, a place to call home on campus with the lounges and students spaces and things like that, residence life and housing, student life opportunities focused on their college as well. So the colleges are for students in the Arts & Science Faculty, which is a very large percentage of U of T undergrad students. But for first years taking Kinesiology & Physical Education, Engineering, Architecture, or Music, they belong to what we call a "professional faculty". So similar to a college, students who are in those faculties receive support from their faculty directly with the same services that I mentioned earlier. In the same way, these faculties provide them with a smaller community that they can access and that they can identify with. This is something I think U of T actually does really, really well. And it's something students really embrace and feel pride in. And this college and faculty pride does start very early. In fact, during Orientation Week, which we will get to in a little bit.

I apologize. I may need a few water breaks. So let's talk about what you all can do as parents and supporters. So first and foremost, I want to acknowledge that by attending this session, you are already taking action to be effective supporters for your students. Everyone's experience is different. Some folks may have experience with other children or family members going to university.

For some, this may be the first person you're supporting through higher education. Regardless, I'm hoping that I can provide you with some information that will be helpful as you move through this time. So entering the first year of university is one of the most significant transitions that a student faces. It represents a very key point in their lives. This transition brings upon a lot of growth, change, and development, and it's formative in so many ways. It presents students with a freedom they may not have ever experienced before and potentially new responsibilities that now fall entirely onto them. So I imagine right now there's probably a lot of excitement, probably some nerves, and a lot of questions, which I will again remind you that we'll drop the link in the chat. Again, if you have questions, please use the form.

I want to chat a bit about what you can expect going into this academic year and some ways that you can manage the feelings you'll be experiencing and some of the best ways that you can support your students.

So one of the first things I want to acknowledge to all of you is that very likely your role is going to change. One of the most difficult habits for parents and supporters to break is interceding on their student's behalf.

Throughout high school, parents and supporters are kept informed by notices of important events and deadlines, phone calls regarding attendance, parent-teacher interviews, and of course, report cards. It's very different at university. While your interest in your student's progress is certainly encouraged, you no longer have this automatic access to their records and information. It's university policy. In fact, it's the law that the university cannot release details about a student to anyone, even the parents or supporters, without the student's consent. If there are concerns regarding performance rules or deadlines, for example, it's up to the student to address them directly. In most cases, this is done through the Office of the Registrar, which employs a staff of experienced and supportive academic and financial advisors to support your student. It is important to note that there if there is a concern for something like safety at any point, there are places you can go. You can reach out to residence staff or to Campus Police and they have processes in place to support you and help with this.

So the next thing, we'll jump slides, perfect, to think about is how the transition is different for everyone. Many first-year students are dismayed when they get their first few assignments back after marking. The grades they receive can be low, sometimes much lower than they've had before. This is common. Even a straight-A high school student may experience some difficulties because of the different approach to studying required by these university-level courses. It can be discouraging, but as they adapt and better understand the caliber of work that is required, the marks usually do start to rise. Sometimes students discover that they've enrolled in a program that they're just not suited for, or maybe they've lost interest. For example, a student who is always wanted to be a doctor may have difficulty in life science, but maybe they discover a passion for and success in something like philosophy, English, or business. It can be confusing for parents and students alike, so don't be surprised if your student does fine tune their program of study or explore other areas. It's quite common, and U of T allows students to explore and assemble a course of study that builds upon and rewards their strengths. A student's best chance at succeeding is to have a passion for what they're studying.

Next, and this is a big one, I'm going to take a sip of water as well. Really let the suspense build. Communication. Communication is key. I recommend that you establish communication guidelines with your student. Focus on how regularly you want to stay in touch and discuss it with them before September. It's important to note that as students become better adapted to campus and their studies, they may communicate with you less, they may feel less need for support, and they may be finding new

communities of support on campus. And that is okay. In fact, it's our hope that they do find this place in community while they're here. At the same time, some students who are living away from home, perhaps for the first time, may experience a transition period where they do feel quite homesick. They may end up contacting you more often, especially at the beginning of the year.

It's normal and it's important to be supportive during this time and encourage them to engage with what is around them, the things that we have talked about. These feelings and needs can also ebb and flow, varying over the course of the school year. You may get an e-mail or a phone call at some point that doesn't totally feel right. We often do see a rise in student stress in October and November, which is most likely their first-ever midterm season. The first time through midterms can be taxing. There really isn't a comparison in secondary school because midterms are unique because there are these large tests and exams taking place in multiple courses while also maintaining their typical weekly course loads.

So it can be quite burdensome. So when your student calls, be patient. Sometimes just listening is enough. It may actually stress you out knowing there is only so much you can do to help. But this listening and this patience and this kindness can go such a long way and can work wonders for a frustrated or stressed student. With this said, you know your students well and if you're worried something really is wrong, trust that instinct and trust your gut and set up a time to follow up with them and offer support in the ways you are able. So while you may want to solve the problems of your student, it is also important to support their independence and their own problem solving.

One of the hallmarks of the university experience is the development of greater independence. It is a natural and a necessary stage of becoming an adult. This is why it is so important for students to interact in the community on their own. We know this can be challenging for many supporters. To start, it may be difficult to imagine these students as adults. For many, it was just a few months ago that they were in high school, and now they're on their own. In other instances, there may be a culture of parental support and involvement that is part of a family's identity. Nevertheless, encouraging your student to become more independent during their first year at U of T will help them succeed not only during their time here, but after they graduate as well. This can be a gradual process and it goes together with the communication stuff that we spoke about earlier. It's important to understand yourself and your student and speak honestly about this. Now, I want to be clear, this doesn't mean that you can't help them grow their independence, and in fact, you can play a huge role in it. To start, encourage your students to access the resources and supports on campus on their own.

You can guide them and make suggestions as our students do have dedicated supports through the Registrar Offices and Dean's Office in their college or faculty. They're also able to access all of the central Student Life services that we offer as well, as these spaces are designed for students. So this can make it easier to approach as a new student because they know this is for them and they belong here, which can remove some of the perhaps intimidation of community supporting. Many of the



services are accessible through online booking appointments via e-mail or the Folio website, which is where you would have signed up for this webinar. Student Life has a Family Supporters Handbook as well on our website that outlines key concerns for every month of the year as well as resources that you can mention to your students. While students are encouraged to learn on their own, it's important for students to know that they can ask for help and that they don't have to be perfect. This time is about learning and growing, and as supporters, you get to assist them along this journey. Finally, it is so important to be understanding. So we often hear students, they're worried. They're worried about disappointing their parents and supporters, and they feel like, you know, these people believe in them and have put so much into supporting them and they should suddenly feel, like, a lot of pressure. As such, students often put a lot of pressure on themselves to be successful right away.

It is important for your student to know that you are there to support them and want them to have a good experience. Let them know it's okay to have challenges and to struggle. This won't change your support. Education is a process. It happens both inside and outside of the classroom. Many of the most important lessons we learn are through our own personal experiences, and these often do come from adversity.

So let's talk about safety, which is something I am sure you've been waiting to finally hear about. Your student's safety is the most important thing and we know it is something parents and supporters think about a lot, understandably so. We want to know our students are safe and comfortable and thriving. Overall, I always recommend that folks familiarize themselves with campus. We have an excellent, excellent interactive map, which we'll put in the chat, that you can play around with to learn some of the different buildings and areas of campus, generally places that your students may visit. This can be found on the link as I mentioned in the chat. U of T is in the middle of a city. However, campus does have a lot of very clearly defined space and a ton of supports for students if they're lost or if they're unsure of where to go. The St. George campus also has a wonderful campus safety app with a lots of information on how to access different safety services or safety programs. For example, there's a great program called Travel Safer. If a student is staying late on campus for any reason, they can register to have someone walk them back to either residence or to the nearest subway station from anywhere on campus. This is a great resource to ensure students are not only heading in the right direction, but they're doing so with someone they can trust. This app is also available for you all to download if you'd like. So if you want to learn more about safety at U of T encourage you to download it. It can be found in the App Store under the name "U of T Campus Safety," as you can see on the screen. And there are a couple other features in this app that I do want to mention. So there's something called "Friend Walk". This sends your location to a friend or a parent and supporter so that they can track your progress as you walk home. There's something called the "Mobile Blue Light". This button calls campus safety and immediately sends them your location. So this allows them to find you wherever you are, excuse me, on campus.



And once again, campus maps. So you can access interactive maps on the app of both campus and the surrounding area. So this app is a great way to ensure that you and your students have everything they need to feel safe while on campus.

Alright, so I know we've been very focused on September, you know, which is fair because it is coming very quickly. However, it's important to remember your students will need support throughout the entire year. This support will look different month to month, and this will depend on what's going on in their schedule, how busy they are, how much academic work they have, as well as the other things they may be participating in or taking part in. So here are some things to keep in mind as one of, if not the biggest supporter they have this year. To start, encourage your students to get involved in campus life. I promise I'm not biased. This is especially important for commuting students. Some of the most important learning experiences students have take place outside of the classroom itself. We often see students choose not to seek out involvement early on because they're worried about it impacting their academics. However, research actually shows that successful students are engaged in community outside of the classroom, often in a few different areas. With this said, it is important to encourage balance. Perhaps it starts by a student participating in one club or one campus group and building up from there if they feel like they have the ability to do so. This is a great way to make friends and find community, especially in first year, and then meet people with similar interests. U of T has over 800 organizations or clubs, so there will be something to support whatever their interests might be. I know for me personally, most of the friends I still have to this day came from getting involved when I was in university. It seemed daunting at first because I didn't want to negatively affect my academics, but it actually did end up helping. I had people I could study with. For example, ask questions to and then friends who could support me and care for me during those stressful times and moments of the year. Everyone does have different levels to which they can get involved, but I encourage all students to take the time to find their fit and figure out what that level is.

We also encourage you to talk with your students about what it means to take on new responsibilities and check in and encourage them to get support when they do hit bumps in the road. It is important to encourage them to access resources proactively before things get to the point where it may be too late. When it comes to academics, it can always be helpful to meet with an academic advisor to discuss how a student is progressing. If a student begins to express concern —academic concern to you, this is a great suggestion you can make, academic advisors, because these advisors are there to help with all of these academic questions.

Beyond the classroom, it is so important for students to take care of their physical and mental health. U of T offers a ton of programs to support well-being, including things like sports and rec, yoga and mindfulness, nutrition, things like resources and workshops around that, and generally a lot of health services. To learn more, check out the website that is being dropped in the chat. Thank you. It can be easy for students to focus solely on the learning, however for the brain to work its best, they need to ensure they're keeping themselves healthy as well. So we have provided a lot of resources to you



today and these can help you support your student as they navigate this very large university. By acting as this referral source, you can demonstrate that you are interested in your student's life at university and the same time you're empowering your students to still solve their own problems.

You don't have to be an expert on campus. The Family—the Parent and Supporter Handbook outlines key resources, as does our website which we're putting in the chat now, parentsandsupporters.utoronto.ca. One thing to remember is that you will probably notice changes in your student. This is a large part of what university is all about, to help your students grow into the person that they're going to become. It's natural, it's inevitable, and it can be really amazing to watch. Growth and learning is part of the experience, and as a supporter, it is so important that you embrace these changes and learn how you can best support them along this journey.

But I want to talk a little bit about preparing for September. So it's coming quickly. And given that there are a few things that I want you to keep in mind. As of now, most of your students have probably activated their U of T e-mail and used what we call their UTORid or JOINid. We want to make sure that they're taking the opportunity to get familiar with common systems such as ACORN or UTmail. ACORN is the web platform that they're going to use throughout their undergraduate career to manage things like courses, financial records and information, and then later on things like grades and transcripts.

Everything they would need is on ACORN when it comes to student systems. UTmail is something they should get used to checking regularly and ideally already are checking it. The university will communicate with them entirely through their university e-mail. This includes all of the administrative offices, their professors for courses, and things happening on campus. This is also where residence life for folks looking to have students in residence will communicate with them as well. And this often comes with very tight deadlines. I would recommend checking your student or checking with your student if they have activated their e-mail yet and if they have, encouraged them to check it at least twice a week.

That is kind of my best advice. There may not be much coming yet, but the stuff that does come can often be very, very important and sometimes very time sensitive. So the first week of school for almost all students, regardless of institution, is Orientation Week. It is one of the best weeks of their entire university career and it is such an amazing way to start things off. We want to make sure your students are registered for Orientation if they haven't done so already.

This year, Orientation is taking place a little earlier than usual, starting the week before Labour Day. Students will be told how to register via their college or faculty, most likely through their U of T e-mail address. At U of T, Orientation is divided across the 11 first-entry divisions, so the colleges and faculty, so I talked about earlier, so there isn't one U of T Orientation, but instead there is one for each of these divisions. There are a few events such as the Clubs Carnival and—and a few other campus-wide



events that are for all students regardless of division. But for the most part, Orientation does take place within their college or their faculty.

It's important to note that we find students are most successful when they participate in Orientation. It correlates directly their likelihood— to their likelihood of success in undergrad. This is because in Orientation, they're learning a ton. They're learning skills, they're learning about the different offices and resources available to them, they're meeting faculty and staff who'll be supporting them, and perhaps most importantly, they're making friends and meeting their— their classmates that perhaps will be friends for a lifetime. To learn more about the dates and registration process for Orientation, encourage your students to reach out directly to their college or faculty offices.

So university is a time where learning is at the forefront, which may seem obvious, but it is worth talking about. Talk to your student about what they want to learn while they're here, inside and outside of the classroom or inside and outside of their major. In first year, there's often a lot of flexibility to take different types of classes. This can allow students to explore some of these areas of interest. Students can take a breadth of things in different areas, especially Arts & Science students. Perhaps students start a course and right away realize it's just not a good fit. If this happens, they can change their course up to a certain date without academic or financial penalty. And change can be good. And it's important to engage with things that students feel passionate about. Talk to your student about what might interest them. There are so many options, so flip through the U of T program page to see what kind of classes are available for first years. There are so many things we offer that you— you may not even realize were classes. You know, things like the History of Music, Poetry of Physics, really unique courses that can round out their learning experience and help them engage with things they are passionate about.

An important task to start on right away for folks is to ensure that you know the dates and deadlines that are required for students. We recommend that you're familiar with them as well as your student being very familiar with them. So find a way to set reminders and talk about these with your students. Some of the deadlines are very, very important, so the more you can plan for them, the more likely that they are not missed.

Some key deadlines to think about are things like course enrollment and course selection, fee and payment deadlines, residence deadlines, Orientation registration deadlines, and then for international students, considerations around things like visas and other requirements for study. Other important days to know, perhaps not now but once the year starts, are things like exam dates, university closures and community events. U of T is in Toronto, meaning what happens in the community often can affect students ability to perhaps navigate to campus, things can get busy, etcetera, etcetera. So the more you can know about what's going on, the better.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we want to make sure that you're getting excited. This is a wonderful time, and although there is a lot of transition and change, there's also a lot of stuff to feel great about. This Fall will be one that your students remember forever. They're joining a new community, making new friends, and having hundreds and hundreds of new experiences. You will hear amazing stories, triumphs, and you get to hear, like, things they do that are amazing. You get to hear all about their new friends and new experiences and probably the odd complaint about things like the TTC being delayed which unfortunately can happen every now and again.

Before we get to the Q&A, which I know we have tons of questions already, I want to cover a few administrative notes that you may find helpful. To start, I do want to note that we do have a Summer Checklist and a Summer Calendar. Folks may have seen this already, but this Summer Calendar and Checklist provide a monthly breakdown of things you and your students should be thinking about and looking into. It also includes things they can do in advance of arriving to September. So if this is something you haven't seen yet, we strongly, strongly encourage you to visit the Summer Checklist web page. This can really help you get started and prepare for the next couple months.

For international students, U of T also provides access to immigration advising. This includes seven immigration advisors who can provide support to you or to your student while they look through their Canadian temporary immigration status. This includes things such as immigration documents, study permits, legal obligations and the rights of international students, as well as things like applying for study permits outside of Canada, working in Canada, post-grad permits, and so much more. There are multiple ways to connect with them. They offer individual appointments virtually, by phone and in person, and they also hold weekly online Q&A sessions. To book an appointment or register for one of the sessions, you can do so on Folio. They also have a series of recordings that may be able to answer some of these questions in advance, so please check those out just in case the thing you're asking is already there.

Yeah, and the last thing I'll note is only immigration advisors can answer questions about these topics because they're licensed to do so. As such, I cannot answer much in our Q&A aside from saying visit these folks because they can do a lot more than I can. In addition, I want to quickly touch on UHIP, which is the University Health Insurance Plan, which is the primary mandatory health coverage for all international students. It is similar to OHIP and it is something that international students are required to have. So UHIP extends from September 1 to August 31 of the academic year, and registered students are automatically enrolled. If you're not sure if you are enrolled, go on ACORN and check your invoice. UHIP is tied to your registration status at U of T, so although you will be billed for UHIP when you are invited to register, you will not be officially enrolled until you've registered on ACORN. And if you deregister for your studies, your UHIP coverage is terminated, meaning you must be a student to have UHIP coverage. If you want to learn more or have more questions about all of this, we encourage you to visit the Centre for International Experience, or CIE, at any of the links on the slide and we'll put them in the chat as well. The resources are available through the RI Hub and the ISE team, so don't hesitate



to reach out. We look forward to welcoming you in person in the fall. One additional piece I think this might be the final slide before the questions revolves around our Parent and Supporter newsletter, which is new for this year. This monthly newsletter is designed just for you folks and provides updates on what's happening on campus, things you can anticipate that your student might be experiencing, as well as things like FAQs and student testimonials. We hope this newsletter allows you to get a glimpse into what is happening at U of T and learn about what your student is experiencing as the year goes on. You can register by clicking the link in the chat or scanning the QR code on the screen.

Alright, well, that is it. I want to thank you all for the questions we already see coming in, and I'm going to stop the recording now, but I will continue with the questions in a second. So I'm going to take a moment to stop the recording. But for folks who are watching the recording, thank you so much and I hope you got a lot from it.