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From the Director

Perhaps to no one's surprise, research demonstrates that engagement – the degree to which we involve ourselves in our own learning, the learning and thinking of others, and in the world around us – has a significant effect on our persistence and success in university-level learning. In this issue of Focus, contributors highlight a number of existing and emerging Dalhousie learning experiences that genuinely foster student engagement.



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DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

Forum on Student Engagement Enriching the First-year Experience at Dalhousie

*Louise Spiteri, Patricia Laws, and members of the Senate Committee on Learning and Teaching (SCOLT)**

On October 30, 2008, the Senate Committee on Learning and Teaching (SCOLT) hosted more than 70 students, faculty, librarians, student services professionals, and academic administrators for an animated discussion of how the Dalhousie University community might collaborate to optimize the engagement – and the success – of first-year students. Our discussions were based on the premise that “What students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are and even where they go to college” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005, p. 8). In the opening plenary for the Forum, Lynn Taylor, Director of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, emphasized that student success is a complex phenomenon that involves a

dynamic interaction among academic development (specialized knowledge and skills in the disciplines), social development (the ability to learn and solve problems with diverse people and as a member of a community), and personal development (an awareness of our beliefs and values, and the confidence and motivation to make informed personal choices).

The research literature suggests that one of the most powerful levers in supporting students in this complex learning task is to optimize their engagement in learning experiences. Because engagement can be expressed in many different ways, definitions tend to be characterized by their lack of definition. Dr. Taylor suggested that for the purposes of our discussion, we define engagement as “the synergy created when we become actively involved in our own learning and thinking;

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in the experiences, learning, and thinking of others; and in the world around us.” This self-other-community synergy creates the kinds of learning experiences that contribute to student learning, intellectual development, persistence, and success.

Effective engagement is the product of the effort that students put into their learning experiences and the institutional resources and activities that optimize student participation and success (Kuh et al., 2005). Consequently, Forum participants turned their attention to how, as a university community, we can create the conditions that favour enhanced engagement in the first-year experience at Dalhousie. Participants formed small groups to generate recommendations in one of the following areas:

1. Creative curriculum options
2. Academic advising and mentoring
3. Social integration and networking
4. Fostering connections to local communities and the world
5. Support for student success
6. Teaching and learning strategies for engagement

The groups focused on their respective themes by considering current initiatives at Dalhousie, analyzing the successes and challenges associated with these initiatives, and making one or two high-impact recommendations for strengthening the first-year learning experience, in particular.

Their primary recommendations and discussion points are described below.

1. Creative Curriculum Options

Recommendation:

- Develop student communities based on common course groupings.

Discussion Points: Significant numbers of first-year students frequently select at least several courses and time slots in common. It would be helpful to group students who register for the same clusters of courses so that they will be placed in different classes with at least some members in common. This strategy lays the foundation for creating student communities that can be enhanced further by collaboration among faculty who may wish to link common topics or projects across courses. Another suggestion was to invite students to indicate their interest in one or more broad topics (e.g., the environment, community service) and match students with shared interests through timetabling of



Srinivas Sampalli addresses the Forum
photo by Zita Hildebrandt

selected courses or by providing opportunities to participate in freshman interest groups. It was also suggested that curriculum committees remember to “keep it real” in planning first year courses by ensuring that real-world experiences come through in our classrooms and are reflected in interactions with faculty and other students.

2. Academic Advising and Mentoring

Recommendation:

- Create structured mentoring programs (at the Faculty level) involving first-year students, senior students, and faculty members.

Discussion Points: Currently there are a number of different approaches to mentoring first-year students that have been implemented at departmental levels across the various Faculties at Dalhousie. Each program is structured differently. Mentor/mentee relationships include advanced student/first-year student or professor/first-year student pairings and coordination structures range from programs primarily coordinated by student organizations, professors, or a combination of both.

Participants identified specific challenges for current and future mentoring programs such as the sheer number of students entering their first year, funding, information overload during orientation, putting “a face” to the resources, and the question of how to encourage all students to seek the advice of an academic advisor. Concerns were also raised regarding privacy and confidentiality.

If Dalhousie developed a first-year mentoring program, fourth-year students could mentor first-year students using semi-structured themes such as “reality check” or exam preparation. Mentors would benefit from opportunities to develop communication and leadership skills.

Some of the features of a more robust mentoring approach would

include increased resources and a more systematic approach. For instance, during orientation, each first-year student could receive a brochure outlining various resources offered, including mentoring. Because students often experience information overload during orientation, one option is to deploy mentors to follow-up after two weeks to provide students with “just in time” information and to identify students who may need assistance. A more comprehensive mentoring program would require the support of the Faculties and the University, including funding to develop sustainable administrative infrastructure and resources.

Mentoring programs were proposed as a priority by other working groups as well. The Social Integration and Networking group identified mentoring programs as a way to connect students to the University community and engage discussions outside of the classroom. The Support for Student Success group proposed that Dalhousie implement a mentoring programme with mentorship training embedded.

The discussion of mentoring extended to the integration of increased advising resources, more generally. Bringing advising services into the classroom would raise the profile and accessibility of academic advising for every student. As an example, a first-year class project in which students are sent on a “treasure hunt” for advising resources would help students put a face to campus resources. Alternatively, assigning each student an advisor or requiring students to see an advisor before registration may be considered.

3. Social Integration and Networking

Recommendations

- Encourage social integration through the development of mentoring programs that link students, faculty, and staff with common interests (both curricular and extracurricular).
- Facilitate social integration by providing more physical spaces outside of the classroom for students, faculty, and staff to meet.

Discussion Points:

Many first-year students arrive at Dalhousie with a high level of social networking, which is facilitated through online websites such as Facebook and is expanded to include more personal interactions (such as student societies, residence life, academic collaborations) once they arrive. Social interaction between and among students serves to create new connections to the Dalhousie community as well as giving rise to engagement in learning. Students should therefore be encouraged to sign up for intramurals, clubs, and societies. Once active, they can continue in leadership and organizational roles to get others involved and connected. In the classroom, tutorials are effective tools to encourage interaction, as their smaller size brings students in larger classes together, often through group work, to increase engagement and integration.

A major challenge for social interaction is getting everyone involved. With over 100 societies on campus, many students do not

appear to have enough information about how to join. While some students are local and already have a network of friends, others come from out of town and need to build their network. There are also differences between on and off-campus students’ ability to make connections. To address these concerns, students should have places to go in between classes. The provision of lockers

in these spaces was identified as strong advantage. Although some areas of campus are well equipped with study and group-work spaces, a more equitable distribution of such spaces is required.

In addition to providing physical spaces for students to meet and interact, it is also important to find ways for students to learn about other programs, disciplines, professions, and, ultimately, different ways of thinking.

“Forum participants turned their attention to how, as a university community, we can create the conditions that favour enhanced engagement in the first-year experience...”

4. Fostering Connections to Local Communities and the World

Recommendation:

- Foster the involvement of students in the broader community through service learning (through a centralized program for volunteering, and the incorporation of community-based discussions in the classroom).

Discussion Points: Participants identified different strategies that are currently in place at Dalhousie to foster connections to local

communities and the world.

These strategies include first-year orientation programs, incorporating real community projects in the classroom, and fostering positive interactions with communities through extracurricular activities and volunteer networks. While some of these initiatives are currently operating in individual programs, it is important to develop a model that would be relevant to the different programs across Dalhousie.

A challenge in this area is that first-year students have difficulty knowing what opportunities are available and how to access them. More information could be made available to faculty to raise their awareness about opportunities available to students. For those students who commit to volunteer work, participation should be rewarded. One suggestion was to institute a co-curricular transcript that would show service learning, volunteer work, and affiliations. The first year of studies is critical and volunteering can provide relevance to a student's chosen degree programme and help clarify decisions about majors and career direction. If a program to ease access to a volunteer experience is set up, students will be more likely to volunteer. Currently, there is no central infrastructure to support volunteerism, but some possibilities include Career Services, online coordination or at volunteer fairs, or through a mentoring program.

The Teaching and Learning Strategies for Engagement working group also reinforced the value of connections with the broader community by inviting alumni and graduate students to be guest lecturers and mentors.

5. Support for Student Success

Recommendation:

- Develop a program to inform both students and faculty about the resources and services that are available to students on campus.

Discussion Points: There is already a good network of services in place to support student success. The next step is to insure that students are informed about the services. This would require further promotion and marketing and information resources for faculty members. The top priorities identified for student success are a "Dal 101" programme to increase knowledge of services available to students, to have a safe place for students to voice their concerns and needs, and to have a mentoring program. To provide more specific support for student success, it was suggested that system for referring students to faculty members could be developed.

The interconnections between these initiatives were illustrated again, as the Fostering Connections to Local Communities and the World working group also proposed enhanced mechanisms at the classroom level to inform students about student success resources and to refer students to specific services where needed. A formal tutoring program on "how to thrive at Dal" could be modelled, including topics on how to navigate the library and how to write an essay. One concern was that student success instruction runs the risk of being de-contextualized and would benefit from more widespread efforts to make it relevant to each individual program to avoid repetition.

6. Teaching and Learning Strategies for Engagement

Recommendation:

- Diversify learning experiences by fostering faculty-student interactions (through mentoring programs or alternatives to "office hours"), integrating other resources into classroom experience (senior students, teaching assistants, librarians, student services), and providing a common space for faculty to interact with students in a less formal environment.

Discussion Points: By including librarians, senior students, and Teaching Assistants (TAs) in first-year courses, Dalhousie could create an integrated learning experience that would likely improve student engagement. Further specific strategies included the integration of guest speakers to make connections outside the University and to provide links to potential careers; systematic efforts to meet students and know them by name; and increasing the use of technology-enhanced "office hours." Alternatively, TAs could be housed in a resource centre to provide "communal" office hours that could benefit a broader cross-section of students.

A number of beneficial practices were identified, prompting a suggestion that Dalhousie provide guidelines for departmental-level policies and practices to enhance student engagement and to ease the transition to university-level studies. Particular emphasis should be placed on first- and second-year students, especially in larger classes where there is potentially less interaction with professors. In this respect, two major suggestions were that there needs

to be dedicated space available in each department for students to meet with each other and their professors, and that TAs can act both as a learning resource and as a bridge to encourage students to interact directly with their professors.

The Support for Student Success working group also recommended using more diverse methods of teaching and learning and offering different types of courses to increase student engagement. In addition, using informal “midterm course assessments” (using print or technology-based tools) that provide students with opportunities to give feedback on courses before the course is finished, would create a climate of inclusiveness.

Moving Forward

The SCOLT Forum coincided with the appointment of Dr. Deborah Kiceniuk as the CLT Associate Director (Institutional Initiatives). Deborah has already begun to meet with Faculties interested in initiatives recommended by participants in the Forum such as mentoring and the use of multi-course cohorts, and she looks forward to collaborating on additional multi-Faculty projects designed to enhance student engagement, success, and retention. For more information, you can reach Deborah at 3808 or by email at Deborah.Kiceniuk@dal.ca.

Reference

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E.J., & Associates. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

CLT Welcomes Deborah Kiceniuk

Dr. Kiceniuk received a PhD in Educational Foundations from Dalhousie University and also holds a Master of Medical Education degree from the University of Dundee, Scotland. Her PhD thesis was entitled “A Study of Change in the Medical Education Curriculum at Dalhousie Medical School from 1947-1967” in which she examined the social, political, and economic forces surrounding curriculum and institutional change. She has taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels in sociology and education. Dr. Kiceniuk has published and presented academic papers at national and international conferences on research methods in education, needs assessment in physician education, women in medicine, and unpaid caregiving. She currently holds research grants at the national level. In her spare time she is an avid kayaker, studies martial arts, and teaches women’s self-defense courses.



photo by Spencer Cantley

Dr. Kiceniuk joined the Centre for Learning and Teaching as the Associate Director (Institutional Initiatives) in October 2008. In this position she is responsible to develop student learning activities in collaboration with the university community that will promote student engagement, retention and success. Since October there have been many developments in these areas. Dr. Kiceniuk reports that “there is a lot of goodwill at this university and that faculty, staff, and students have been enthused and supportive of promoting student engagement at Dalhousie.” This is becoming more evident as the number of interested people contacting the Centre is increasing. Recently, funding has become available from the Vice-President Academic and Provost to support development and assessment of first year program initiatives that are aimed at promoting student engagement throughout the university at the faculty level.

These programs include:

1. Tri-Faculty Mentorship Program: The Faculties of Computer Science, Engineering, and Management, the Office of the Registrar, Student Academic Success Services, the Centre for Learning and Teaching, and student representatives are collaborating to develop a student peer mentorship program.
2. Science in the Community: In collaboration with the Faculty of Computer Science there is a plan being developed to implement a first year course in computer science that integrates practical activities and academic skill-building with learning scientific concepts.
3. First Year Student Cohorts: This program is aimed to group together students that select the same patterns of courses so that they are in multiple courses together thereby creating a learning community for incoming students.
4. The Centre for Learning and Teaching and Student Academic Success Services are discussing ways in which to implement first year seminars that develop knowledge in a field of study as well as academic/life skills for first year students. These skills would be available online for faculty members who teach in first year.