

Stakeholder Summary

Additional course support at Queen's has mixed results in improving grades, engagement and retention

As class sizes grow and budgets are squeezed, instructors at Queen's University are finding new ways to improve learning. One approach, known as Supported Learning Groups, pairs upper year undergraduate students who have completed the course with students who are currently enrolled. But while these sessions are meant to increase student success, the results are mixed, at best.

Project Description

The report, *Student Services at Queen's University: An Evaluation of the Supported Learning Groups Pilot Program*, explored what factors influence students' likelihood of participating in SLG sessions, and whether participation impacts success, course material retention and engagement, and study skills.

The SLG program was piloted at Queen's University in Biology 102 and 103 during the 2008-09 academic year and in Psychology 100 in the 2009-10 academic year. Sessions were delivered in student residences.

The study included data from student surveys, student records, SLG attendance files and focus groups.

Findings

Students who were female, of full-time status, Canadian-born, and in their first year of study were the most frequent attendees of SLG sessions. These students believed that attending an SLG would help them improve their grades and understanding of the course content, or keep pace with the course material. However, those students who could most benefit from these sessions didn't participate very often, or at all.

In many cases, there was little evidence to suggest that SLG sessions improved students' grades as the difference between participants' and non-participants' final grades weren't statistically significant. Many students commented that the sessions didn't have the desired effects on their academic performance.

Still, the SLG sessions showed positive effects on student engagement. On average, SLG participants were more likely than non-participants to ask questions in class, include diverse perspectives in assignments and discussions, draw on a variety of concepts and ideas, and discuss course concepts outside of the classroom.

The authors suggest that SLGs play an important supplementary role to traditional lectures, labs and seminars yet they cannot act as stand-alone approaches to instruction.

Further Research

Why aren't the students who need the help the most, participating in these sessions? More research is needed to explore strategies to increase participation among students with low engagement and among students most at risk of not completing the course or failing to progress into upper year courses.

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