Face-to-Face and Online Learning Communities Enhance Student Success!

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• Student Success
• “The Student Experience”
• Learning Communities
  ► BIOME Online Community
  ► First-Year Learning Communities

Student success.

- Develop intellectual and academic competence.
- Establish & maintain interpersonal relationships.
- Explore identity development.
- Consider program and career goals.
- Maintain health and wellness.
- Reconsider and internalize beliefs and values.
- Develop an awareness & appreciation of diversity.
- Develop community & civic responsibility.

Purpose of higher education...

• Knowledge acquisition for personal growth.
• Learn to prepare for future employment.
• Learn to become engaged citizens and serve public good.

Performance dimensions sought by prospective employers:

# 1 - Interpersonal skills
# 2 - Integrity
# 3 - Leadership
# 4 - Perseverance
# 5 - Knowledge

Purpose of higher education...

“Every student will have the opportunity for an outstanding and unique experience at the University of Toronto.”

− Stepping Up U of T academic plan 2004-2010

The Student Experience.

1. Enjoyment of courses
   (content + quality of instruction)
2. Satisfaction with grades
   (grades are reflective of effort and understanding)
3. Connection to a campus community
   (club, team, program, online, research group...)
4. Supportive campus environment...
   residence, advising, access to required courses, student space, admissions, athletics and recreation, bookstores, career center, classroom quality, college life, disability services, financial issues, food services, health services, libraries, math lab, non-academic advising, online resources, orientation, recreation, residence life, study spaces, transportation.

Community.

• (Biology) An association of organisms having mutual relationships among themselves and to their environment and thus functioning, at least to some degree, as an ecological unit.

• A group of interdependent organisms inhabiting the same region and interacting with each other.

“Sense of community.”

• Membership
  – boundaries; secure; emotionally safe; sense of belonging; personal investment in the group
• Influence
  – members have some influence in the group; some influence by the group on its members also needed for group cohesion
• Integration and fulfillment of needs
  – members feel rewarded for participating
• Shared emotional connection
  – the "definitive element for true community"; includes shared history and shared participation

Cohort.

A well-defined group that has a common experience.

Source for previous slide:

- James Fraser, Physics, Queens University. Building community in the first year science classroom. First Year in Focus Conference, Carleton University, Feb. 2008.
Usage.

- 5,500 users
- 38,000 threads
- 570,000 messages posted
- page views (millions)
- 220 forums (120 course forums)
- 35 student moderators

Since Sept '07

Elements of a successful online community.

1. academic cohort
2. student-to-student
3. social presence ("general chat")
4. rules of conduct
5. comfort zone
6. lurkers learn
7. allow for identity, fun (avatars, emoticons, humour, signatures)
8. restricted registration (@utoronto.ca)
9. active moderation and administration
10. listen to and involve students

What is NOT acceptable to post.

- Racist, misogynist or homophobic remarks
- Foul language
- Inflammatory remarks directed towards others
- Using someone else’s account
- Disclosing confidential information
- Hate literature and pornographic materials
- Harassment, including sexual harassment
Evaluation.

- visit at least once a week… **62%** (30% once a day)
- post and read messages… **38%**
- only read messages… **50%**
- visit **academic** forums only… **77%**
- visit **academic + social** forums … **23%**
- **BIOME** is a useful resource… **85%** (90%, Yr 1)

Disadvantages of membership.

- Addictive
- Distraction from studying
- Cliquish… domineering people, let others “in”
- Swearing, offensive language
- Inappropriate subject matter
- Anonymity (also an advantage)
- Place for people to complain, as well as brag
- Perception that moderators abuse privileges

Advantages of membership.

- Help others… get help… 24/7, anywhere
- Meet people… create study groups, make friends, sit with in class, get notes, socialize…
- Get advice from upper-year students
- Relieve stress, entertaining
- Learn about opportunities, programs, profs…
- See that there are other people just like me
- Interesting discussions
- Great resource for large classes!

“A relaxing place to talk to other students in the comfort of my own room, talking about anything at all, such as insecurities, help with course work, and hangout spots.”
"BIOME gives us a sense of friendship and community no matter where we live. It allows students from Oshawa to Mississauga to Thornhill to all stay connected!"

"BIOME is like going to an extra tutorial: being able to read posts at your own pace, and discussing only topics that interest you."

"I've met some of the greatest people through BIOME. It sure makes the university experience a whole lot better!"

Individual and collaborative learning.
Build relationships.
Support for critical moments, 24/7.
Facilitates face-to-face interactions.

**What is it?**
A small group of students who come together to create a community of learners. The 24 students in each learning community take two or three courses in common, belong to the same college or program, and meet regularly from Sept. to April. Meetings are facilitated by an upper-year student peer mentor, under the guidance of a staff and faculty advisor.

**Why join?**
First-Year Learning Communities (FLCs, “flicks”) make it easier to find your way around, make friends, form study groups, develop skills, and succeed academically. FLCs enhance the way you learn and help you connect to your university community.

Get connected. Stay connected.

**FIRST-YEAR LEARNING COMMUNITIES**
A great way for students to learn and succeed!

flc.utoronto.ca
• Help new students succeed at U of T (St. George)
• Meet classmates, develop friendships, form study groups, and develop academic and personal skills
• 2005-06: 260 life science students taking large classes, not living in residence, 11 mentors
• 2007-08: 440 students, 48 mentors
• 20-24 students per group

• “Block registered” in core courses (e.g. BIO, MAT, CHM) and FLC
• Non-credit, no fee, transcriptable (e.g., COM 099Y)
• Facilitated by student peer mentor, under guidance of a staff and faculty advisor
• Meet 90 minutes, weekly at start, then bi-weekly (15 sessions, Sept. to April)

Academic, developmental, and social activities:
• Learning for mastery
• Time management
• Study groups
• Choosing a program
• Research opportunities
• Getting a summer job
• Better health/better GPA
• Career explorations
• Exam preparation
• Mastering m/c tests
• Note-taking
• Stress management
• Studying effectively
• Etc.
Assessment:
- glad I participated… 97%
- I made new friends… 97%
- learning to be a successful student… 82%
- peer mentor effective… 95%
- recommend FLC to friends… 98%
- want to be involved on campus next year… 97%
- wish there were SLCs next year… 89%

Connection to a community.

Grades.

My university experience has been positive.

“… I made best friends, who were there to share happy times and sad times, before and after labs and tests, and who were willing to help online and walk to the subway after class.”
…Overall, FLC gave me the best peer mentor, friends, and staff and faculty advisors, who made life easier that if I had not joined FLC. Joining FLC was one of the best things I ever did!”

**What is a LC?**

- a cohort of students who take at least two courses together (block scheduling)
- regular mandatory meetings in small groups
- advisor(s)
- academic and social interactions
- curriculum integration across courses: none → high

**Benefits for participation.**

- better understanding of self and others
- learn about expectations of college
- college success skills taught during LC time
- establish academic & social support networks
- increase connection with college
- learn “how to learn…”
- greater satisfaction with college life

**Educational outcomes of LCs.**

- course completion
- higher academic achievement, better grades
- retention: re-enrol in subsequent terms at higher rates
- graduation

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   academic advising, access to required courses, activity spaces, admissions, athletics and recreation, bookstores, career centre, classroom quality, college life, disability services, financial issues, food services, health services, IT resources, library, math aid, non-academic advising, orientation, recruitment, residence life, study space, writing support...

Students are ultimately responsible for their own success.

The role of faculty is to teach as well as to help students learn.

It is the institution’s responsibility to create an environment that both challenges students and supports their success.