

## Creating a Week's Space across the Curriculum for Engagement

### Overview

#### *Coordinators:*

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#### *Collaborators:*

Sara O'Sullivan, Dean of Social Science, College of Social Sciences and Law  
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*Contributors:* Marta Bustillo: College Liaison Librarian

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#### *Programme Title:*

Social Sciences undergraduate programmes; BSc Social Sciences (DN700), BSocSc Social Policy & Sociology (DN750), BSc Psychology (DN720), BSc Economics (DN710)

#### *Student Cohort:*

Undergraduate, Full-time, 750 students approx.



### The Background

During the planning stages of the new BSc Social Sciences, and following a recommendation by a College-based *Students as Partners Working Group*, Week 8 of the first semester was ring-fenced as an opportunity for first year students to step back, reflect on, and ensure they were on target with all of their learning activities following their first few weeks in University. Forming part of an extended orientation, which is widely considered more effective than a single-block of information delivery prior to semester starting, space was created in the curriculum to enable students:

- to catch up on readings,
- get ahead on assignments,
- assess how the first half of the semester had gone,
- make the most of the academic and non-academic supports that are available on campus, and
- to have a breather on their journey at UCD.

The idea was to create space for them to take advantage of a less hectic schedule and to reconnect with academic and social supports so that their experience as an undergraduate student in Social Sciences is a very positive one holistically. Astin suggests a highly involved student who is involved in extra-curricular activities tend to have a better student experience (Astin, 1984). While Lowe and Shaw suggest that student participations, engagements, opportunities and extra-curricular activities all impact on the student experience in varied ways (Lowe and Shaw, 2015).

This approach also aligns with the new UCD programme assessment and feedback principle that *'consideration is given to the time and space for assessment and feedback approaches, including (reducing) staff and student assessment load...space for more complex learning'* (UCD T&L, 2018a; 2018b).

## What we aimed to do

The objectives of the mid-semester fieldwork/study week were to:

- provide non-classroom based learning experiences to engage and support student interests;
- engage or reconnect with academic supports introduced to them prior to the start of semester;
- engage with peer supports including their societies;
- support students in self-monitoring their progress, getting assignment plans in place and ensuring they were prepared to successfully achieve towards the end of semester.
- relay messages of reassurance that it is not too late to engage with their studies, how to maximise their potential, and do well in Semester 1.

The academic supports identified were: assignment planner, the library, maths support centre, and writing centre, academic mentor.

Non-academic supports were identified as: student adviser, clubs and societies, and peer mentor and mentee group.

## How we did it

During the planning stages of the BSc Social Sciences programme, it was agreed that week 8 would be an opportunity to create space in the curriculum for students to take stock and catch up, during the long first semester. This was seen as critical to enhancing student engagement, providing time to engage with the diversity of supports on offer and enabling students to engage in non-classroom based learning activities during their first semester at UCD. None of the social sciences subjects timetabled classes for week 8 and a co-curricular award was advertised to support schools to develop activities that would run that week.

A number of week 8 initiatives, supplementing supports provided during week 0 and week 1, included:

- the College Liaison Librarian set up week 8 'Introduction to the Library' and 'Finding Information'

- Sessions for first years and the College Educational Technologist scheduled Blackboard and Brightspace Clinics for any first years experiencing difficulties.

Finally the College Office liaised with the maths support centre, writing centre and clubs and societies to confirm their hours for week 8 and/or if they were running activities.

In weeks 6 and 7, a communications plan was put in place through the College Office to inform students about the opportunities provided by week 8 and to ensure that they were prepared to use the time wisely rather than seeing it as a mid-term break. Communications with students was multi-modal: 1) via a hardcopy A5 postcard distributed at core lectures in week 7, 2) poster displays around the Newman Building, 3) via email 4) a webpage on the College website and 5) on the TV screen in the Social Sciences Programme Office.

The screen shot of the post card (below) gives an overview of the information students received and all Week 8 information and this was made available at the time on the UCD Social Sciences website (UCD Social Science, 2019)



## How it went

None of the Social Sciences subjects timetabled classes for week 8, although students taking minors or Mathematics/ Statistics had classes. There was lots of positive feedback from School staff and peer mentors about the benefits of not scheduling lectures in week 8 and how it provided an opportunity for students to take stock and catch up.

The Schools of Archaeology, Geography and Law used the space during Week 8 for fieldtrips and study skills sessions (See *Photograph of Geography Fieldtrip to Trim*)



Overall the introduction of the week across the subjects was successful, and further data is being gathered on its impact. The next step is the introduction of more subject based activities for the week.

We are also looking at making a series of vignettes for YouTube to highlight and direct students virtually and remotely to all their academic supports. We feel that those students who want to engage, but for

varying reasons do not remain on campus during Week 8, can do so from whatever location they may be in.

Some tips for a Programme team considering this approach:

- Timing of execution is important
- The specific date and time of the day that students receive information is important, so it is wise to think about timelines carefully
- Ensure to liaise closely with all providers of support so that all information regarding opening hours, contact hours or any specifics are up-to-date and clear for students
- For the promotional materials, a reliable and professional graphic designer who understands the ethos and student group is helpful
- Communication of the purpose of the week to student and staff stakeholders is key to its success.

## Resources

Astin, A. W. (1984) Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education, *Journal of College Student Development*. 5, 518-29.

Lowe, T., Shaw, C. (2015) *Students engaging with 'Student Engagement'*. GuildHE, London.

UCD Social Sciences Website (2019) [Mid-Semester Check-In](#) Retrieved 18<sup>th</sup> January 2019

UCD T&L (2018a) [UCD Programme Assessment and Feedback Principles](#), UCD T&L: Dublin

UCD T&L (2018b) [Some Initial Ideas for Programme Assessment & Feedback Enhancement](#), UCD T&L: Dublin