

Stakeholder Summary

Students Involved in On Campus Activities More Likely to Improve Key Skills

Students involved with on-campus activities like student government, residence associations and peer mentoring are more likely to improve several skills valued highly by the labour market and postsecondary education, according to a new study published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *The Peer Helper Program at the University of Guelph: Analysis of Skills Objectives* found that students involved in these activities scored significantly higher in core skills including mobilizing innovation and change, communication, personal time management, problem solving and analytical skills.

The study examined the benefits of being involved with peer academic support programs, like the University of Guelph's Peer Helper Program, and found that participants who volunteer to assist other students score even higher on mobilizing innovation and change than those involved in other campus activities.

Project Description

The study is based on students at the University of Guelph from 2009 to 2011 who were divided into three groups: Peer Helper participants, those involved in student government and other campus activities, and those not involved in any campus activities. Using an online survey, students were given a series of scenario-type questions connected to four "Bases of Competence": managing self, communicating, managing people and tasks and mobilizing innovation and change. Responses were evaluated by independent external raters. In total, 2470 students participated in the survey. The authors had originally hoped to follow students longitudinally over the course of three years of study; however this was not possible due to a low number of students completing the survey more than once.

Findings

Students who were involved in off-campus activities, such as part-time employment, did not see the same skill boost as those involved on campus. The authors argue this highlights the importance of activities offered by universities and colleges and suggests well-designed university in-school programs can reduce the apparent skills gap being seen by researchers and employers.

The study notes that skills related to mobilizing innovation and change had the lowest overall scores, and the success of the Peer Helper participants could be related to their training. However, the authors caution that as the program has minimum requirements for involvement, those accepted may already be exceptional students.

While the types of skills assessed are critical to the transition to the work world, the authors argue that more research is needed on the impact of in-school programs to improve transferable skills. Studies that

use independent assessment tools like the scenario questions in this survey were seen to be particularly valuable.

The Peer Helper Program at the University of Guelph: Analysis of Skills Objectives was prepared by Serge Desmarais, Frederick Evers, Olivia Hazelden, Laurie Schnarr and Brenda Whiteside from the University of Guelph.