

A Common Undergraduate Experience at UBC Okanagan

Report to the Academic Plan Working Group from the First-Year Experience Mini-Project

The motivation for instituting a Common Undergraduate Experience comes from the desire to build more intimate learning communities, to increase student engagement, and to lend distinctiveness and distinction to UBC Okanagan. After decades of narrowly focused specialization in academic disciplines, there are strong movements toward breadth of discovery, self-tailored learning, broad engagement, and interdisciplinary approaches. Universities are redefining themselves and their mission within a global society, and this necessitates alternative modes of instruction and knowledge generation. Students are equal partners in the journey toward rediscovery, and a Common Undergraduate Experience is a vehicle by which universities can make incremental (or monumental) steps toward this end.

Among the *preferred outcomes* for a Common Undergraduate Experience are the following:

1. A strong sense of place, identity, purpose, and belonging
2. Orientation to university resources and culture
3. Awareness of the breadth of academic options available to students
4. Proficiencies and skills essential for success at university and in future careers
5. Commitment to the education of the “whole” person (i.e., physical, emotional, and mental health)
6. A sense of “common mission” among students, faculty, and staff
7. A sense of civic responsibility through community-based actions
8. A sense of global citizenship based on membership in sustainable societies

A Common Undergraduate Experience usually involves a suite of programs that lead to certain *key skills* including the following:

1. literacy
2. numeracy
3. fluency
4. citizenship
5. responsibility
6. skepticism and critical thinking
7. positive and meaningful social interaction
8. information literacy

A detailed consultant’s report on best practices (*Options to Enhance the Academic Experience of First Year Students at UBC-O* by Terence Day) identifies a broad range of *options* available for consideration by UBC Okanagan in designing a Common Undergraduate Experience. These include the following:

1. Co-registration of courses and sections to create cohorts (learning communities)
2. Core curricula
3. Common first year
4. Interdisciplinary first-year courses
5. Academic “freshman” seminars
6. “University 100” type seminars (see below)
7. Academic courses with some “University 100” type content
8. Inquiry courses
9. Courses with non-standard credit values (e.g. 1, 2, 4, or 9 credits)
10. Writing courses or writing requirements built into regular academic courses
11. Summer reading programs
12. ESL for credit
13. Early opportunity to declare major
14. College systems (e.g., residential colleges)
15. Student research
16. General Education

Lengthy discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of these programs (articulated in the consultant’s report) identified several *key concerns* regarding the UBC Okanagan context. These are as follows:

- The question of appropriate levels of resources needed to launch and sustain the ideal suite of programs constituting a Common Undergraduate Experience. The financial and administrative commitment of the institution is a key element in future success, as is faculty and support staff commitment.
- Students might resist taking courses that do not carry credit.
- Students typically respond negatively to programs that force them to do something against their free will.
- Innovative programming will require one or more “champions”. This is tied to the institutional will to implement such program and to having the appropriate incentives, rewards, and administrative support.
- Is the program so unique that it does not allow broad access (university transfer students, for example) or that it disadvantages UBC Okanagan students if they fail in a “special” program that is not easily transferred elsewhere?
- Where does credit ESL fit into all of this? It is a special program only for international students, but it could make a big difference to that cohort if used to advantage in a Common Undergraduate Experience.

Despite these issues, the group was enthusiastic about the prospects for a Common Undergraduate Experience at UBC Okanagan. The recommendations to the Academic Plan Working Group are as follows:

1. UBC Okanagan should proceed with instituting a Common Undergraduate Experience, subject to several caveats listed below.

2. There is no compelling reason to restrict the program to first-year students exclusively although considerable attention needs to be paid to this cohort.
3. The Common Undergraduate Experience should be a multi-faceted program that is flexible and encourages innovation. There should be strong core elements that lend cohesion and direction to the program, and there should be complementary optional elements that enhance the overall suite of offerings and opportunities.
4. Some elements of the program could be instituted quickly (e.g., University 100, reading programs) whereas others would take time to develop and phase in (e.g., a general education program, learning colleges).
5. Evaluation and assessment mechanisms to gauge success (preferably using quantitative measures) should be built in from the start.
6. Base funding should be put in place in support of the programs and the assessment mechanisms to ensure success and continuity. This should be a campus-wide initiative and therefore should be funded centrally.
7. A coordinator/director should be appointed quickly to provide oversight, leadership, and coordination. This individual should be given a precise mandate, and would be aided by a working group that includes faculty, students, staff, and administrators.

Suggested Key Elements of a new Common Undergraduate Experience Program

1. Choice not Mandate (students and faculty should have options within the broader requirement to participate)
2. Flexibility (appreciate that one size does not fit all)
3. Acknowledge the students' perspectives and needs
4. Open and transparent communication regarding the rationale for the program and how various actions contribute to the overall mission (faculty and staff need to understand what the objectives are and how the various activities contribute to those goals)
5. Engagement and self-motivation (active participation, not passive reception).

Favoured options (given our current context)

Academic First Year Seminars are extensively used at the University of Toronto, where they are optional but do carry credit. The Freshman-only Seminars at the University of Southern California are similarly popular, but have limited enrolment and therefore do not serve the broader community of incoming students (restricted access likely leads to the desirability). At UBC Okanagan first-year seminars could be used as a basic platform program and be customized to incorporate features of several other options such as inquiry learning, interdisciplinary studies, global citizenship, or materials from a University 100 course.

Comments: Start on a small scale as pilot projects in Fall 2005 or Winter 2006.
 The project can be expanded over time.
 The program will require faculty buy-in. This is a critical issue.
 There is a question of the seminar class size – 25 is too many but there are obvious costs implications related to class size.

It is essential that the seminars carry course credit.
The summer reading program was discussed with mixed opinions. It could be built into the orientation days or week.

Arts & Science I is a blend of co-registration and core curriculum. UBC Vancouver has successful examples. There are several variants of this option, and it could contain as many as eight of the other options when appropriately linked or embedded. The possibility of an “Environment I” was raised. A negative factor: it is often seen as an elitist program.

Comments: Every class is a learning community.
Requires “great” teaching and much teaching support.

Appendix 1

Important Skills Normally Covered in a “Student Success” Course

- 1) Recognizing how higher education can fulfill one’s life. Finding a mentor as a role model.
- 2) Time Management – this activity includes using how to maximize the time available for education; allocation of the correct amount of time to studying, reading, etc; learning how to use a day-planner; recognizing the best times of day for activities like reading; showing up to lectures.
- 3) Learning how to improve the memory process. For many courses, memorizing facts and processes is of primary importance. There are some important techniques that can be used to improve retention of information.
- 4) Learning how to take great notes. This includes learning how to capture the essence of important information from a professor’s lectures and how to extract notes from one’s textbook(s).
- 5) Learning how to prepare for tests.
- 6) Learning how to read effectively. This skill assumes an appropriate University level of reading.
- 7) Learning how to best manage the aspects of life that may affect one’s ability to be a successful student. This includes one’s management of their health, personal relationships, money, etc.

8) Finding out what resources are available at institutions of higher learning to support students.

9) Information Literacy Skills - Information literacy is the ability to locate, evaluate, synthesize, organize, and use information to become an independent life-long learner. Information literacy is emerging as one of the most critical skills for those living in the 21st century.

Appendix 2.

Participant List

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