



# Returning to Campus during COVID-19: Keeping Accessibility in Mind



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**



# Keeping Accessibility in Mind

As the University of Toronto begins a gradual return to campus and in-person learning, keeping accessibility in mind throughout the planning and return process remains a key priority. For members of the University community with disabilities, returning to campus may present new and unique barriers to accessibility.

Members of the University community may have new or amplified concerns about their health and safety. This is especially the case for members of the U of T community who are immunocompromised, have chronic health conditions, or have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of COVID-19.

As outlined in our [Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities](#), the University of Toronto is committed to eliminating and minimizing the adverse effects of barriers—including physical, environmental, attitudinal, communication, and technological barriers—that may prevent the full participation of individuals with disabilities across the University.

This guideline serves as an overview of key accessibility principles that all U of T community members should take into consideration as we prepare to return to campus. We recognize that it cannot cover all accessibility considerations and best practices in our multiple teaching, learning, and working spaces.

If you have specific questions, issues, or concerns relating to accessible practices and accommodations at U of T, we encourage you to reach out to the University's AODA Officer, Ben Poynton (Ben.Poynton@utoronto.ca, 416-978-7236). The AODA Office can address concerns and assist in identifying specific resources and supports.

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# How members of the University community can create an accessible environment

## Wearing Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and our ongoing efforts to keep our community safe, the University of Toronto has implemented a [Policy on Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings](#) which requires non-medical masks or face coverings to be worn indoors in common-use spaces.

While this policy applies across the institution, and as reflected in the exceptions listed in the Joint Guideline (see Resources), we are mindful of the fact that some members of our community cannot wear a mask or face covering for health or disability-related reasons, including individuals with asthma or breathing issues and individuals with invisible or non-evident disabilities, such as those who identify as being autistic, neurodiverse, or as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

We are also aware of the communication barriers that masks and face coverings can present to individuals with hearing loss. Enforcement of this policy will vary depending on the nature of the issue and the impact it has on others. We are focused on creating University spaces that are flexible, mindful, and respectful of the needs and considerations of persons with disabilities while also adhering to COVID-19 guidelines.

### What you can do as a U of T Community member:

- Wear a mask or face-covering in all common-use indoor University spaces unless you have a health-related or disability-related accommodation.
- Do not ask colleagues, students, or others at the University for supporting documentation or other proof regarding exemptions or accommodations.
- For more information, please refer to the [Policy on Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings](#) and the [Joint-Provostial and Human Resources Guideline](#).
- In specific circumstances where an individual is unable to wear a face mask or covering and their health and safety is at risk, individuals may be asked by a manager or academic administrator to provide supporting documentation to the University through the appropriate office on a confidential basis. For more information, please refer to the [Joint Provostial and Human Resources Guideline](#).

## What you can do as a manager or administrator:

- Address accessibility concerns on a case-by-case basis, working to understand the unique accessibility needs of each individual.

### Resources:

- [Student Non-Medical Mask Accommodations for Disability Related Reasons](#)
- [Policy on Non-Medical Masks or Face Coverings](#)
- [Accommodation Guidelines for Employees](#)
- [Joint Provostial and Human Resources Guideline on Nonmedical Masks](#)
- [Guidance for Managing Non-Compliance Issues Related to COVID-19](#)

## Service Animals

Some individuals with disabilities use the assistance of a service animal to accompany them through buildings, walkways, and other physical spaces. As we begin to return to campus, it is important to be mindful of the needs and considerations of community members who use service animals to navigate spaces on campus.

Some spaces may no longer appear familiar or could be new to some. Navigating our campuses may initially present barriers to members of the University community who are accompanied by service animals. We are committed to fostering a working and learning environment that centres and addresses the needs and considerations of individuals with disabilities and their service animals.

We encourage community members to be mindful of such barriers and offer flexibility to individuals who use the support of service animals in our spaces.

### What you can do:

- Be mindful that individuals being supported by service animals may experience barriers to accessing our services and spaces.
- Help individuals who are experiencing an accessibility barrier, where appropriate. Always ask for permission before offering your help and let the individual indicate to you how best to support them.
- Refrain from touching, petting, playing, or otherwise distracting service animals while they are on the job.

### Resources:

- [U of T Service Animal Guidelines](#)

## Accessing supports and navigating a different environment:

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted persons with disabilities in a variety of ways. Restrictions prevented many individuals from accessing critical accessibility supports and resources, including one-on-one attendant care and mental health resources.

Many people with disabilities also had to adapt quickly to the changing realities of new and ever-evolving physical environments. Protocols surrounding physical distancing guidelines and building access routes have created additional accessibility barriers for many within our community.

Keeping these challenges in mind, it is important that we centre the needs, experiences, and voices of individuals with disabilities and work to create inclusive supports, resources, and spaces that address their needs.

### What you can do:

- Consider the visible and invisible barriers that exist within your learning, teaching, or working environments and work to create an inclusive space that is flexible and responsive to the needs and considerations of community members with disabilities.
- Check in and ask how you can help an individual facing an accessibility barrier, if and when appropriate.
- Ensure that students, staff, faculty, librarians, and community members are aware of the supports and resources available to them through the [Human Resources & Equity](#) and [Vice-Provost, Students COVID-19](#) websites.
- Complete the University's 30-minute [online AODA training session](#).

### Resources:

- [Human Resources & Equity: COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Vice-Provost, Students: COVID-19 Information for University of Toronto Students](#)
- [Inclusive & Universal Design Repository](#)



## Use of elevators and power-operated doors

Some individuals with disabilities rely on elevators and power-operated doors to access campus buildings and spaces. While we anticipate physical distancing requirements to be reduced for Fall 2021, Public Health physical distancing requirements currently in place have made it more difficult for individuals in assistive devices such as wheelchairs to access elevators.

Many community members with disabilities also use power-operated doors to access buildings and physical spaces on campus. With the rise of COVID-19 and growing anxiety around touching handles and doors, many people may choose to use power-operated automatic doors rather than opening doors manually. While this behaviour is understandable given the desire to avoid spreading infection, it is important to note that with increased use comes additional wear. A malfunctioning automatic door prevents access to those who cannot otherwise enter that space.

We must be intentional about how we use elevators and automatic doors on campus, working to give priority to individuals with disabilities who depend on

### What you can do:

- When using elevators and automatic doors, give space, time, and priority to individuals who use assistive devices.
- Consider using the stairs instead of elevators, when possible.
- If possible, avoid using automatic door features if you do not need them.
- Be mindful that individuals with invisible or non-evident disabilities may still rely on using elevators.

### Resources:

- If you notice that a door or elevator is not working, call the [Facilities Department](#) on your campus:
  - o [UTSG](#): (416) 978-3000 or 8-3000 from an internal directory
  - o [UTM](#): (905) 569-4455
  - o [UTSC](#): (905) 569-4455



## Washroom access

When using public spaces such as a washroom, we must all consider the needs and experiences of people with disabilities. Due to physical distancing measures, many washrooms across campus may function at limited or reduced capacity. This can present challenges for individuals with disabilities who might need more space and time when using a washroom.

For example, individuals with sensory disabilities, such as hearing or vision loss, might use washrooms differently and may not be aware that others have knocked prior to entering the space. Some washrooms on campus have a [‘knock and talk’](#) procedure prior to entering. There are also many single-user accessible washrooms on campus specifically designed to be accessible to persons with disabilities.

It is important to be mindful about occupying single-user accessible washrooms. If it is safe and appropriate to do so, we encourage community members to use alternative washrooms on campus in order to keep single-user accessible washrooms free and available for individuals who need them.

### What you can do:

- Give others time and space to use the washroom safely.
- Implement the “knock and talk” procedure before entering a washroom.
- Consider using alternatives to single-user washrooms if it is safe to do so.
- Avoid using accessible washrooms if you do not require them.

### Resources:

- [“Knock and Talk” Washroom Procedure](#)
- [Online campus maps for accessible washrooms:](#)
  - o [UTSG campus map](#)
  - o [UTM campus map](#)
  - o [UTSC campus map](#)

# How faculty and staff can support students with disabilities

## Return to In-person Learning & Services

Many students with disabilities have adapted and adjusted to a completely new form of teaching, learning, and socializing as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

For some students, the online learning and service environment removed barriers that they previously experienced with in-person spaces. For others, online spaces may have created additional barriers to access that were not present in physical environments. For example, many community members noted that the loss of connectivity and interactions with peer networks has been particularly difficult to navigate, while others have expressed a sense of anxiety and hesitation around the idea of returning to campus.

The safe return to in-person activities for the Fall 2021 term may still bring uncertainty and stress, and potentially some unanticipated barriers. We should be aware of these varying realities and experiences and work to support and accommodate individuals as they navigate unfamiliar environments.

### What you can do:

- Be intentional about checking in with students, taking their health and safety and accessibility concerns seriously.
- Where online learning is still taking place, support students studying remotely as you would any other member of the University community.
- Work to create a flexible learning plan and teaching environment that addresses the unique needs and considerations of each individual student.
- Familiarize yourself with the University's [support services for students](#) and find ways to connect students to support and accessibility resources on campus.
- Incorporate these services and resources into your regular classroom communications (e.g., lecture slides, emails, syllabi, etc.).

### Resources:

- [Vice-Provost, Students list of resources and supports](#)
- [Accommodation Guidelines for Students with Disabilities](#)



## Classrooms: Making space for others

When we return to classrooms and other teaching spaces, it will be important to ensure that all members of the University community can protect their health and safety.

We need to 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 to someone giving a lecture.

### What you can do:

- Take time to understand the needs and considerations of your students to determine what accommodations and supports will work best for them.
- Dedicate time to discuss and explore how your classroom can be set up so that all students can participate fully.
- If you have questions regarding how to make your classroom more accessible, contact the [Accessibility Services](#) on your campus or the [AODA Office](#).

### Resources:

- [CNIB COVID-19 Accessibility Recommendations](#)
- [Ontario Autism Coalition: Support Resources](#)
- [Accommodation guidelines for students with disabilities](#)



# How managers and academic administrators can support students with disabilities

## Sharing resources and providing a supportive environment

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our faculty members, librarians, and staff adjusted to the realities of working remotely for the first time while also navigating new and unprecedented barriers to accessibility in the workplace.

For example, access to ergonomic furniture may not have been possible and adjustments to the office environment may now be required. Stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 and returning to different workspaces may also create new barriers in the workplace.

Many of us have discovered that a hybrid and remote working brings a new flexibility that allows us to examine where, when, and how work is completed. It is important that we offer timely and relevant supports and accommodations for individuals who are facing any new barriers to workplace accessibility.

### What you can do:

- Check in with the faculty and staff you supervise and make sure they are aware of the resources and supports available to them, including:
  - [Health and Well-Being Programs & Services](#)
  - [Employee & Family Assistance Program \(EFAP\)](#)
- Provide as much information as you can about what employees can expect in on-site physical space(s).
- Create opportunities for employees to raise concerns and identify any potential barriers.
- Work collaboratively with those in your areas to proactively address and eliminate any barriers to accessibility.
- Review the University's [AODA website](#) for helpful information on accessible employment, including ways we welcome support persons with disabilities and service animals.

### Resources:

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

## Alternative work arrangements

In the return to on-site work this fall, we understand that some employees may feel concerned or anxious about returning to different environments, and that these may encompass potential impacts on their health.

The Division of HR & Equity has created an [Alternative Work Arrangement Guideline](#) that outlines the fundamental requirements of alternative work arrangements, and ways in which alternative work arrangements can be requested or initiated. This guideline requires that Divisional processes reflect a commitment to equity and fairness in establishing alternative work arrangements.

Processes are expected to include fair timelines and a focus on the fundamental requirements of alternative work arrangements as the means of reviewing arrangements.

### What you can do:

- Take health and safety concerns from faculty, staff, and librarians seriously and provide reassurances of the measures that the University has taken to follow public health guidelines.
- Exercise flexibility, with a focus on the fundamental requirements of the [Alternative Work Arrangement Guidelines](#) when requests for alternative work arrangements are made.
- Review requests under the Alternative Work Arrangement Guideline with equity, inclusion, and accessibility in mind. For formal workplace accommodations, refer to the process outlined by [Health & Wellbeing Programs & Services](#).
- Apply flexibility, compassion, and innovation when addressing alternative work arrangement requests, prioritizing the on-going well-being and inclusion of all U of T community members.
- Support faculty, staff, and librarians with alternative work arrangements. Familiarize yourself with our Alternative Work Arrangement Guideline and share these resources with faculty, staff, and librarians.

### Resources:

- [How U of T is preparing for a safe return to campus](#)
- [Alternative Work Arrangement Guidelines](#)

## We're here to help!

The guidelines presented in this document provide an overview of accessibility tips and best practices you can incorporate into your daily work. As we prepare for our return to campus, it is important that we take proactive and consistent steps to deepen our understanding of accessibility principles, practices, and considerations.

If you have questions about how to request an accommodation, please refer to our [online accessibility resources](#). If you would like more information about how you can embed accessibility into your spaces or about our accessibility broadly, you can reach out to our [AODA Office](#).

### Additional Resources:

- [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#)
- [Materials for accessible information and communication](#)
- [AODA Office training offerings](#) (Search the LMS catalog for a range of sessions focusing on accessible procurement, ableism, accessible language, web accessibility, and accessible events)

### Student Accommodations:

When a student requests accommodations due to a disability, they are referred to Accessibility Services:

- [UTM - Accessibility Services at the University of Toronto Mississauga](#)
- [UTSG - Accessibility Services at the University of Toronto St. George](#)
- [UTSC - AccessAbility Services at the University of Toronto Scarborough](#)

### Employment Accommodations:

- [Accommodation Guidelines for Employees with Disabilities](#)

### Report Campus Accessibility Issues

To report a physical barrier or accessibility problem on campus, please contact:

- Facilities Management, University of Toronto Mississauga - (905) 828-5301
- Facilities Management, University of Toronto St. George - (416) 978-3000
- Facilities Management, University of Toronto Scarborough - (416) 287-7579