

# Evaluating Community Based Learning Programs for Transferable Skills: The Social Innovation Projects (SIP) Program

## Introduction

Ontario's labour market, and student pathways into it, are unpredictable. Many graduates find work in careers or sectors different from what they planned during their studies (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2015), making *transferable* skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, essential for graduates to obtain meaningful employment (Business Council of Canada, 2018). Both in-classroom and co-curricular experiences (in sports, school and community activities) have been found to help students develop transferable skills (Fakhretdinova et al., 2021; Hancock et al., 2012; Rubin et al., 2002). Work-integrated learning experiences similarly contribute to student skill development (Ismail, 2018; Losekoot et al., 2018; Maelah et al., 2012). While not all co-curricular and work experiences result in skill development or practice, employers and recruiters often use these activities as a proxy for graduate skill development (McKean, 2018).

The Social Innovation Projects program (SIP) at University of Toronto Mississauga's Centre for Student Engagement was a co-curricular program created to provide students opportunities to work and learn alongside their communities (Tamarack Institute, n.d.). The SIP program was geared towards students who wanted to develop transferable and employment-relevant transferable skills outside of the classroom. Over the 16-week period of this project, seven teams of student volunteers were paired with a variety of community organizations and a faculty advisor to solve a real-world challenge within an organization. Each group developed a project plan, budget, deliverables and a communications strategy to meet the needs of their partner organization's challenge.

Understanding exactly how co-curricular activities such as the SIP program can help students develop transferable skills is valuable to employers, institutions and students. To that end, researchers focused on undergraduate students' acquisition of competencies across four transferable skills during the SIP program: teamwork,<sup>1</sup> problem solving,<sup>2</sup> oral

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<sup>1</sup> Teamwork is behaviour under the control of individual team members (effort they put into team tasks, their manner of interacting with others on the team, and the quantity and quality of contributions they make to team discussions.)

<sup>2</sup> Problem solving is the process of designing, evaluating and implementing a strategy to answer an open-ended question or achieve a desired goal.

communication<sup>3</sup> and civic engagement.<sup>4</sup> The assessment sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent did participating in the SIP program affect student skill acquisition?
2. How did student self-assessments of skills align or compare to ratings provided by peers and an external evaluator?

## Methodology

Researchers used the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U's) Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Rubrics to explore if participation in SIP's co-curricular civic engagement programming increased students' teamwork, problem solving, oral communication and civic engagement skills. The rubrics were used to assign ratings on a 5-point scale. Higher ratings indicated higher competency.

- Thirty-seven undergraduate students in the 2021 SIP program used four VALUE rubrics to assess their own and their peers' skill competencies at the beginning and end of their 16-week program.
- A research assistant assessed each students' skills by reviewing videotapes of the first and final group meetings using the four VALUE rubrics.

## Findings

Figure 1 presents students' average self-evaluated scores on transferable skills before and after the program. Students' self-evaluated teamwork, problem solving, oral communication and civic engagement skills improved significantly after participating in the SIP program. Teamwork and problem-solving skills showed the largest gains.

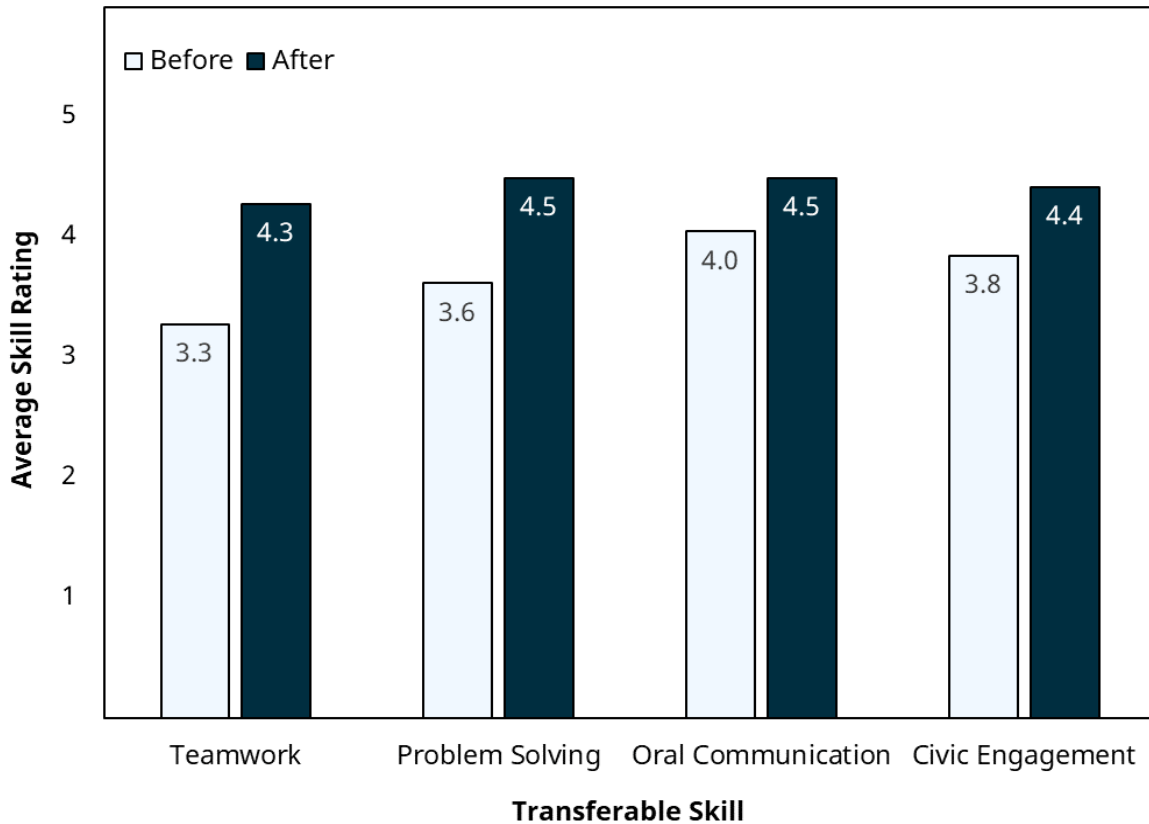
Figure 1

*Average Student Self-Evaluation Scores on Transferable Skills Before and After the SIP Program*

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<sup>3</sup> Oral communication is a prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs or behaviours.

<sup>4</sup> Civic engagement is working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.



*Note.* Figure 1 presents the students' average self-evaluation scores on their teamwork, problem solving, oral communication and civic engagement skills before and after the SIP program.

Self- and peer-assessment yielded similar average skill competency scores at the beginning of the SIP program. These scores were higher than the external evaluator's ratings. Differences across student, peer and external ratings may reflect the raters' perspectives, expertise and opportunities to observe students' skill development. Even though self- and peer-assessments were more consistent than the external evaluator's assessments, all three assessment methods were highly reliable, indicating that the VALUE rubric is a reliable tool to use when different raters evaluate student skills.

## Discussion and Conclusion

While the importance of transferable skills such as teamwork, problem solving and oral communication for graduates' success in the labour market is not in question (De Prada et al., 2022; Lenarcic Biss & Pichette, 2018; Weingarten & Hicks, 2018), low student and graduate skill levels raise concerns about the skills gap and, more broadly, the university's ability to prepare job-ready graduates (Elias, 2014). The SIP program curriculum successfully supported participating students' teamwork, problem solving, civic engagement and oral communication skill development. It highlighted the importance of co-curricular education and programming as a complement to academic study, offering

experiential, authentic and future-oriented opportunities for students to develop transferable skills (Collins-Nelsen et al., 2022; Dean, 2015; Elias, 2014; Mintz & Rutter, 2016; Sterling & Kerr, 2015). Group-based civic engagement programs like the SIP are among a range of co-curricular program types that can be effective for skill development, particularly in the areas of teamwork and problem solving. The SIP also includes a service learning element, which requires collaboration with community partners to identify and solve a local problem. Community and civic engagement opportunities enable graduates to collaborate across diverse communities to address global challenges (Jacoby, 2009). These opportunities are increasingly important as the workforce continues to diversify.

Co-curricular assessment in Ontario relies heavily on short surveys and Likert-style questions; rubric-style program assessment tools offer an additional means to assess student learning outcomes. Student affairs practitioners can use rubric-based assessments to understand student experiences and enhance co-curricular program design and development.

The differences between student, peer and evaluators' scores in this study require further exploration. Students' self-evaluations are influenced by the fact that they care about how well they do; they are motivated to provide higher scores compared to instructor evaluations (Valenzuela, 2020). Future studies should use the VALUE rubrics to explore how and when self, peer and external ratings converge.

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