

Lifting As We Climb

Access Strategy & Partnerships Office
Year in Review: 2024-2025

**BUILDING
MOMENTUM**

THE CLIMB

THE LIFT

Land Acknowledgment

We wish to acknowledge this land
on which the University of Toronto operates.

For thousands of years it has been the traditional land
of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the
Mississaugas of the Credit.

Today, this meeting place is still the home to many
Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are
grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

-The University of Toronto



In reflecting on the theme of the Access Strategy and Partnerships Office's (ASPO) annual report, I consider the range of student-facing staff, policies, and initiatives across my portfolio – all of which strive toward equitable access to supports, resources, and services for students at U of T.

I'm also struck by how these supports should be available early on in a student's journey, and, ideally, they are in place before one even applies to University to help navigate the daunting task of sifting through uncharted information.

The tri-campus access and outreach programs do just that: they encourage prospective students to consider various pathways, offer strategic guidance, make warm referrals and, working alongside recruitment and admissions colleagues, demystify the application process. Quite simply, they put a face to this large University.

The Access Programs University Fund (APUF) was established in 2019 to provide funding to support the development of programs that seek to engage high school students, mature learners, and others in our broader academic community to see U of T as a place where they not only belong but can thrive.



Professor Sandy Welsh **Vice Provost, Students**

"Lifting as We Climb" is a perfect title for ASPO's inaugural annual report: through a broad range of resources, services, and access programs, we are committed to continuous learning and improvement – ensuring that those who never imagined a place for themselves here, see a progressive pathway in and through the University of Toronto.

Sincerely,

Professor Sandy Welsh
Vice Provost, Students

The phrase **“Lifting as We Climb”** powerfully captures the spirit of our work across the University of Toronto’s tri-campus community. Coined by early 20th-century suffragist Mary Church Terrell, the motto speaks to the dual pursuit of personal and collective progress—an ethos that continues to guide efforts toward equitable outcomes in education.

At U of T, this principle is reflected in the work of the Access Strategy and Partnerships Office (ASPO) and our wide tri-campus network of collaborators. Together, we strive to create and sustain pathways that support students from historically underrepresented communities—through outreach, mentorship, academic preparation, and customized programming.

This work is deeply collaborative. Faculty, staff, students, and community partners contribute their time, insight, and leadership to co-create programs that meet both students and prospective students where they are. Many of our 110 access and outreach programs are led by students who once benefited from access programs and pre-university supports themselves and are now reaching back to support others.

This inaugural “Year in Review” highlights the achievements of our access and outreach community. Some programs at U of T have over half-century experiences while others are just beginning to consider access programming in their divisions.

These unique experiences invite reflection on the road ahead for our expansive access agenda at U of T.



Helen Tewolde **Director, Access Strategy & Partnerships Office**

We look forward to continued collaboration as we work to ensure that the University of Toronto is not only a place of opportunity—but a catalyst for transformation, where every everyone can envision, pursue, and achieve their fullest potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Tewolde', with a stylized, flowing script.

Helen Tewolde
Director, Access Strategy & Partnerships Office

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1.0

THE LIFT: HARNESSING OUR COLLECTIVE VISION, CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

ASPO: A UNIVERSITY-WIDE MANDATE FOR ACCESS

Established in 2022, the Access Strategy and Partnerships Office (ASPO) works alongside tri-campus academic divisions and units to invest in access programs and partnerships toward divisional and university-wide goals related to access to higher education for traditionally underrepresented groups.

ASPO's mandate responds to two of three mutually reinforcing Presidential priorities; namely:

(1) Leverage Urban Location including:
i) engaging with community partners;
ii) expanding opportunities for students in the city and
iii) contributing to the prosperity of the Toronto region and

(2) Re-imagine and Reinvent Undergraduate Education: including
i) enhancing the quality of student life, both inside and outside the classroom;
ii) creating a more supportive and engaging environment for students and
iii) investing in mental health services and well-being programs.

Access is an amorphous and multidimensional concept. It is both a process and outcome. Access as a process incorporates the ways in which learners, both prospective and current, are engaged, supported, and developed as they imagine, define, and pursue their educational aspirations. There are several access imperatives across the student life cycle, from outreach and engagement to graduation, and beyond.

Access may include the development and implementation of initiatives that provide students from traditionally underrepresented groups with individual or group supports, customized pathways for non-traditional educational trajectories, structured programming, as well as opportunities to learn and thrive at the post-secondary level.

Access initiatives typically include partnerships with public and nonprofit organizations such as school boards, community-based organizations and hospitals, which support the University's key role as a city builder.

A series of documents laid the groundwork for ASPO's work, including the Scarborough Charter pursuant to 2020 National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education; U of T Equity Census Advisory Roundtable Report; U of T Anti-Black Racism Taskforce; Answering the Call: Wecheehetowin the Final Report on U of T's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).



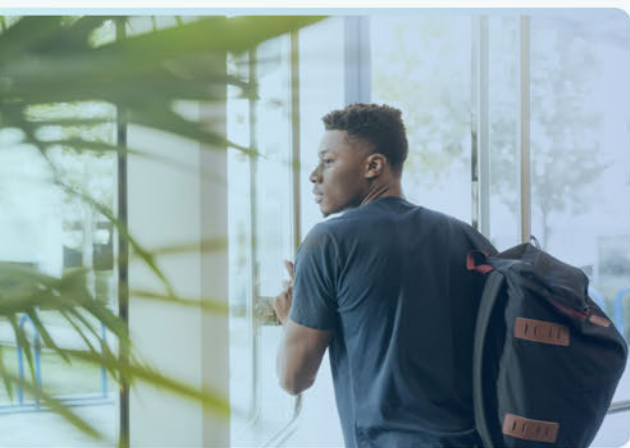
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FROM VISION TO ACTION: ASPO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



In May 2023, ASP0 invited access and outreach partners to prioritize our top two strategic priorities which were then translated to an integrated and responsive operational workplan.

Throughout 2024 and 2025 the ASP0 staff connected with tri-campus partners through engagements, such as:



02

**TRI-CAMPUS
SURVEYS**

12

**ON-SITE ACCESS
PROGRAM
VISITS**

06

**ACCESS
PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY
FUND (APUF)
INITIATIVES
FUNDED**

03

**SPEAKING
ENGAGEMENTS**

02

**ASPO-LED
EVENTS**

Insights and learnings about our partners' unique contexts have iteratively informed ASP0's response to our two strategic priorities.



Strategic Priority 1

Identify the structural barriers to access pathways in collaboration with institutional partners (internal) and community, postsecondary, school board and other partners (external).

In 2024, ASPO developed a new channel for gleaning insight into the structural barriers to access pathways. The Access Programs University Fund (APUF) now invites applicants and recipients to reflect on structural barriers relevant to their access programs.

- **In November 2024, ASPO presented an early snapshot of the top structural barrier themes emerging from ten APUF applications and nine APUF reports.**
- **Access and outreach partners discussed the findings and shared promising practices that can help address the identified structural barriers, such as:**
 - **Responsive Programming**
 - **Strategic Outreach**
 - **Awareness**
 - **Continuum of Support**
 - **Access-First Approach**
 - **Collaboration**

APUF applicants identified structural barriers that may be impeding educational access their initiative would address.

2023 Access community ranks this as ASPO's first priority.

2024 ASPO includes questions about this priority in the Access Programs University Fund (APUF) applications and report.

2025 ASPO consolidates a summary of findings from APUF applications and reports to inform partners of emergent trends.



Strategic Priority 2

Support and strengthen the capacity of U of T's access, engagement, and outreach community to serve students and prospective students.



Resources

To strengthen the capacity of U of T's access, engagement, and outreach community, ASPO embarked on building new resources that develop a foundation of collective knowledge of access programming, tools and resources across the tri-campus. These resources will continuously grow and evolve and will be updated and enhanced with the support of our partners.

Resource Hub

A resource hub has been introduced on the ASPO website which includes a searchable library of U of T and external resources that contains links to reports, publications, toolkits, guides, data and statistics, primarily in a Canadian context. The resource hub references U of T offices and supports and ongoing professional development opportunities.

The introduction of the resource hub on the ASPO website marks a significant step in enhancing accessibility and knowledge-sharing across the U of T community and beyond. The hub serves as a vital tool for educators, staff, and students committed to inclusive and informed practice. This evolving repository not only supports individual and institutional growth but also fosters a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and innovation across the access community.



ASPO is grateful to U of T's access community for contributing programs and resources to our growing database and resource hub which increases our collective capacity for ongoing learning, collaboration and innovation.

Access Programs Database

The University of Toronto's access and outreach initiatives vary considerably in size, scope and scale. To increase our understanding of what currently exists, ASPO has worked with partners to develop a tri-campus database of **100+ access and outreach programs** across the tri-campus searchable by several categories.



Tri-Campus Access Programs Database

Searchable database of all access programs across the tri-campus.



Access Resource Repository

Searchable database of internal and external reports and publications, toolkits and guides, data and statistics, learning and conferences.



Learning and Connecting Opportunities

Learning and community-building opportunities informed by your feedback on the Access Partners Survey.

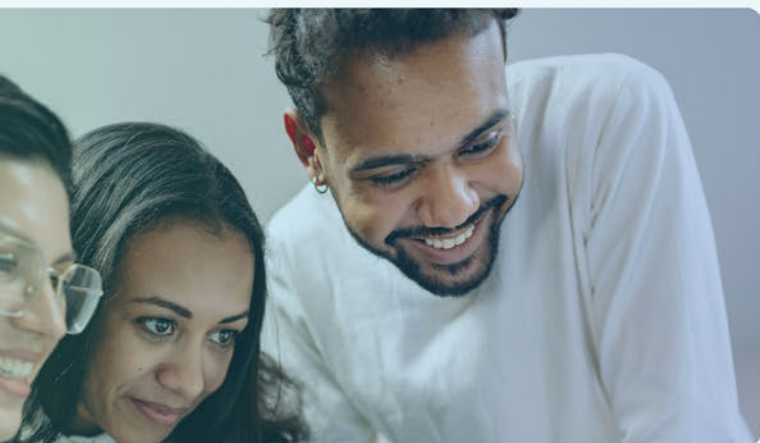


A Plan for Continued Learning and Engagement

ASPO is developing activities to promote collaborative learning amongst internal access and outreach colleagues. The themes and format of the learning activities reflect access topics and priorities and are informed by community feedback, namely through the Access Partners Survey. In support of the second strategic priority, these learning activities aim to:

- 1) **Strengthen relationships within the diverse U of T access community, and between ASPO and the access community, and**
- 2) **Foster an environment for deeper collaboration within the access community.**

The plan has been in development throughout 2024 and will be launched in May 2025.



Investing in Access: Access Programs University Fund (APUF)

The Access Programs University Fund (APUF) provides opportunities for creating outreach opportunities and pathways to post-secondary education for underrepresented groups by investing in new initiatives or scaling existing ones.

APUF responds to **Priority 2**, identified on pages 11-12, supporting and strengthening the capacity of U of T's access, engagement, and outreach community to serve students and prospective students.

Launched in 2019, APUF has supported 52 access initiatives at U of T's three campuses across a wide diversity of program areas. Through the support and championship of academic deans and faculty across divisions, APUF investments reflect divisional goals to build, sustain and innovate access programs and initiatives that respond to local contexts, needs and priorities.

Investing in access aligns with the University of Toronto's commitment to ensuring that students from underrepresented communities see and experience U of T as a place where they can thrive. Increasing access for prospective students means investing in supports to remove barriers to university entry, participation, and persistence.



APUF 2024-25 Grantees

Six access initiatives were granted APUF funding, all for two-year commitments, and three were first-time awardees.

- ISAP Enhancement Project
Factor Inwentash School of Social Work
- Future Sound 6: Expansion Program
Faculty of Music
- Increasing Access through Learning Communities for First-Year Student at A&S and FASE, Faculty of Arts & Science and Faculty of Applied Science & Engineering
- Summer Psychology Research Initiative (SPRINT),
Faculty of Arts & Science, Department of Psychology
- MedLinx, Temerty Faculty of Medicine,
Office of Access and Outreach
- Indigenous Access Days, University of Toronto
Mississauga, Centre for Student Engagement

APUF Review Committee (2025 – 2027)

The APUF selection process is informed by the knowledge and experience of U of T staff.



Cassandra Abraham

Engineering Outreach Coordinator,
Faculty of Applied Science &
Engineering



Kwame Diko

Assistant Director, University Student
Recruitment Equity and Outreach, Office of
Student Recruitment and University
Admissions and Outreach



Eleonora Dimitrova

Executive Director, Law in Action Within
Schools (LAWS), Faculty of Law



David Montemurro

Associate Professor, Teaching Stream,
OISE/UT



Andrew Situ

Access Project Officer, University of
Toronto Scarborough (UTSC)

APUF Review Committee (2023 – 2025)

Eleonora Dimitrova

Acting Executive Director, Office of the Dean

David Montemurro

Associate Director, Master of Teaching Program,
Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, Ontario
Institute for Studies in Education, Curriculum,
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Ike Okafor

Senior Officer, Service Learning and Diversity Outreach,
Temerty Faculty of Medicine, Office of the Dean

Jessica Silver

Director, Student Engagement, Centre for Student
Engagement, University of Toronto Mississauga

Nadia Rosemond

Assistant Dean, Co-curricular Engagement and Student
Leadership, Office of Student Experience & Wellbeing,
University of Toronto Scarborough



INTERVIEW WITH ACTING DEAN ROBERT LEVIT

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design (DFALD)
Building Black Success Through Design (BBSD) Program

1. Can you tell us about the Building Black Success through Design (BBSD) program?

Building Black Success Through Design (BBSD) is a free 12-week mentoring program for Black high school students interested in architecture, art, and design. BBSD aims to inspire Black students to pursue excellence and innovation within design industries and academia, enhancing diversity and building Black success through design. [...] In Winter 2025, students proposed design interventions that integrate community identity, belonging, and personal interpretation of a designated site on the grounds of the Wildseed Centre for Art and Activism. [...] The creative work produced by the high school students during the program can be included in their portfolios for consideration in application to post-secondary [programs].

2. How does the program respond to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) goals and the Scarborough Charter? Does the program facilitate a culture of inclusion?

The core gap that BBSD seeks to fill is representation: to demonstrate to Black youth that professions in art, architecture and design are open to them and that there is a pathway to these careers. In short, they are made aware that if they can see it, they can be it. The 2024 Student Equity Census data indicates that the Black student population across all Daniels programs is 4.7%¹. [T]he BBSD program is one of the ways in which the Faculty pursues its goals of acknowledging and responding to issues of access and inclusion as laid out in the University's recommendations made in 2021 in the Anti-Black Racism Report and the 2021 Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities. These include the building of a pathway that connects Black high school youth to Black university students and Black members of the art, architecture and design professions.

“

The most valuable part has been being able to learn more about what architecture really consists of. I have seen what it is like to be an architecture student with both the difficulties and joy. I got to ask architecture students firsthand what it is like being a black student in the architectural field firsthand that really challenged and influenced my perspective.

-Shanaya Clarke, BBSD Architecture Mentee



3. How are DFALD undergraduate and graduate students involved in the program?

Engaging Daniels Black undergraduate and graduate students as mentors has been transformative for them as they are in a position where they can lead and demonstrate their expertise— which is not the role that they typically occupy as students. The mentors are not only teaching new skills and ways of thinking to the mentees, but they also develop their own skills as teachers and leaders. Mentors demonstrate to mentees how to design through and for Black identity— something that we believe is empowering for all involved.

4. Can you tell us about how alumni and faculty are engaged in this initiative?

[...] Throughout the program, various faculty members, have come in to give writing seminars, and hands on design workshops. [...]. The faculty member most involved with the program is Joshua Kirk, who serves as the Academic Advisor for BBSD and plays a significant role in the program's delivery. [...] Alumni have participated most prominently as mentors, hence broadening the perspectives that are shared with mentees. [...] There is a deep and dedicated sense of commitment and devotion to offering community-based support— the very thing that these young Black designers and architects have not had, but they feel necessary to share.

5. Is there a memorable moment or story about this program you would like to share?

[...] The annual showcase comes to mind because it provided the opportunity for us to see the results from all the hard work put in over the years. Parents were ecstatic, proud of the work that their children had done. The mentees were thrilled, proud of themselves and empowered by their moment of celebration as they walked their families around of the Daniels Faculty building. [...] [M]emorable moments are also when participants in BBSD enrol in Daniels as undergraduate students – this is the epitome of the success of the program. One example of this is Stacey Browne, who participated in the 2023 BBSD cohort and enrolled in the undergraduate Bachelor of Arts in Architecture Studies in 2024.



Over the past four years, BBSD has grown from a pilot initiative into a vibrant, deeply impactful program that continues to open doors for young Black creatives.

Clara James, Events Coordinator and Program Supervisor for Building Black Success through Design, Founder of Black Students in Design (BAIDA STUDENTS)

6. What was the significance of the Access Programs University Fund (APUF) on this program?

APUF was revolutionary. The seed funding from APUF was vital to kick starting this initiative and enabling a period of exploration and refinement. Over the two -year APUF grant period, BBSD was able to evolve and develop its own character and community, and so when it came time for the Faculty to support BBSD as part of its operational budget, there was a history of engagement by students, faculty and community members, including the architecture and design profession broadly.

Acting Dean Robert Levit



Access Programs University Fund (APUF) Program Highlights

Creating outreach opportunities and pathways to post-secondary education for underrepresented groups by investing in new initiatives or scaling existing ones.

Pursue STEM

“We are creating a network of Black students who can help lift each other up as they enter STEM spaces where historically (and still too often currently) they might otherwise find themselves alone.”

Professor Emeritus, David Bailey, Department of Physics



PharmPath

“As technology advances and as we make gains in research and teaching excellence, are we also closing long-standing gaps in access or are we widening the gulf? Are there more benefits for everyone as a result of our efforts or are we continuing to perpetuate the status quo?”

*Leanne Perry, Research Administrator, PharmPath,
Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy*



Future Sound 6

“Lifting as We Climb” embodies the essence of Future Sound 6, where we create pathways to higher education by sharing resources, expertise, and technology with BIPOC young women and gender-expansive youth from underserved communities in the GTA.”

*Reshma Dhrodia, Director, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,
Faculty of Music*



SPRINT

“As graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, the SPRINT executive team is acutely aware of the underrepresentation of historically marginalized individuals in psychology research and higher education, including those who are Indigenous, Black, and racialized. ASPO’s theme of “Lifting as We Climb” strongly resonates with the mission of SPRINT of working towards a diverse and inclusive academic environment that helps students to flourish and succeed.”

Bryan Hong, Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Psychology, Summer Psychology Research Initiative (SPRINT)



DLSPH Outreach and Access Program

“For us, “Lifting as We Climb” speaks to the idea of progress through partnership and collaboration. In the context of our access program, this means that as we develop strategies to overcome access barriers, we also recognize the responsibility to share these strategies with other access programs as we collectively build. This theme reminds us that success is most meaningful when it’s shared and that access programs are powerful vehicles for building networks of support that can extend beyond the program itself.”

Sekou Gregg, Program Coordinator, Dalla Lana School of Public Health Outreach and Access Program





3.0

THE CLIMB: STEPPING UP TOGETHER

Partnerships & Collaborations

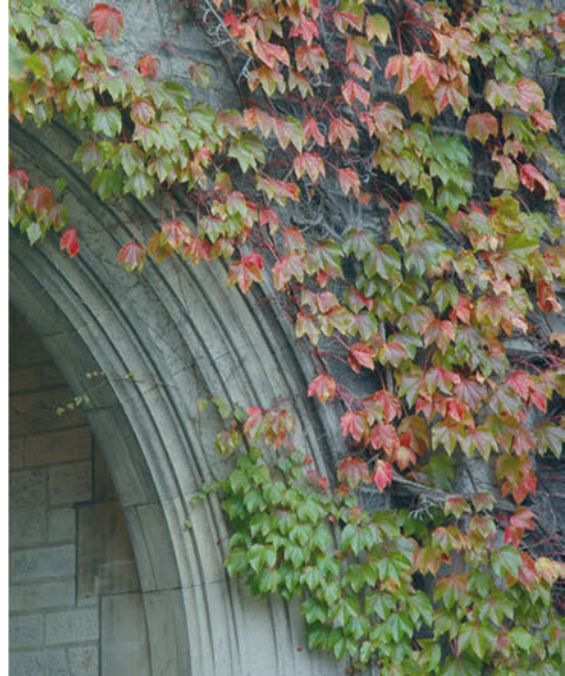
In 2024–25, ASPO facilitated a series of strategic discussions regarding internal and external access-focused partnerships at U of T.

Partnerships are the lifeblood of access programs; and as such, clarity and coordination among U of T staff as they embark on new partnerships for their programs, units and divisions is essential. It is also important to collectively endorse common partnership principles. This is not new work as several offices and units across the University have been engaged in these values-based questions for a long time. Our work at ASPO seeks to leverage and respond to an already robust body of knowledge in order to make it easier for faculty, staff and students to engage in meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Guided by key questions—what to start, stop, and continue—participants identified opportunities to advance access priorities through initiatives like a mentorship program for new staff, a Community of Practice, and a skills inventory that mobilizes internal expertise. Trust, privacy, and participant positionality were underscored as essential considerations in these efforts.

Feedback also highlighted the need for a comprehensive partnerships toolkit to support relationship-building, particularly with Indigenous communities, and to streamline collaborations with school boards and community organizations. Suggested resources include MOU templates, partnership guidelines, and curated contact lists.

ASPO was recognized as well-positioned to advance the priorities of the access community, including continued APUF funding; more formal and informal gatherings, and increased opportunities for collaboration.





Leveraging Community (ACD)

ASPO's connections play a crucial role in enhancing collaboration across campuses by providing platforms for engagement, knowledge sharing, and relationship building.

By engaging with each other, ASPO and its partners can build stronger connections, share valuable insights, and work together more effectively to enhance access initiatives across all campuses.

Internal

Involvement in U of T access program graduations, milestone anniversaries, symposiums, tri-campus working groups, forums, and ASPO-led events foster a sense of community, celebrate achievements, and provide opportunities for sharing best practices and innovative ideas.

External

Participation in national conferences and provincial association meetings allow ASPO staff to connect with external experts and organizations. These interactions help bring new perspectives and strategies back to the tri-campus community, enriching local initiatives.

Site Visits

Visiting U of T access initiatives on-site enables ASPO to understand the unique contexts and challenges of each program showing how they are tailored to meet specific needs. These visits facilitate direct communication, feedback, collaboration, and can reveal how resources and expertise can be shared.



2024 Fireside Chat

On November 13, 2024, U of T's Access Strategy and Partnerships Office (ASPO) hosted their first Fireside Chat on Access and Strategic Student Recruitment Practices.

The hybrid event connected 78 professionals across the tri-campus community to discuss aligning access priorities with recruitment and admissions practices.

Professor Sandy Welsh praised the ASPO team for fostering connections among campus partners. The morning featured a panel discussion on access and strategic recruitment, moderated by Helen Tewolde, with insights from U of T panelists Dr. Ryan Hargraves, Kyomi Hastings Duncan, and June Viglatzis. They explored the evolving landscape of post-secondary education and strategies to expand access for underrepresented groups.



Access Connections Day (ACD) 2025 Event

On May 7, 2025, we hosted a dynamic and engaging event that welcomed 110 U of T staff and faculty to participate in a tri-campus wide conversation on access priorities. The event, themed "Lifting as We Climb", emphasized the importance of collective progress and mutual support in fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

The day opened with opening remarks from Sandy Welsh, Vice-Provost, Students and Chancellor Wes Hall reflected on his own personal journey and the significance of access in higher education. The Chancellor's remarks were followed by a powerful keynote from Nation Cheong, Vice President of Community Impact and Mobilization at United Way Greater Toronto, who offered valuable insights into grassroots approaches to access.

A panel discussion moderated by Susannah Bunce, brought together voices from across U of T, including Dr. Andrew B. Campbell, Reshma Dhrodia, recent U of T graduate Devo Moosewaypayo, and Alica Hall of Nia Centre for the Arts, who shared professional and personal reflections on what "Lifting as We Climb" means to them. Breakout sessions encouraged dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and the development of actionable strategies while the Access Expo showcased the work of 15 departments and units advancing access across the institution.



Certified Gold by the University of Toronto, Sustainability Office as part of the Sustainable Change Programs.



A low-angle shot of a person in a graduation gown, seen from the chest up, reaching their right arm up towards a graduation cap that is suspended in the air. The background is a solid teal color. The person has blonde hair and is wearing a dark gown with a maroon collar. They are also wearing a beaded bracelet on their right wrist. The graduation cap is dark with a tassel hanging from it.

4.0

LIFTING AS WE CLIMB: BUILDING MOMENTUM TOGETHER

2025-2026 Facing Forward

As we move into the next year, we are reminded that access is an "all-hands-on-deck" priority. This is a call to action for everyone to contribute to our mission of creating inclusive and supportive pathways to education. The importance of partnerships and collaborations cannot be overstated.

By leveraging these relationships, we can amplify our impact and ensure that our efforts reach and benefit all students. Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive community where every student can thrive. Let's continue to lift as we climb, working step by step, and hand in hand to make a lasting difference.

The Access Strategy & Partnerships Office (ASPO) implements the "Lifting as We Climb" theme by fostering a collaborative and supportive environment across the tri-campus. Here are some key ways ASPO embodies this theme:



1. Building Infrastructure: ASPO focuses on creating a solid foundation for access work, facilitating greater information sharing and knowledge transfer between campuses. This infrastructure supports the collective growth and success of all access initiatives.

2. Leveraging Partnerships: By forming strategic partnerships, ASPO maximizes resources and expertise, ensuring that the benefits of their work extend to all students and communities involved. These partnerships amplify the impact of access programs and foster a sense of shared responsibility.

“

U of T's access community embodies the spirit of “Lifting as We Climb,” opening doors and empowering students to thrive.

3. Reflecting University Priorities: ASPO aligns its efforts with university-based access-focused priorities, ensuring that their initiatives are responsive, resourceful, and innovative. This alignment helps address the evolving needs of the university community and promotes inclusive excellence.

4. Supporting and Empowering: ASPO is committed to supporting and empowering its partners and communities. By working together and sharing successes, ASPO ensures that progress benefits everyone involved, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.





Access Strategy & Partnerships Office

Year in Review: 2024-2025

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