Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

Foundational Academic Skills for Undergraduate Students

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1 THE CHALLENGE

The University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) is a primarily undergraduate, suburban campus of the University of Toronto. Students at UTSC come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and therefore the skills that they were lower level courses with run vary widely. Frequent, the content and skills being taught in these courses are a basic level of competency in a variety of foundational skills including: writing and other communicative skills, research skills – including finding, evaluating, and using a variety of information sources – critical thinking skills and, where appropriate, numerical literacy and statistics skills. Currently, there are no foundational skills courses either offered independently or embedded into a specific Department at UTSC. Instead, these skills are built into courses, most frequently at the request of the individual instructor.

2 THE METHODS

Faculty
Surveys were sent to Department Chairs and members of their Curriculum Committees.
Hour long focus groups divided roughly by Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences

Students
Surveys were conducted in Winter 2017 and Winter 2018.
One survey for first year students and a second for last year students

3 THE RESULTS

Foundational Skills List
- Academic writing
- Academic integrity (plagiarism & citations)
- Critical reading
- Critical thinking
- Digital & technical skills (computer skills)
- Evaluating sources
- Note-taking
- Numeracy (data & statistics)
- Project planning
- Presenting & communicating
- Professionalism
- Presentation skills
- Problem-solving
- Project planning
- Research skills
- Teamwork
- Time management
- Understanding different types of sources (primary/secondary, etc.)

Faculty Respondents: 17
Need for a Foundational Skills Course: 12
Logistics are problematic: 12
Some skills are taught in their classes (with partners such as the Library): 3
Suggestions:
- In person/classroom hybrid
- Tutorials
- Academic bootcamp
- Pass/Fail

First Year Students
- Understanding different types of information sources
- Critical reading
- Writing
- Project planning
- Note taking
- Critical thinking

Final Year Students
- Evaluating sources
- Professionalism
- Critical writing
- Note taking
- Presenting & communicating
- Critical reading

ACADEMIC AUDIENCE: Faculty

4 DISCUSSION

- The faculty survey and focus group confirmed our initial hypothesis that they felt there was a gap in the foundational academic skills of both incoming and graduating students.
- The student survey that participated in the survey had an overall positive experience in high school, for the first year, and at UTSC, for the final year.
- Final year students were generally optimistic and rated their own skills of graduating students.
- Students do not see a need for major changes to the way academic skills are taught at UTSC.
- Potential for a response/non-response bias.
- Method differences between the Faculty’s perception of students and the student’s perception of their own abilities was noteworthy.

5 CONCLUSION

- Non course based suites of workshops resulting in a Library Skills certificate in various Library related foundational academic skills.
- Partnership with high school groups to build relationships with potential future students.
- Collaboration with other academic support such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning on exploring University-wide options.

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