

Supplemental Instruction in Canada - Guidelines for Best Practice

This document reflects the work of a small group of Canadian SI professionals who came together in June 2013 to create a set of guidelines for how the Supplemental Instruction model is best implemented within the Canadian higher education context. Given that some best practices are influenced by practical constraints related to resources and budgets, alternative recommendations have also been included to reflect “highly recommended practices”.

What is SI?

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a form of co-curricular academic support that supports high-risk courses rather than targeting high-risk students. SI provides students and course instructors with a non-remedial approach to learning enrichment by offering regularly scheduled peer-facilitated study groups within courses to integrate essential academic skills with course-related material. These sessions are facilitated by trained undergraduate students commonly referred to as SI Leaders.

The SI model was created at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) in 1973 and has since been effectively implemented around the world. UMKC remains the International Centre for SI, providing training for the US and accrediting other National Centres to provide their certified training around the globe. In order to run an effective SI Program, faculty and staff receive specialized training from a Certified Trainer in their region. SI Programs appeared on the Canadian landscape in the late 1990s, and have since been implemented across the country in colleges, polytechnics, and universities.

Objectives of SI

SI in colleges, polytechnics, and universities throughout Canada responds to a variety of key strategic objectives - such as retention, transition, the first year experience, student success, student engagement and social inclusion agendas - by enabling students to co-construct knowledge and develop study skills under the guidance of more experienced peers, the SI Leaders/Facilitators.

The general objectives of SI are to:

- Improve student retention and progression rates
- Enhance the quality of the student experience
- Deepen understanding of the discipline
- Improve academic performance of attendees
- Develop and improve student knowledge of effective study strategies
- Foster the development of transferable learning skills
- Enhance students' meta-cognitive awareness
- Create and foster a learner-centred approach
- Foster collaborative and active learning and engagement
- Enhance social inclusion and create a non-threatening learning environment
- Create discipline-specific student communities of practice
- Facilitate social-connectedness
- Provide leadership development for high-achieving students

Best Practices for a Certified SI Program

SI Program Logistics & Operations

1. Is run by an SI Supervisor who has been officially trained through the Canadian National Centre for Supplemental Instruction or another Certified Trainer at the University of Missouri Kansas City or other National Centre.
2. Is centrally funded by the institution with base budget commitments. This is crucial to effective strategic planning and growth of the SI Program.
3. The SI Program is regularly evaluated. This evaluation should include an examination of quantitative as well as qualitative factors, with additional feedback from faculty/instructors regarding their experience with the program and the SI Leader they worked with.
4. Has secured ethics clearance through their institutional ethics board, in order to be able to disseminate program results and ensure compliance with federal and provincial privacy legislation.
5. If the term “Supplemental Instruction” will hinder the establishment of the program on a given campus, an alternate name for the program should ideally be in line with other established programs in Canada. Some commonly used names are: Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), Supported Learning Groups (SLGs), Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), and Facilitated Study Groups (FSG).
6. In order to best allocate resources individual SI programs should establish criteria for reviewing all classes offered on campus to guide the addition or discontinuation of courses from the SI roster as the program evolves.

Attaching SI to Courses

The SI model is designed to work with high risk courses, rather than high risk students. The SI model is most effective in courses that:

1. Have a historically high rate of students getting a “D” grade, failing, or withdrawing (also known as a DFW rate), usually in excess of 30% of enrolled students.
2. Are perceived as difficult by students.
3. Have a high level of instructor support and willingness to collaborate.

The final decision regarding whether SI support is attached to a course should lie with the SI Program.

Review of Courses with SI Support

When reviewing the effectiveness of SI support in a given course, it is important that feedback be gathered from a variety of courses to guide decisions, including but not limited to the following:

1. Outcome data for all SI sessions offered to date in the course.
2. Feedback from students who have attended SI sessions for the course.
3. SI Leader experiences running SI sessions for the course.
4. Instructor feedback.

SI Leaders:

1. Are model students at the undergraduate degree or diploma level. They have taken the course before and achieved an “A” grade, and are academically successful.
2. Are trained and supervised by a Certified SI Supervisor.

3. Receive intensive training before their placement begins, which should be based on the Training Manual provided through the SI Supervisor Training. This Pre-Service Training should be not less than 2 full days in length in order to adequately cover the material prior to SI Leaders beginning their role.
4. Receive ongoing training during their placement.
5. Re-attend all lectures for the course they have been assigned to.
6. Develop a professional relationship with course instructors and other relevant staff and communicate with them regularly.
7. Are given sufficient time in their placement/hours to be able to properly plan activities and strategies to engage students in the SI sessions, engage in ongoing para-professional learning, and to participate in program promotion as required.
8. Are facilitators who re-direct questions, provide time for students to engage with the material and allow students the opportunity to check their understanding of class concepts.
9. Are not tutors, TAs, or someone who will explain concepts to students. See the appendix for a definition of the differences between these roles. An SI Leader may be an undergraduate TA for another course, but should not be involved in the assessment or delivery of content in the course they are supporting.
10. Have demonstrated excellent interpersonal and communication skills, are meta-cognitively aware and have a strong understanding of group dynamics.

SI Sessions:

1. As a proactive approach to student success, SI Sessions should begin in the 1st or 2nd week of classes, and run through the end of the semester.
2. SI is a non-remedial approach, therefore the sessions are available to all students enrolled in a given course.
3. Are voluntary, anonymous, and available at no additional charge.
4. Are offered on a drop-in basis such that students do not have to sign up to attend. The ideal session size is 10 – 15 students, though students will never be turned away based on numbers.
5. Are peer-facilitated in that they are led by a fellow student (the SI Leader).
6. Help students integrate what to learn with how to learn – students will have the chance to become aware of, and develop, effective study strategies in the context of reviewing relevant course content.
7. Are highly interactive and use collaborative learning strategies to help students process and review course content as well as develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
8. Are planned by SI Leaders, but remain flexible depending on the needs of students.
9. Have attendance taken at every session.
10. Do not impact student grades directly (i.e., participation in SI sessions is not rewarded with marks or extra credit based on attendance), so as not to privilege students who are able to attend over those who legitimately cannot attend as a result of a conflict

Highly Recommended Practices for a Certified SI Program

SI Program Logistics & Operations

1. If an SI program is not able to be centrally funded with base dollars, it is possible to run a highly effective program through the use of temporary funding (such as grants, one-time-only dollars, contributions from departments). Retaining control over the delivery and supervision of the SI Program-is paramount however and the development of a plan for attempting to secure stable funding should be a priority.
2. If the SI program does not have ethics clearance, it is important to contact the institution's research division -to inquire about privacy legislation compliance in relation to taking attendance at all sessions.

Attaching SI to Courses

Other highly recommended factors to consider are:

1. The size of the class.
2. Whether the course is a requirement for more than one degree program.
3. The scope of the material covered, and whether it is a new discipline for students taking it.
4. The assessment methods and pacing of the curriculum.
5. In large courses that have multiple sections, it is recommended that each section have at least 1 SI Leader attached to it, particularly if there are multiple instructors. This may vary for large courses with common content delivery and assessment. It is important to take into consideration the size of the institution and the definition of the term "large", as well as attendance patterns that emerge over time. SI Leader attendance at lectures not only provides excellent promotion and visibility, it also ensures consistently aligning with course curriculum.

SI Leaders

1. Can still be successful in the role with less than an "A" grade, or if they have demonstrated an ability to improve significantly after struggling academically.
2. If an SI Leader is unable to re-attend all lectures for the course they have been assigned to, on rare occasions arrangements may be made with the instructor for the SI Leader to still be assigned to the course. The SI Leader should still develop a strong classroom presence, commit to meeting with the faculty member weekly, and regularly communicate with students.
3. Complete peer observations of sessions to learn from the practice of their fellow leaders and provide feedback to their peers.

SI Sessions

1. Effective SI Sessions can still occur with numbers below or above the ideal session size of 10-15. It is important for the SI Supervisor to track attendance numbers, adjust assignments where possible, and provide additional training and support regarding facilitating very small or very large SI sessions.
2. Participation rates vary significantly by institutional context and class size. For institutions with small classes, a participation rate of 40-50% can be ideal. For institutions with very large classes, a participation rate of 15-20% is a reasonable target. An SI Program should set their target participation rate objectives in line with these recommendations.
3. SI sessions are commonly held as 1-hour sessions three times a week, two 1.5-hour sessions per week, or one 3-hour session per week. Institutional context and course content will influence the ideal length of sessions in an SI Program.

Appendix - Differentiations between SI Leaders, Tutors, and Teaching Assistants (TAs)

SI Leaders	Tutors	Teaching Assistants (TAs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewed as a near-peer, pursuing the same level of degree or diploma as students • Intended role is as a facilitator, not as a content expert • May be paid by the university, or may function as a volunteer • Offer free services to students • Offer pro-active, regularly scheduled study sessions every week of the semester • Always report to a staff or faculty member who is their SI Supervisor • Typically work with groups of students • Use collaborative and active learning strategies to engage student with course content • Are attached to a specific high-risk course within a given semester • Are not involved in grading or teaching course content • Are in contact with the instructor • Are trained and receive on-going supervision from a Certified SI Supervisor • Are familiar with the course content, and achieved well in the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewed as a content expert • Viewed as someone who can explain concepts (though individual tutors may take a collaborative approach) • May be graduate students, other instructors, or undergraduate degree/diploma students • May or may not be paid for by the student directly • Offer services on an “as-needed” basis, often at student request as a result of difficulty • May or may not report in to a staff or faculty member • May or may not be trained/certified • May or may not receive on-going supervision • Do not typically have an attachment or affiliation with specific courses within a given semester • Typically work with students 1:1, some may do group tutoring • Are not typically in contact with instructors for courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewed as content experts • Viewed as an authority figure • May be graduates, graduate students, or occasionally undergraduate students • Are attached to a specific course • Are paid and report to the instructor of the course • May or may not receive training related to their role • Assign grades to students • May answer student questions about course format and content • May teach seminars, labs, or tutorials that are part of the course curriculum