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# University to College Remediation

## Understanding challenges and effectiveness

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## Introduction

This research project is the third phase of a general arts and science retention pathway developed by UOIT/DC under project 2015-23. For this reflective research paper we collected, analyzed, and interpreted both quantitative and qualitative data about the Diploma and Degree Retention Pathway Program (GAS-S), with a focus on exploring and describing the experiences of participants, their choices with respect to continuing at either Durham College or UOIT, and their subsequent performance. We also discuss lessons learned from this research in the hopes that it will be used to inform the development of future pathways and additional learning supports for students.

## Review of the Literature

Some students in higher education do not persist to graduation, or indeed beyond the first year of study, departing early from academic study for cognitive, social, an institutional factors (Swail, 2004). This problem of undergraduate student retention has both plagued higher education institutions, and been prevalent in higher education research for decades (Tinto, 2006). Researchers have dedicated their focus to why students in higher education fail to complete their program of study, and how institutions can modify/change their approach to reduce the amount of attrition faced by first year cohorts moving into second year; increasing the institutions retention (Tinto, 2006). This research has also led to a paradigm shift in how institutions perceive students who fail and what the institutions role is to lessen the chances of that happening.

Early research (pre 1970's) into why students do not persist to graduation often focused on what the student was 'lacking', whether that was certain attributes, skills or motivation, to

explain why student retention was low (Tinto 2006, 1987). Much of this early literature mischaracterizes students who have departed from higher education, and from that mischaracterization, a profile of a stereotypical 'dropout' was posited to explain why a student was not retained (Tinto, 2006, 1987; Astin, 1984). This profile highlighted that students who did not persist to graduation were assumed to be "less able, less motivated, and less willing" (Tinto, 2006, p.2) than their peers who persisted and went on to obtain a degree. This mindset often put the responsibility of student persistence solely on the student and absolved the institution of any responsibility when it came to a student being successful in higher education. As Tinto (2006) noted, "the students failed, not the institutions" (p.2).

In the 1970's research on student retention and persistence saw a shift, with new research focusing on not only what the student needed to do to persist, but also what institutions need to do to support students in order for them to be successfully retained. Researchers began to look at how a student interacts (or engages) with the institution's environment, both academic and non-academic and what the connection may be to student retention (Astin 1975, 1984; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terezini 1980). Research has since found that student engagement in targeted, meaningful activities, both inside and outside of the classroom, contributes to the persistence and retention of students in higher education (Tinto, 2006; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonvea, 2008; Schroeder, 2013). For activities to be meaningfully engaging, institutions have to take a 'student-centered' approach when developing learning activities, institution wide policies, procedures and co-curricular programming (Tinto, 2006; Kuh, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Assoc, 2005; Kuh, et al. 2008; Schroeder, 2013). The student-centered approach means considering a mix of different facets of a student's identity/background upon entering the institution such as: race, ethnicity, first generation status, financial responsibilities,

familial responsibilities, commuter vs. non-commuter, etc. (Tinto, 2006; Kuh et al. 2005, 2008; Schroeder, 2013) when planning academic and co-curricular endeavors for the student.

From the 1970's onwards, acknowledgement of student involvement/engagement as a key contributor to the likelihood that a student persists continues to permeate literature on student retention. Researchers noted that student engagement activities must be planned intentionally and responsive to what the student needs both academically and non-academically (Tinto, 1987, 2006; Kuh et al. 2005, 2008; Schroeder, 2013). The focus then became on what kind of engagement opportunities an institution should provide in the hopes of boosting their student retention, with the focus being in primarily three areas: curricular, co-curricular and administrative.

Research has shown that intentional curricular student engagement opportunities have assisted in promoting persistence in first-year students (Tinto, 1987, 2006; Kuh et al. 2005, 2008). While each institutions student body context is different, institutions who understand who their students are and engage them in their academic journey, see higher rates of retention among first-year students (Kuh et al. 2005). Chickering & Zelda, (1999) highlight several ways to harness a student's engagement towards academic endeavors, for example, increasing and encouraging student-faculty interactions, both outside and inside the classroom. Also, creating learning spaces that promote collaboration between students and encourage active learning. Providing feedback in a timely fashion so a student has the opportunity to seek assistance and highlighting the importance of time management and organization. Lastly, faculty set clear expectations of the course and activities and create learning environments that acknowledge the diverse range of learners and skills sets within their classroom (e.g. not relying solely on exams to assess a student's academic capability). These are just some of the ways institutions are

engaging their students in a meaningful and intentional way with the hopes of encouraging them to persist.

In addition to heightening student engagement within their academics, institutions that adapt their administrative policies, procedures and student services to better respond to their first-year student cohort tend to see an increase in student retention and persistence. A 'student-centered' approach to policies, procedures and student service programming meant that institutions were now using their understanding of who their students are when modifying or creating them (Tinto, 1987, 2006; Kuh et al. 2005, 2008). A way to adapt policies and procedures that govern students is to look at different processes students encounter, such as course availability and scheduling, reconfiguring space to enhance coordination of academic supports, eliminating bottlenecks in institutional service areas (such as the bookstore) that can cause frustration (Schroeder, 2013). Student service programming such as orientation, mentoring, and peer events, that actively engage a student by giving them choice and responsibility are more likely to better perform through-out first year but only if these programs have been created/customized to fit the students' needs; just having the services available is not enough (Kuh et al. 2005).

Current research acknowledges that having student engagement approaches to both academic and administrative process, policies and programs has assisted with student retention. However, an overarching universal implementation framework still does not exist. Tinto (2006) highlights that a considerable amount research has been done around 'what' students' need to persist (they need to be engaged in their institution), however, what it still does not tell institutions is 'how' to go about enhancing the engagement they currently have. Recent studies (Kuh et al. 2005, 2008; Schroeder, 2013; Chickering & Zelda, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) have been able to provide examples of what academic and administrative engagement activities can look like,

however, an institution wide model on how to implement these activities is still not clear. For example, orientation is an activity commonly cited to help students' persist to second-year when planned intentionally and is student-centered. While we know what activity the student may need (orientation), a universal institutional guideline as to how to implement orientation programming to enhance the persistence of all first-year students is still elusive (Tinto, 2006).

Research into a universal intuition-wide student success framework, is still lacking, but researchers are still optimistic about the possibilities of increasing student engagement and retention on campus. Several studies have demonstrated how student engagement strategies and activities have enhanced student retention, albeit through institution specific approaches (Kuh et al 2005; Schroeder 2013; Tinto 2016). What does appear to be at the core of these individual success stories, or the common thread that links them, is that each institution took the time to understand their students' needs when trying to answer how best to engage them. This engagement may look different at each institution but all have grounds in student-centered approaches that are based off the needs and challenges that their specific student populations' face.

There may not be a universal, institutional student engagement model that will guarantee student success, but institutions can still bridge this gap by researching who their students are, what they do, and why they are coming to higher education. Research has shown that institutions that have a deep understanding of their student, and using that information to plan engagement activities (both academic and co-curricular) have a greater rate of success when retaining students past first-year.

With this guiding principle in mind we undertook the development, implementation and modification of a student focused program for academic remediation between a community

college and a university. This program dubbed the General Arts and Science Success program, or simply, GAS-S was created to allow for greater student success through increased engagement and academic remediation.

## Program Design and Context

Some first year university students are at risk of achieving success due to a lack of preparedness for university level academics. Currently, the majority of these students end up suspended and do not pursue additional education. The University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) and Durham College (DC) have collaborated to develop the GAS-S program, an alternative pathway from suspension. The pathway allows students successful in GAS-S to be eligible to earn a general arts and science certificate concurrently with the continuation of their University degree after suspension. The pathway specifically addresses life skills related to academic success and communication to improve the student's preparedness for returning to academia in the fall without losing valuable time towards obtaining their academic goals. While some causes for not achieving success are indeed academic in nature, it was found that the majority of poorly performing students are encountering difficulties due to other issues. These issues include exam anxiety, lack of study skills, long commutes, need to work, schedule conflicts, poor time management, family commitments, financial crisis, stress, loss, or other issues that impose a social or personal burden upon the student. Before university, the students were relatively unprepared for the transition, and these issues were not familiar to them. Hence, the student has to deal with academia and new life situations at the same time. In the academic success pathway, students that have been suspended from UOIT will be given the opportunity to enter a Durham College program (GAS-S) that will address academic success related deficiencies. The students will undergo an assessment process to identify their specific needs

and will have access to academic advisors at both institutions for guidance. Upon successfully completing the program, the student returns to University with a position reserved in their program of study allowing for a semester reduction in the time lost due to suspension. The program includes four core courses and two electives to maintain the academic pace expected at the university level. The core courses are academic success, a double-weighted fundamentals of communications course, and a math fundamentals course. In the academic success course, the students concentrate on improving their life skills with particular focus on time management, study skills, responsibility and financial management. The double communication course is essentially one course on individual communication and one course on group communication. The course cover fundamental literacy, verbal and written communication and comprehension but also focuses on communicating with authority and self-advocacy. The math fundamentals course is expected to ensure numeracy skills are present for day-to-day success.

The two electives are selected in consultation with the student's university academic advisor to provide improved preparation for their specific academic program. This program allows the student to focus on other academic deficiencies upon their return to UOIT. The program also allows the student to recognize that they are not in the right program or at the right academic level and thus may choose to transfer to a diploma program at the college or apply to switch university programs during the remedial semester. Regardless of the pathway taken, the student is provided the opportunity to be successful in obtaining the academic education that they are most suited for.

## Methodology

Now entering its third cohort, the GAS-S program has helped a number of students remediate academically, and return to university study while allowing others to pursue a college

diploma or non-academic pursuits. This study will explore three areas to understand better the efficacy of the GAS-S program on student success across two cohorts: 1) academic performance (GPA) and student persistence associated with programmatic outcomes, 2) student surveys that explore attitudinal responses to the program design and its ability to augment student success, and 3) student, faculty and administrator focus groups that centered on student responsiveness to learning outcomes and general success criteria.

**Academic Performance**

To review student academic performance individual course grades and aggregate GPA were compared. Starting with initial grade performance at the university, performance in the GAS-S summer program and grades achieved for those who were eligible to return to the university after remediation. These data sets were compared to look for correlation in individual course disciplines, and overall academic performance.

**Survey Administration**

During the summer GAS-S session a survey was administered to the remedial cohort. The survey questions can be grouped into the following categories:

| Category | # of Questions | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| Who the Student is | 10 | Questions are related to domestic/international, age, dependents, 1st Gen., where they live, with whom, etc. |
| Self-Perception | 8 | Questions are related to academic confidence in math, writing, and computer skills, physical ability, creativity, emotion health, drive and determination |
| Behaviours | 5 | Questions are related to engaging in class, reviewing their work, exploring on their own, accepting lessons learned |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Contacts | 9 | Questions are related to who are their contacts for academic help such as Professors, TAs, advisors, friends, parents, siblings |
| Emotions | 7 | Questions are related to loneliness, feelings on unsafe, worry about health, interference with school, family and advisor support |
| Extra-Curricular Activities | 5 | Questions are related to being in a club, athletics, campus radio, sorority, fraternity |
| Course Observations | 8 | Questions are related to late assignments, skipped classes, fall asleep in class, witness to academic dishonesty, playing video games |
| Work Activities | 4 | Questions are related to hours of work, commute time, time on homework, and housework |
| Self-Evaluation | 2 | Questions are related to how the student perceives themselves academically |
| Challenges | 3 | Questions are related to ease or difficulty of developing skills, adjusting to academic demands, or developing friendships |
| Other Activities | 7 | Questions are related to being bored in class, consumption of alcohol, feeling overwhelmed, depressed, money to family, healthy diet and adequate sleep |
| Services | 11 | Questions are related to use of academic and non-academic services on campus for help such as math support, ESL, health services, counselling, writing, student accessibility services, advising, peer mentor programs, etc. |
| How to fix 1st Year | 1 | Students were asked to provide their thoughts on how to fix their first year experience |
| Hope for GAS-S | 1 | Students were asked to identify their hope for the GAS-S program |

Table 1: Survey questions grouped by theme

**Focus Groups**

A total of four sets of focus groups were used in this study. The first focus group involved GAS-S students after they had completed the survey but before they completed the GAS-S program. The second focus group involved university staff, mainly the Academic Advisors held several months after completion of the GAS-S program. The third focus group involved college

staff, instructors and advisors around the same time as the second focus group. The fourth focus group was held one month after the launch of the third GAS-S program delivery. This focus group was not originally planned. The group included a small set of Academic Advisors most closely involved with the students and the GAS-S program; the purpose was to determine the reason for the apparent change in GAS-S interest.

For the student focus group, the following five questions were asked:

1. What challenges have you/did you encounter while at university?
2. Tell us about your decision to enter the GAS-S program?(main influence/objective)
3. What did you like about the GAS-S program?
4. What services or resources did you find helpful while in GAS-S and when you return to the University?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve the GAS-S program?

The second and fourth focus group contained participation of several Academic Advisors from all faculties with students participating in the program. These groups were asked the following questions:

1. What challenges have you seen students encounter while at university?
2. Tell us about your decision to recommend the GAS-S program? (influence/objective)
3. What did you like about the GAS-S program?
4. What services do you believe would help the students when they return to university?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve GAS-S?

The focus group for the Durham College staff, faculty and advisors were asked the following questions:

1. What challenges did you see that the students encountered while in the GAS-S program?

2. What type of student is the GAS-S program successful for?
3. What do you like about the GAS-S program?
4. What services are helpful to the GAS-S student?

## Discussion

### Academic Performance

An analysis was performed of all of the courses for students that were facing suspension from the university, and eligible for the GAS-S program. Figure 1 shows the distribution of all GAS-S students (first and second cohorts) with respect to the course discipline code (ex. CHEM, or BIO) noting that students may take more than one course or different courses within that code. The discipline code analysis shows that the courses where the students had the most difficulty were business, chemistry, engineering, math, social science, and physics. These disciplines are core courses for the degree programs which students are enrolled, and as such are normally expected to be their area of strength. The distribution of the marks within these disciplines are shown in Figure 2. While these at-risk students do struggle in these core courses, Figure 2 shows that it is not uniform for all students. Some of the students are clearly excelling in some of their courses, while struggling in others. They demonstrate that they can do the material, but the collective effort across all of their courses is weak. This suggests that the material alone is not likely the main problem and this supports the theory that the students are progressing with difficulty due to non-academic matters.

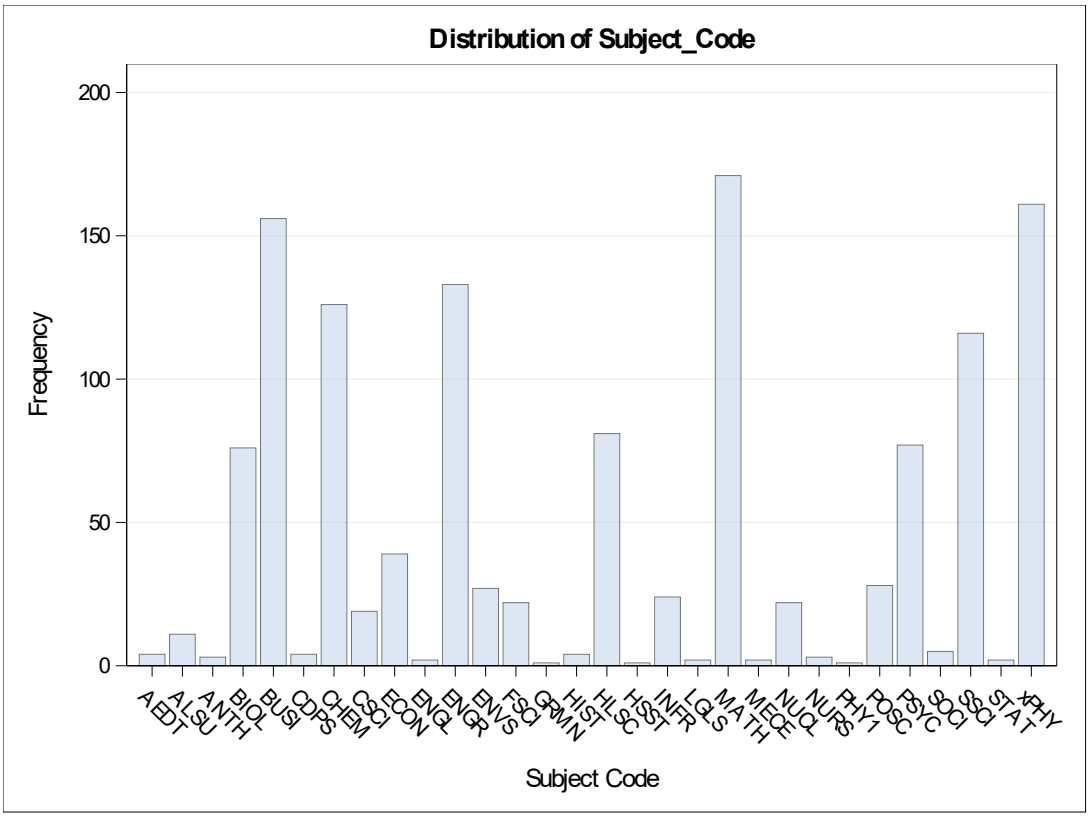


Figure 1: Distribution of students having difficulty with respect to their course code.

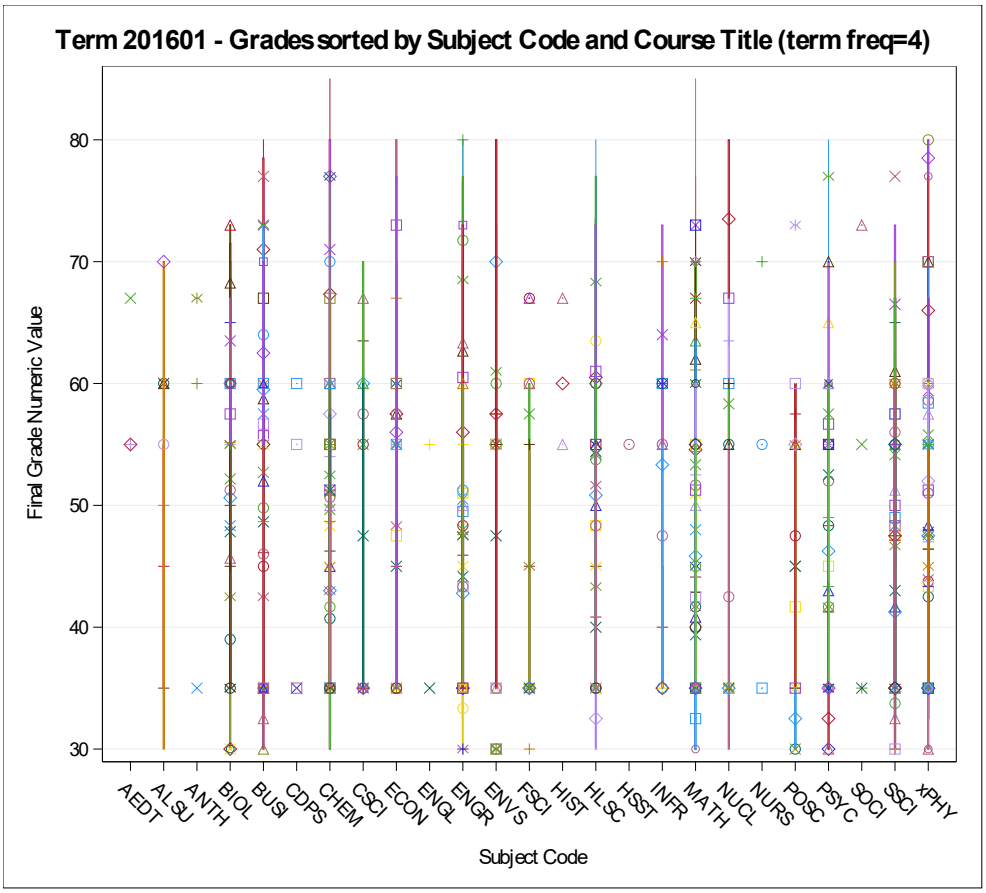


Figure 2: Mark distribution of students that progress with difficulty

***First cohort (Summer 2016)***

The 2016 GAS-S cohort was a pilot project with limited seats available. All spots were limited to those students that were 1st year and suspended. Not all students that participated in this cohort returned to university. For those that did, an analysis was done to determine their effectiveness in the fall courses compared to their marks obtained in the GAS-S program. The data was assessed for all faculties involved to determine if there were any programmatic trends. The results indicate that of those that returned, approximately half were successful in obtain a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.0 or greater which is the minimum for clear academic standing, as shown in Figure 3. The faculties were mixed between those that succeeded and those that did

not. The one outlier being the Faculty of Health Science where great success was observed. Further investigation revealed that this increase in success for some faculties was largely due to students transferring to another program in another faculty. Some students transferred to either business or social science programs and in doing so obtained a significant increase in their GPA. Note that it was common for students entering the GAS-S program to request information about how to change programs.

One interesting observation is that business students were more modest in their success relative to science and engineering students.

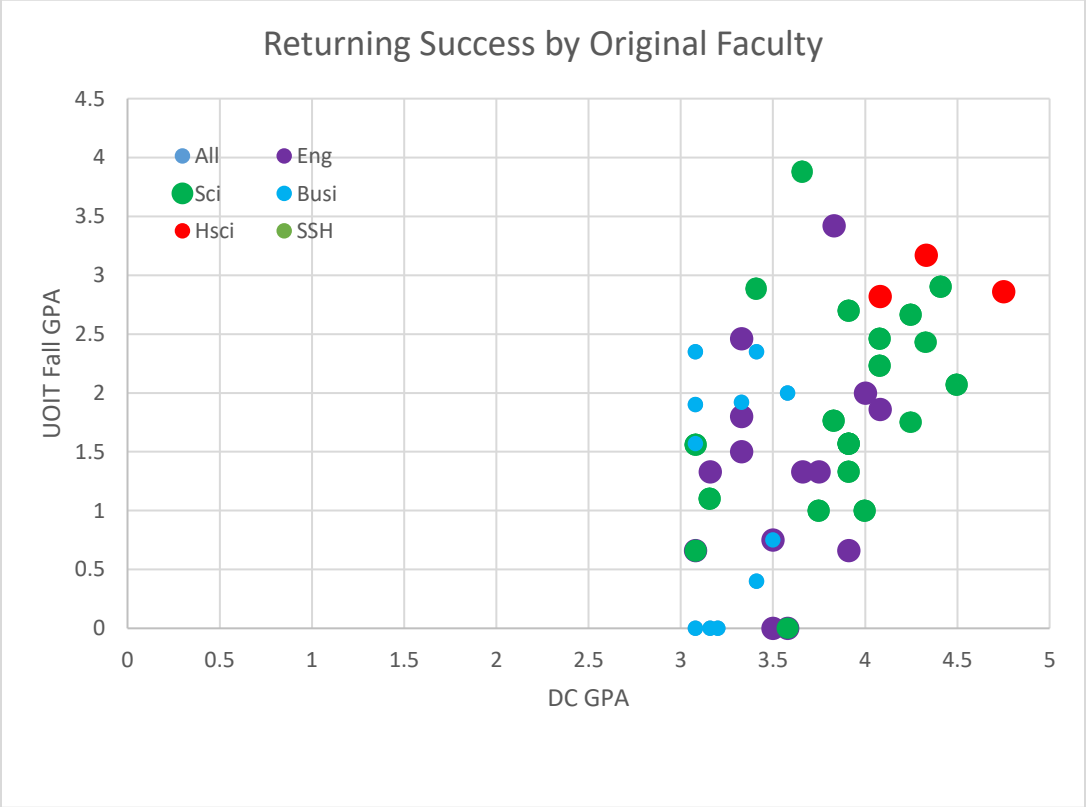


Figure 3: Grade Point Average for the first Cohort of GAS-S students that returned to the University

The success rate for the first cohort (2016) was reasonable but not as high as expected. Many students did not return to the university or the college. For the second cohort (2017), an

analysis of the grades in the GAS-S program was done. The results are shown in Figure 4. The grades were high for the academic success course and both communication courses with a marked increase in performance for the second communication course. The math and chemistry courses were also reasonable. The remainder of the electives however, were lower grades. In particular, the performance of business students in the management course was very poor. The electives are playing a role in the overall performance. This may be due to the students seeing the electives as less important. There was an incorrect perception that to return to the university, core courses count more than electives.

***Second cohort (Summer of 2017)***

The second GAS-S cohort was more engaged in the program than the first cohort. The attendance was higher and the student survey responses showed that if they went to class, they participated in the survey. The number of students that returned to the University from the second cohort was approximately the same number of students that completed the survey. Of the 64 that returned to UOIT in the fall of 2017, 20 of the students did not perform sufficiently well to persist to the winter term. While this suggests GAS-S was not helpful for these students, it is suspected that these students had issues that could not be easily solved even by employing the skills learned in GAS-S, or that they were not as engaged in the program. Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of student persistence, is that some students wanted to switch to another UOIT program but were not able to.

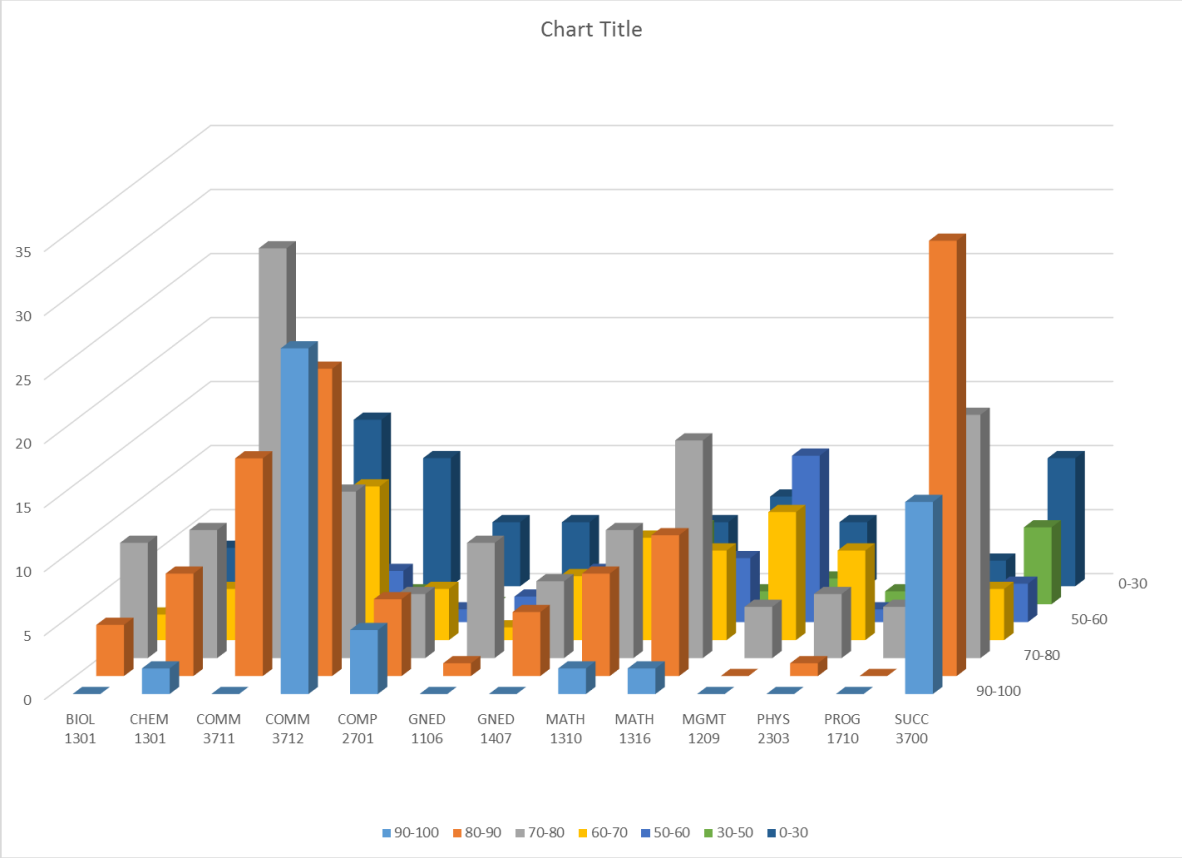


Figure 4: Distribution of grades in the GAS-S Program for the second cohort

Usually at UOIT when a student returns from probation or suspension, they are strongly advised to repeat courses for which they have a D (GPA 1.0) or F (GPA <1.0) on the transcript. The fastest way to get into clear standing is to eliminate such courses from the cumulative GPA calculation, as a repeated course with a better grade replaces the previous mark. Experience before GAS-S is that most students will not repeat earlier courses unless mandated to do so. Examining the grades before and after for those students that did persist to the winter term shows that approximately half of them retook courses that had a D and thus resulted in a significant improvement in their GPA. This showed an increased understanding of their actual situation in regards to academic standing.

Figure 5 shows the change in their annual GPA from before GAS-S to after GAS-S. In the Pre-GASS phase, all the annual GPAs were less than 2.0 with the majority being between 1 and 1.5. Students with extremely low GPAs (<0.5) were not encouraged to enter the GAS-S program in the second cohort. The GAS-S histogram for this cohort is peaked at the highest marks. This is not surprising as you needed to get marks in this range to return to the university and doing well in GAS-S is expected to result in stronger performance at the university. The annual GPA for the second cohort that completed the winter term is very encouraging. Only six students achieved a GPA less than 2.0 and all of those cases were very close to 2.0. The majority of the students obtained an average closer to 3.0 that puts them into the B- range with a significant percentage in the A range. The GAS-S program is clearly successful for those students that engaged in the program. Considering that some students elected to stay at the College as well, the program was also successful in helping students identify where they need to go.

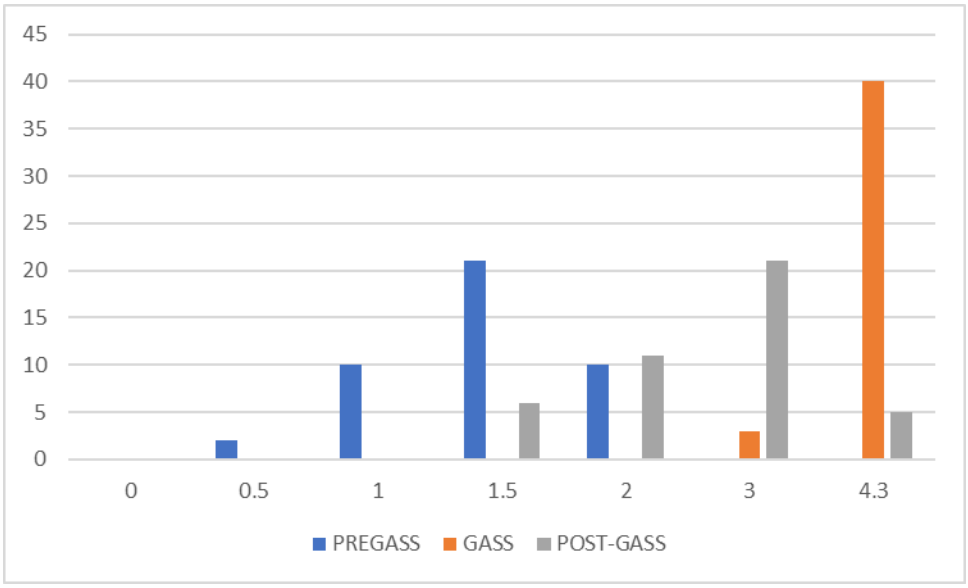


Figure 5: GPA distribution for University Successful students both before and after the GAS-S program

**Second cohort survey**

The survey was provided to those students in the second cohort while they were in class. While 134 students entered the GAS-S program in the second cohort, class attendance was closer to 65 students. A total of 44 students completed the survey suggesting that the survey results are indicative of those that attended class and engaged in class activities.

All of the students were domestic with a 60/40 male/female split. 75% of the students were of an age consistent with 1st year students and the remainder represented some of the higher year students that were allowed to take the program in the second delivery. The majority of the students lived in an owned home with their family and very few attended residence. The majority also were funding their studies with loans and reported feeling secure in their funding that money was not a concern.

With respect to self-perception, the students classified themselves as average or above average regardless of whether the issue was math, writing, computer skills, or physical ability. There was a significant percentage that identified as having high creativity, a strong emotional health, and to a lesser extent a strong drive and determination. Essentially, the group of students that answered the survey did not see any significant weaknesses in their academic ability or self-worth.

With respect to behaviours, the students only occasionally asked questions in class. They did however put effort into reviewing their own work, exploring their topics (library, internet), and sought feedback after class, and accept their mistakes as part of the learning process.

Regarding student-faculty or student-administration contact, the students contacted Professors once or twice a month, Teaching Assistants once a week, and Academic Advisors approximately twice a term. The students contacted close friends often but usually those friends were outside their program or not at this University. There was also daily contact with family and siblings for the majority of the students.

With respect to emotions, there was no clear trend for loneliness. There were no concerns regarding campus safety, or health worries. Job interference, was a concern to approximately half of the students. Family responsibilities are interfering with several of the students' academic work yet it was also evident that there was strong family support for their success. There was also strong support from the faculty and academic advisors at both institutions. As for extra-curricular activities, the survey shows that a few students did join student clubs but essentially there were limited extra-curricular activities on campus over the summer. Those that did join student clubs are clearly a minority. Regarding course observations, students rarely skipped class or fell asleep in class. Few received help though DC tutoring services and many studied with other GAS-S students. They did not witness academic dishonesty, and only a few played video games/social media during class.

Work activities were split, and 50% of the students did not work during the academic year. The remainder worked 11 to 30 hours per week. The majority commuted 4-20 hours per week. 55% spent less than 12 hours a week on homework. 50% spent less than 6 hours on housework per week and the remainder spent 6-18 hours on housework per week. These results suggest the group is usually active doing some activity such as jobs or housework, and that the homework time is reduced because of these activities.

When asked regarding the cause of their suspension, the majority of students responded that they were either not prepared for the material or that more study time was required than they expected it to be.

The majority of students found that understanding the professor's expectations were relatively easy but it was not as easy to develop effective study skills or adjust to the academic demands of the university. The majority also found it relatively easy to make friends which is a surprising result, since from other responses the students indicate that they did not utilize friends in their UOIT program for assistance. The majority of the students occasionally found the work boring. A high majority also felt overwhelmed and more than 50% felt occasionally depressed even though the majority also claimed that they were healthy and were getting adequate sleep. More than half support their family with money. With respect to UOIT services, essentially they were not used by the students. The sole exception was the UOIT Academic Advisors where 60% of the students reported using their service.

When asked regarding how to improve the UOIT first-year experience, there was a large variety of responses with no clear concentration. The responses ranged from 'do nothing, it's on the student', to help students understand the services better and make the courses easier to complete. When asked about their hopes for the GAS-S program, there were two typical responses. The first was to pass and return to the university for about 60% of the students. The remainder were mostly interested in improving their skill set.

**Focus Groups**

**Student Focus Group**. Although student participation in the survey was very good, student participation in the focus groups was extremely poor and the findings are not statistically significant. Despite choosing times optimal for them and offering free food of their choice, the

students demonstrated a lack of interest in participating beyond the actual classroom. Despite that, the feedback was uniform. The key challenge was time. Whether they lost time due to extensive commutes (up to 3 hours to get to school), or family commitments/expectations when they got home, or work commitments, the students agreed that there was no time to do anything outside the classroom. The commitment to these activities exceeded the expectations of the UOIT program of study for the time need to spend on homework. The transit issue was raised with the university and an independent study confirmed that the transit times for commuter students were significant, even for those nearby, due to lack of busses, etc.

The students also felt that the university environment was an isolated or individual environment while the college was more welcoming and personal, closer to their experience in high school. The main concern for GAS-S programming was around scheduling. The students would rather have a full day at the college and have days off during the summer rather than come here for one class on a given day. Similar comments have been made about the university schedules. The students also cautioned that their peers that did not attend the focus groups would likely say the opposite about the program and that there was a wide range of opinion on the usefulness of some of the courses, especially the electives.

**Academic Advisor Focus Group**. The following challenges were identified: time management, balance course work with external commitments, effort required now more than high school. The advisors spend a significant amount of time helping students adjust schedules that fit with their job requirements and help reduce the workload to something students can handle. The key challenge for the advisors is that there are few tools to work with to help students, such as: Insufficient summer courses to help a student catch up and encouraging a student to take lower course loads.

Recommending the GAS-S program to the students was split as to why they would. Some advisors recommended GAS-S because there was no alternative other than suspension. Some recommended the program as it was a useful carrot to help students advance, especially for those students that did not have extenuating circumstances for their lack of success. The advisors found that it was relatively easy to sell the program to the students, likely since there really was no alternative; the UOIT appeal process is not fast enough, nor a guarantee, and suspension for one year is the other option.

The advisors did like that there was now some option other than a full suspension. They also appreciated the option to transfer to the college. One of the key concerns was that the return to the university in the fall was not always helpful since the pre-requisites needed to start second year had not been completed and thus students were still delayed. While the intent of GAS-S was to return students back to first year, for some programs, this does not necessarily provide an advantage as the courses they need to take are in the following semester at UOIT.

With respect to university services, the advisors felt that modifications to the existing services were necessary. The modifications were not to content but in how to match the student with the appropriate support. The key was to ensure that the students followed up with the advisor regularly so that they could help identify the appropriate supports.

The main area for improvement to GAS-S was to improve the method for identifying students that need it. Diagnostics or interventions that can get the student into the advising office sooner to help guide them towards GAS-S and ensure that the program is the right choice for them. There was also some interest in improving the number of elective options for the GAS-S student to provide better success for them in the future.

**College Focus Group.** The college instructors felt that some of the students saw GAS-S as punishment and that it was difficult to get them to engage in the classroom, some did not have the fundamental skills expected from high school, and some did not understand the importance of study and soft skills. It took a significant amount of instructor feedback before the students realized they might not return to the university unless they engaged, then the students began to participate in the program. The focus group also advised that students had difficulty with the college culture and had a hard time getting the students out of the laptop mentality (university programs were laptop based). There was some engagement of students to attend support services but largely it was classroom participation only. Language and comprehension issues were common yet ESL support was hardly accessed. For some technical skills, such as Math, it was determined that the students did know sufficient math skill but that they did not take studying those skills seriously. Similar observations were made for the other technical skills. Testing would be useful to help identify those students that were truly lacking in the fundamental skill. The students also had no significant ability at note taking.

GAS-S was considered successful for those students that truly wanted to engage. Whether they have the fundamental skills or not was not so important. It was important that the student wanted to get more serious about their learning, and that they wanted to take ownership of their learning. GAS-S was also useful for those students who did not know what they truly wanted. Many discussions were held regarding which program they should be in when they return to the university. Some do select the college but the attraction of a university degree appeared to be a driver that the college faculty and staff observed.

The college staff and faculty liked that the program was a second chance and believe the true value of the program was engagement. Students in the program have rich stories to tell regarding their experience that do come out once they fully engage. The faculty did feel that integration, or at least discussion, of the GAS-S program amongst the different instructors would help produce a more cohesive program for the students. There was also an interest to strengthen the connections between the university advising groups and the college advising groups.

With respect to services, the academic support unit (SALS) in the college was useful to the students. Especially for those that intended to stay in the college as the support continued after the summer and the students were more engaged. For university supports, the instructors and advisors felt that more opportunities to collaborate with various university support services would help them encourage the students to use those supports.

**Second Academic Advising Focus Group**. The final focus group with the university advising team was held after the launch of the third cohort for the GAS-S program. The main reason for this was that the number of students interested in the GAS-S program declined from the previous years and we needed to determine why. Part of the decline appeared to be that some UOIT programs no longer supported GAS-S for their students. The numbers they had involved in GAS-S were small and they preferred suspensions. Another factor was a reduction in the effort to advertise and support the program, hence reduced awareness.

Several students informed the advisor that summer plans for work or travel were already in place and there was no interest in the summer program. Others received feedback from upper-year students that stated the program was not useful. This is somewhat ironic since

those students were successful through GAS-S and able to return to their original program because of this success. It is not clear why these students believed the program was not useful. Supposedly, the upper-year students claimed that time management and academic success were good but the rest of the courses were not helpful and that the loss of working for the summer did not justify the benefits they got from it. There was also a sense that not all students needed the entire program or it was not the right fit. While some obviously did, some only needed elements of the program or needed some other type of program.

Commonality across focus groups

Common amongst the focus groups was the idea that time is a critical factor. Regardless of cause, the students are not succeeding in university due to a lack of time and the same phenomena occurs during the summer GAS-S program limiting their ability to attend focus groups or support services. Another common factor is engagement. GAS-S works for those students that truly want to be in higher education. If they put the effort in, they get the right result. What is missing, is a diagnostic or method to assess that engagement and help the student understand why they are successful or not. Finally, GAS-S is not for everyone. It has resulted in remedial success for a significant number of students, but not all students benefited from this type of program.

## Conclusions

The literature supports that students who have greater involvement in on-campus and academic life will have a greater chance of success in higher education (Kuh et al 2005; Schroeder 2013; Tinto 2016). Involvement seemed to be a major factor in students who benefited from the GAS-S program. In both cohorts, only a third of students persisted in academic

progression after their course work, but those who did seemed to be the students who had higher participation levels in class, and who had reported higher feelings of self-efficacy.

In the GAS-S program, we observed challenges when there was a lack of engagement for many possible reasons. A significant number of students reported that they live at home with their family. They have family support but also family interference, including financial obligations. This group also has significant travel and housework issues affecting availability of time for study. A second group of students are likely commuters and have a job to help pay for their school since they do not live at home. They may not have family support or constraints but they do have a significant amount of time spent on day-to-day activities outside of class. In either case, it is possible that the amount of time spent on academic work is below the expectations of the program and that effective time management and study habits are an issue.

Another possible issue is that students were late to utilize university support services. It is clear from their attendance rates in orientation programming, and from the focus groups that the students are very aware the services exist. They do however, not fully understand the benefits and intricacies of the services. Unfortunately, the survey instrument does not identify why this is the case, and this may be an area for future research. However, we may infer from the focus group feedback that time is a major factor; there is some indication that there just is simply not enough time available to use these support services.

Some students will benefit from a college remedial program that contributes to academic success upon returning to university, however, in the case of GAS-S, this program helped a minority of students. Moreover, the students that benefited the most were those that had higher levels of engagement. Future program design may want to focus on engagement factors as well as academic remediation.

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