

RETURNING TO CAMPUS DURING COVID-19

KEEPING ACCESSIBILITY IN MIND

Prepared by
Human Resources & Equity

Returning to Campus During COVID-19: Keeping Accessibility in Mind

As the University of Toronto undertakes a gradual and phased return to our campuses, keeping accessibility in mind throughout the planning and return process remains a key priority. Returning to new and unfamiliar environments could lead to new barriers to accessibility for members of the University community with disabilities. Many members of our community may have new or amplified concerns about health and safety as we gradually return to our physical spaces. This is especially the case for members of the University community who are immunocompromised, have chronic health conditions, or who have otherwise been disproportionately impacted by the effects of COVID-19.

Under the Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities, the University will continue to work to eliminate or minimize the adverse effects of barriers, including physical, environmental, attitudinal, communication and technological barriers, that may prevent the full participation of individuals with disabilities in the University community.

This document outlines things all University of Toronto community members need to take into consideration as part of your day-to-day routine to ensure that our physical spaces remain accessible and safe when we return.

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1. How all members of the University community can create a supportive environment

Wearing Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings

The University of Toronto has implemented a [Policy on Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings](#), requiring non-medical masks or face coverings to be worn indoors in University common-use spaces across our three campuses. The Policy is subject to the University's duty to accommodate members of our community who cannot wear a mask for health or disability-related reasons, such as asthma or breathing issues, as well as individuals with invisible or non-evident disabilities, including those who identify as being autistic or as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and those who have hearing loss.

What you can do

- If you can, wear a mask.
- Students should not be compelled to wear a mask at risk of being asked to leave a classroom or asked to move to online learning.
- Be mindful that for health-related or disability-related reasons, some members of the University community might not be able to wear a mask.
- If an individual is not wearing a mask, follow the processes outlined in the Policy on Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings. Individual members of the University community should not ask for proof of supporting or medical documentation.
- Be mindful that wearing a mask may create communication barriers for members of the University community who have hearing loss, or who are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. Such persons may rely on lip reading or facial expressions for the purposes of communication. Work with them on a how best to communicate in the circumstances and while keeping physical distancing in mind.



Resource

[Joint Provostial and Human Resources Guideline on Non-Medical Masks](#)

Service animals

Service animals might not know how to physically distance. This may result in situations where a guide dog supporting a person who is Blind, for example, may lead the person they are supporting to a door rather than a queue waiting for access.

What you can do

Be mindful that individuals being supported by service animals may experience barriers to accessing our services and spaces. Offer assistance, where appropriate, and let the person indicate to you how best to support them.

Resource

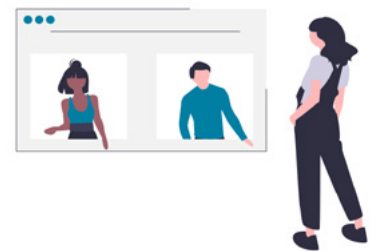
[U of T Service Animal Guideline](#)

What you can do if you serve students or supervise faculty and staff

For many persons with disabilities, access to support resources has been restricted due to the limitations of COVID-19. We know that fewer people are accessing mental health support services since COVID-19 restrictions began, and attendant care has been limited due to concerns about spreading the infection. This lack of access may have negatively impacted members of the University community and may create new barriers affecting their return to our physical spaces. Further, members of the University community may experience barriers to getting around our spaces due to new access routes being introduced.

What you can do

- Ensure they are aware of the support resources that are available to them via the Human Resources & Equity and Vice-Provost, Students COVID-19 websites.
- Proactively offer an inclusive environment that supports concerns to be brought forward.
- If appropriate, ask what you can do to help address any wayfinding barriers someone is experiencing



Resource

- [Human Resources & Equity](#)
- [Vice-Provost, Students](#)

Use of elevators and power-operated doors

Some persons with disabilities rely on using elevators and power-operated doors in order to access our buildings; no other option is available. Given physical distancing requirements, there may be less space available in our elevators, including for persons who use assistive devices such as wheelchairs. Preventative measures during COVID-19 may mean that more members of the University community who don't rely on them will choose to use door operators rather than manually opening the door.

What you can do

- Whenever possible, consider using the stairs instead of elevators
- Be mindful that individuals with invisible or non-evident disabilities may still rely on using elevators
- Be aware that increased use of power-operated doors may result in them breaking down more frequently. If you notice that a door or elevator is not working, call the facilities department on your campus:
 - UTM: (905) 569-4455
 - St. George: (416) 978-3000
 - UTSC: (905) 569-4455

Washroom access

Be considerate when using the University washrooms, especially if you work in a space where the capacity of the washroom has been reduced. Some washrooms may have a 'knock and talk' procedure prior to entering. Consider who might need more space or time, and be mindful that persons with sensory disabilities such as hearing or vision loss might use washrooms differently and may not be aware that others knocked prior to entering the space. Be considerate of your use of single-user accessible washrooms; if it is safe and appropriate for you to use an alternative to a single-user washroom, please do so.

What you can do

- Consider using alternatives to single-user washrooms if it is safe for you to do so
- Give others time and space to use the washroom safely; you might need to leave and find another washroom.

2. How faculty and staff can support students

Online Learning & Accessibility

Many students with disabilities will have had to move to a relatively new form of teaching in a different environment. For many students, this environment removed barriers to access that they experienced in social spaces. For others, online spaces have created new barriers that were not present in physical environments. All of our community has reported that a loss of connectivity to peer networks have been difficult to adjust to. The return to our physical spaces may create new and different barriers to accessibility for our students.



Resource

- [Vice-Provost, Students list of resources and supports](#)
- [Strategies for Online Learning](#)

What you can do

- Take health and safety concerns from faculty, staff and students in good faith
- Support students who study from home as you would any other member of the University community
- Familiarize yourself with the University's support services for students
- Include these services and resources in any regular communications

Classrooms: making space for others

When we return to classrooms and other teaching spaces, it will be important to maintain the appropriate distances to ensure that all members of the University community can protect their health and safety. We will all need to be mindful when entering these spaces and consider the different requirements for space in order to support students with disabilities. For example, some students who use assistive technology for communication or who make recordings may need to be in closer proximity than others to someone giving a lecture.

Resource

- [U of T AODA and accessibility services contact information](#)

What you can do

- Work collaboratively with students in the space to determine what will work best for them
- Ensure time and space is given to the discussion of how classrooms need to be set up so that all students can participate.
- Contact accessibility services on your campus or the AODA Office for any questions

Further support and learning resources:

- [Centre for Independent Living Toronto: Support Resources](#), Web Page
- [Virtual Town Hall of Disability Issues During COVID](#), YouTube Video
- [Ontario Autism Coalition: Support Resources](#), Web Page
- [U of T AODA and accessibility services contact information](#)

3. What managers, leaders, and academic administrators can do to support faculty and staff

Sharing resources and providing a supportive environment

Most of the University's faculty and staff, including those with disabilities, will have experienced working from home for the first time. This may have led to new barriers to accessibility in the workplace that were not there before. For example, access to ergonomic furniture may not have been possible and now adjustments to the office environment may be required. Stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 may create new barriers to the workplace, and new supports may need to be put into place.

Resource

- [Wellness, Equity and Accommodation at U of T](#)
- [General Workplace Guideline](#)
- [Service animals and support resources](#)

What you can do

- Check in with all faculty and staff who you supervise and make sure they are aware of all the support resources that are available to them, including Health & Wellbeing Programs & Services
- Review the University's AODA website, for information on accessible employment, including how we welcome support persons and service animals

Continuing to work from home

All members of the University community who can work from home should continue to do so. Managers and leaders should be aware that many employees may feel concerned about the potential negative impacts returning to physical space will have on their health and should be open to providing employees with the flexibility to stay at home if their work can be done from home. There will be members of our community who are immunocompromised, have become ill as a result of COVID-19, whose mental health has been impacted, or who have other underlying conditions which make them feel unsafe returning to our physical locations. Please be mindful of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 will have had on these members of the University community.

What you can do

- Take health and safety concerns from faculty, staff and librarians in good faith
- Exercise flexibility when requests for work from home are made
- Familiarize yourself with the support resources available to faculty, staff and librarians
- Support faculty, staff and librarians who work from home as you would any other member of the University community



Resource

- [Flexible work guidelines](#)

Feedback

We welcome any feedback you might have on this document and particularly encourage members of the University community with lived experience of disability to provide feedback to the University's AODA Officer, Ben Poynton. All feedback will be treated as confidential.

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