

# 2008/09

## Supported Learning Groups – First Year Report



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supported Learning Groups (SLG) pilot project, underway since September 2008, is administered by four volunteer coordinators: Wendy Watson, Director of Assessment Services; Kim Isaac, University Librarian; Donna Alary, Director of Enrolment Management; and Najmi Alibhai, UFV Counselor.

Supported Learning Groups, also known as supplemental instruction (SI), are student-led study skills and learning strategy sessions designed to increase student success in historically-difficult courses.

During the pilot year, SLGs were offered for students in 7 courses (17 sections) in the Faculties of Arts and Science: Computer Information Systems 192; Computing Science 150; Geography 101 and 130; Mathematics 104 and 105; and Psychology 101. The total final graded enrolment for these courses was 518 with 191 students participating in SLG (37%). The total number of session hours offered was 295. The student contact hours totaled 1203.

The combined mean course grade for the SLG participants was 2.54 as compared to 2.20 for the non-participants. The rate of P, NC, and W's in the SLG participant group (10%) was lower than for the non-participant group (21%).

Due to the small sample size, data must be interpreted with caution. However, these results are encouraging as those who attended SLGs received higher course grades than those who did not. For the individual courses, the data analyzed by clustered attendance (0, 1-3, 4 or more hours) suggest that students who regularly attend SLGs receive higher grades than those who attend only one session.

These data suggest that the SLG supported learning model makes a difference in students' learning. When students learn and achieve higher course grades for their learning, particularly in first year courses, we know that they tend to stay in higher education at a higher rate, thus affecting retention on campus.

The student leaders in year one also indicate that this experience was valuable to their own learning and development; several of the leaders have returned to serve in the SLG program for a second year.

Administering the SLG program is time- and labour- intensive; it cannot be sustained with the current structure of volunteer coordinators running the SLG program in addition to their regular responsibilities. As we move into the second and last year of the pilot project, UFV will need to make a decision about committing to SLG as an ongoing program for September 2010, as part of the budget development process for 2010/11. In addition to budget, the SLG program will require a modest allocation of dedicated space.

## BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The Supported Learning Groups (SLG) pilot project, underway since September 2008, is administered by four volunteer coordinators: Wendy Watson, Director of Assessment Services; Kim Isaac, Director of Library Services; Donna Alary, Director of Enrollment Management; and Najmi Alibhai, UFV Counselor.

Supported Learning Groups (SLGs), also known as supplemental instruction (SI), are student-led study skills and learning strategy sessions designed to increase student success in historically-difficult courses. Developed at the University of Kansas City (UMKC) in 1973, the SLG program is now widely utilized in over 1800 post secondary institutions in 30 different countries.

When Wendy Watson and Kim Isaac attended the first annual Canadian Learning Commons conference at the University of Guelph in June 2006, they were introduced to Guelph's very dynamic and successful SLG program. Given UFV's current focus on student retention measures, the time seemed right to introduce supported learning locally. In January of 2008 the Learning Commons Group agreed to support the development of a proposal for an SLG pilot project.

In the summer of 2008, approval was given by the Vice President, Academic and the Associate Vice President, Teaching and Development, to proceed with a proposed pilot Supported Learning Groups (SLG) project. A modest budget request to support the project was approved as well.

Throughout the summer of 2008, the four coordinators identified academic departmental partners for the project, and recruited and trained student leaders for the program. In September, the Supported Learning Groups program was launched.

## SUPPORTED LEARNING: HOW IT WORKS

*The power of the SLG program is its focus on at-risk courses as opposed to at-risk students.* The student leaders are people who have already successfully completed the course and completed a leader training program. The SLG leader attends classes along with the other students, and then once or twice a week facilitates a study session for any student who wishes to attend. The SLG leader focuses on helping students develop transferable learning skills and strategies, and applies these to the content of the course.

The theoretical framework for supported learning groups is based on a social knowledge construction approach to learning which incorporates Lev Vygotsky's notion of the "zone of proximal development": that is, "What learners do in collaboration today, they will be able to do independently tomorrow" (Supplemental Instruction Supervisor Manual. Kansas City: UMKC, c.2006. P. 12.)

This social knowledge construction aspect of the SLG program distinguishes it from more traditional approaches to supplemental instruction, such as tutoring programs. Students learn to learn in a collaborative, structured, social environment where proven learning strategies are applied to course content. SLG leaders facilitate learning by teaching students to recognize and implement learning strategies appropriate for difficult course concepts. Students participate in small group exercises that promote social interaction and collaborative learning. In these small group settings, students assist each other as they develop their own learning strategies. In some cases, students who have been helped by SLG go on to help others by becoming SLG leaders themselves.

## OBJECTIVES AND GOALS FOR THE SLG PILOT PROJECT

A number of goals were established for the pilot project, falling under two main objectives: student success and retention, and student leadership development.

<p><b>Objective #1: Improve Student Success and Retention</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Improve course completion rates in targeted courses</li> <li>❖ Improve student performance in targeted courses</li> <li>❖ Improve student performance in other, non SLG courses</li> <li>❖ Improve the rate of students returning for subsequent semesters</li> <li>❖ Improve the number of students graduating with their chosen credential</li> <li>❖ Increase the number of student leader work study positions and the number of courses being supported by SLG</li> <li>❖ Increase the level of student engagement of those who participate in the SLG program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Objective #2: Expand Opportunities for Student Leadership Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Provide SLG leaders with training opportunities for leadership development</li> <li>❖ Provide an outstanding experiential learning/service learning opportunity</li> <li>❖ Increase leadership and learning experience by articulating learning outcomes of for SLG pre-service and in-service training and for the mentorship role of the SLG leader's work study contract.</li> <li>❖ Demonstrate how theory informs practice and practice informs understanding of theory in student leader training and practice</li> <li>❖ Provide structured opportunities and heuristics to increase reflection on practice and critical thinking</li> <li>❖ Create a credit course opportunity based on articulated learning outcomes for the SLG training and mentorship experience. This course will be developed in concert with Portfolio Learning and other credit leadership courses currently in development. (E.g. Portfolio Learning Introduction: Communications department.)</li> </ul>

<b>Courses and Sections Supported in SLG Pilot Year One</b>	
<b>Fall 2008</b>	<b>Winter 2009</b>
Comp 150: Intro to Programming (2 sections) Geog 101: Weather & Climate (double section) Geog 130: Geography of Canada Math 104: Introductory Statistics (3 sections) Math 105: Math for Elementary Teachers (2 sections)	CIS 192: Intro to Networking Comp 150: Intro to Programming (2 sections) Math 105: Math for Elementary Teachers Math 106: Statistics I Psyc 101: Intro to Psychology I (2 sections)
Total = 10 sections	Total = 7 sections

In selecting courses to support, we have deliberately chosen to apply the supported learning model to a wide variety of programs and disciplines, focusing on historically difficult courses within each of these discipline areas.

There are many different learning strategies that SLG leaders learn about and use to help students master course material and develop their own learning skills. We have found that while some of the learning strategies are better suited to certain disciplines, learning in *all* disciplines can be improved through supported learning.

### **Student Leaders in SLG Pilot Year One**

Before we began the pilot, we were advised by SLG coordinators from other institutions that the success of the program would depend on the students selected to be supported learning group leaders. In recruiting leaders, we asked faculty from the courses that would be supported to suggest former students who had done well in the course, and who they felt would make good SLG leaders. These students constituted our shortlist of potential leaders. We then went through a selection process with these students to come up with the list of those we felt would make good leaders, according to criteria developed at other universities.

In early September 2008, nine student leaders attended three days of pre-service training organized and delivered by Najmi Alibhai and Wendy Watson. During the fall and winter terms, in-service training sessions were held on a bi-weekly basis, to provide ongoing learning opportunities and support for the student leaders. Each student leader was assigned to a coordinator, who served as a mentor and supervisor.

Student leaders were paid from UFV's work study program. In addition to these positions, we were able to hire a half-time co-op student from September to April. This co-op student, CIS major Chris Brown, provided invaluable support in many ways, including logistical support for student leaders and the program, and the development of an SLG web site: [www.ufv.ca/slg](http://www.ufv.ca/slg).

### **EVALUATION PROCESS AND RESULTS FOR SLG PILOT YEAR ONE**

As noted earlier, supported learning is a well-established program that has been in existence for over 35 years in North American universities. The University of Missouri, Kansas City, has developed a methodology for evaluating the results of SLG that includes multiple forms of evaluation. UMKC collects data from universities employing the program.

Before the start of the UFV pilot, Donna Alary reviewed the methodology from UMKC and established how the UFV pilot would be evaluated. Over the course of the term, three short surveys were administered to the students registered in the SLG-supported courses. The results provided feedback to the SLG leaders about

why students may or may not have attended the SLG sessions and what grade they expected versus what grade they would like to receive. At the end of term, the leaders also provided feedback on their experiences by responding to a survey. After the semester was over, a quantitative evaluation of the course grades was completed.

### **Evaluation Results for Pilot Objective #1: Improve Student Success and Retention**

The following provides a brief overview of the results gathered from the students who participated in the evaluation of the SLG program. We are not including the specific results of evaluations done for each course in this document, but we have shared these results with course instructors and administrators in each academic area.

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These data suggest that the SLG model makes a significant difference in the students' learning. When students learn and achieve higher course grades for their learning, particularly in first year courses, we know that they tend to stay in higher education at a higher rate, thus affecting retention on campus.

We also gathered feedback at the end of each term from students who attended the SLG sessions. Selected comments from these data include:

*"I've never done so well in math. Without SLG I'm certain I would have failed or just scrimped by. Now I'm getting my first A in math- in my whole life."*

- Mathematics 105 student

*"It would be nice to have the time longer. Yet I know time is always limited. I found the time that I did have very helpful. Thank you!"*

- Geography 101 student

*"SLG really helped me to solidify my understanding about the concepts and theories of this course. Without SLG, I don't believe I would pass this course."*

- Mathematics 104 (Stats) student

*"They are a great way to study for exams, review info, ask and clarify questions, and bounce ideas off of your peers. I think it's a great study tool, wish more classes offered them!"*

- Psychology 101 student

*"This particular course curriculum required constant practice. The material often required instruction outside of class time. SLG made this more available. ☺"*

- Computer Information Systems 192 student

*"I think this program is very helpful. I am grateful that it exists! Love it! Thank you! It has made me love math again!"*

- Mathematics 105 student

Data will continue to be collected on SLG participants to determine long term impacts on retention and graduation rates.

### **Evaluation Results for Objective #2: Expand Opportunities for Student Leadership Development**

Student leaders participated in end-of-term qualitative surveys in December 2008 and April 2009. The feedback they provided was invaluable, providing the coordinators a sense of what worked and what needed to be improved in the program. The leaders' reflective, thoughtful comments indicated that for most, the experience was valuable to their own learning and development.

Five of the nine leaders trained for the 08/09 academic year, are rejoining the SLG program in 09/10. Of the other four not returning, two graduated from UFV and are no longer eligible for the program. Exit interviews conducted with the other two leaders who did not return indicate that a variety of factors influenced their decisions, including time and finance issues.

Note: A great deal of work remains to be done to develop articulated learning outcomes for the student leader experience, and to develop a credit course that is tied to this experiential learning opportunity. This task is part of our ongoing goals in 09-10.

### **LESSONS LEARNED AND ACTIONS FOR 2009/2010**

We are pleased and relieved that year one of this pilot went remarkably smoothly with no major problems. However, through our own observations and through the feedback of student leaders, student participants, instructors and department chairs, we have identified areas which can be improved. Below are some of the lessons that we learned, and actions we are taking to address them.

Lessons Learned	Actions for 2009/2010
<p><b><u>Lesson #1:</u></b> Student attendance for SLG sessions needs to be improved in particular courses. Note: participation rates ranged from 65% in MATH 104 to 10% in GEOG 101.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ More training time will be spend with SLG leaders to help them develop effective recruitment strategies in the classroom</li> <li>❖ Wherever possible, one SLG leader will support two sections of the same course, to increase the number of potential participants</li> <li>❖ Coordinators will work more closely with course instructors to encourage them to promote SLG</li> <li>❖ Coordinators will work with departments and UFV International to find ways of encouraging the participation of international students</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Lesson #2:</u></b> SLG leaders want their pre-service and in-service training sessions to be practical, useful, and time well spent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Pre-service leader training for year 2 will provide more effective group facilitation skills to nurture deeper comprehension and critical thinking skills in UFV students.</li> <li>❖ Pre-service training will provide SLG leaders greater session planning flexibility, capacity to assess real student needs, and skills to facilitate large as well as small numbers of students and unprepared students in their sessions.</li> </ul>

Lessons Learned	Actions for 2009/2010
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ In-service training will provide feedback to leaders on their session facilitation; in addition, the sessions will provide concrete skills training such as time management, knowing their own and others' diverse learning styles, and developing their own and others' critical thinking skills.</li> <li>❖ Training will directly address personal and leadership development competencies.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Lesson #3:</u></b> The support of the department chair, while necessary, is not sufficient in establishing a successful SLG for a course. There must be the understanding, agreement and support of the course instructor.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SLG coordinators will be assigned to work individually with the faculty members teaching SLG-supported courses, both before and during the semester.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Lesson #4:</u></b> SLG student leaders must have excellent interpersonal skills in addition to being academically strong.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ All potential SLG leaders will go through a careful screening process that includes an interview with SLG program coordinators, and a check of references.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Lesson #5</u></b> Running the SLG program is time- and labour- intensive, and cannot be sustained with the current structure of coordinators running the SLG program in addition to their regular responsibilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ During 2009/10, coordinators will track time spent on SLG tasks</li> <li>❖ Coordinators will make staffing recommendations for making SLG sustainable, and cost out those recommendations for submission to the budget process for 10/11.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Lesson #6</u></b> The SLG program requires space: a small amount of dedicated space for the use of staff and student leaders, and access to classroom space for the SLG sessions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Coordinators recommend dedicated space for staff and student leaders be allocated to SLG once the pilot phase is completed.</li> </ul>

## FALL 2009 UPDATE

In the Fall of 2009, the SLG project was awarded the UFV Outstanding Initiative Award. (Link to news release: <http://www.ufv.ca/MarCom/newsroom/Outstanding09.htm> )

This fall, the program will expand from 8 SLG leaders to 12 (includes 2 student mentors returning from last year) and will increase to support 20 sections (up 10 from last fall). Over 700 registrations will have the opportunity to attend an SLG session this term.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have benefited tremendously by the generosity of colleagues who have gone before us in developing and running supported learning programs at their own institutions. We would like to acknowledge the following people, who gave their time and shared their experiences:

**Nancy Schmidt**, former Co-Director, Learning Commons, University of Guelph

**Mary Wilson**, Educational Development Associate and Canadian National  
Supplemental Instruction Representative, University of Guelph

**Krista Bianco**, Manager, Supported Learning Groups, University of Guelph

**Clarke Mathany**, SLG Supervisor, University of Guelph

**Elizabeth Templeman**, Coordinator of Supplemental Learning, Thompson Rivers University

We are especially grateful to a number of UFV individuals whose real and moral support made all the difference in this first year:

**Karen Evans**, Associate Vice President, Teaching & Development

**Dianne Common**, Vice President, Academic and Provost

**Deborah Bartlette**, Director, Career Centre

**Vi Chappell**, Director, Student Services

**Chris Brown**, CIS and SLG Co-op Student 2008-09

We would also like to acknowledge UFV departments that contributed to the success of the first year of this project:

Assessment Services

Career Centre

Enrolment Management

Learning Commons Group

Library

Student Services

Computer Information Systems

Geography

Mathematics & Statistics

Psychology

Finally, a special thanks to our charter group of SLG student leaders and faculty members:

SLG Leader	Faculty	Course
Annette de Vries	Steven Marsh	GEOG 101
Ben Dippenaar	Stephan Bohm	COMP 150
John Fronck	Camilo Martinez	MATH 104
Lance Hathaway	Edward Lo	CIS 192
Taryn Lawrence	Garry Fehr	GEOG 130
Britt Postnikoff	David Chu	MATH 104
Nicole Willisroft	Jane Cannon	MATH 105
Anjuli Zukowski	Andrea Hughes	PSYC 101