

CoESP Student Blog 2016-2017 Report

Purpose of the CoESP Student Blog

As described by one student, the purpose of the CoESP student blog is to develop a network “where undergrads can talk constructively about their education and be heard” (student blogger, Sept. 23rd, 2016). Generally, the undergraduate CBS students who authored the blog used the platform to share their own lived experiences and to relate to the experiences of their peers. As the blog evolved between September 2016 and March 2017, it seemed to develop as a peer support tool, though whether it was used this way in undetermined.

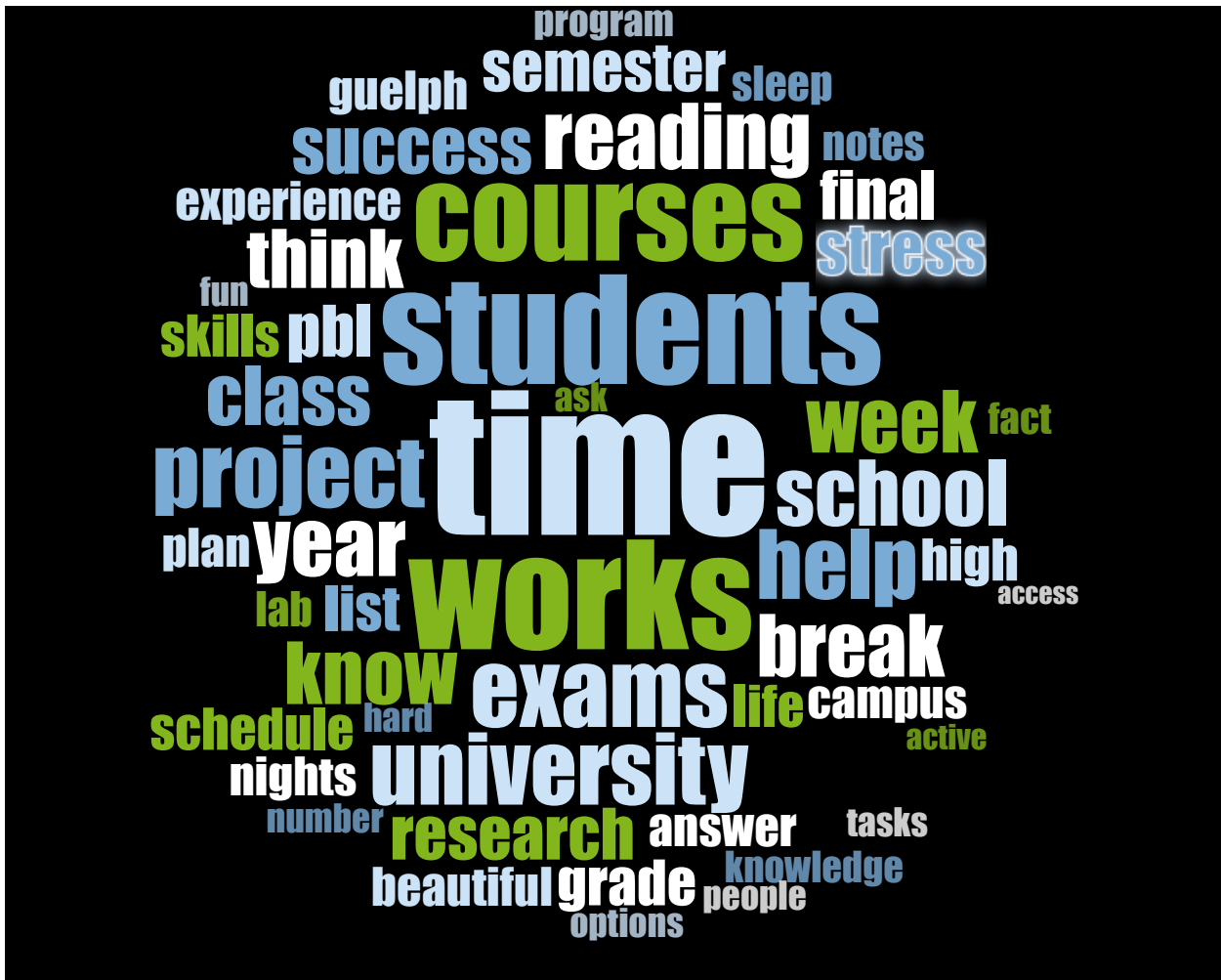
Word Frequency Table (top 50 words)

This table was created using the NVivo software. The blog posts, in their entirety, were analyzed for the most frequently used words. Commonly used words, especially those with little meaning, including articles, prepositions, verbs and adverbs, were then eliminated from the count. Similar, or stemmed (e.g. working), words were grouped and included in the count. The top 50 most frequently used words are presented in the following table. The word frequency search was also used to create the word cloud below.

Word	Count	Similar Words
time	39	time, times
students	29	student, students, students'
works	29	work, worked, working, works
courses	24	course, courses
exams	19	exam, exams
university	18	university
project	18	project, projects
help	17	help, helped, helpful, helps
reading	16	read, reading, readings
school	16	school
year	16	year, years
week	15	week, weekly, weeks
break	15	break, breaks
know	15	know, knowing, knows
class	14	class, classes
think	14	think, thinking
success	13	success, successful
research	12	research, researcher, researchers
pbl	12	pbl

stress	12	stress, stressed, stressful, stressing
final	11	final, finally, finals
semester	11	semester, semesters
list	10	list, lists
grade	10	grade, grades, grading
life	9	life
skills	9	skills
high	9	high, highly
schedule	9	schedule, scheduled, schedules
answer	8	answer
beautiful	8	beautiful
campus	8	campus
experience	8	experience, experiences, experiments
<u>guelph</u>	8	<u>guelph</u>
nights	8	night, nights
plan	8	plan, planned, planning
lab	7	lab, labs

notes	7	notes
sleep	7	sleep, sleeping
fact	6	fact, facts
knowledge	6	knowledge
program	6	program, programs
ask	5	ask, asking
fun	5	fun
hard	5	hard
number	5	number
options	5	options
people	5	people
tasks	5	tasks
active	4	active, actively
access	3	access



Individual Blog Topics

The following table provides the titles and themes of each blog post.

Date	Title	Themes
March 27 th , 2017	Assignments and Exams: The Bread and Butter of University	- tips for success - teamwork as a strategy
Feb. 28 th , 2017	We were on a Break!	- reading week task list - importance of breaks
Feb. 13 th , 2017	The Best Study Breaks on Campus	- resources on campus - what to do on a study break
Feb. 6 th , 2017	School can be hard, don't make it harder!	- positive thinking - acknowledge your hard work
Jan. 31 st , 2017	Best the New Years blues	- mental health/ seasonal blues - getting outside
Jan. 24 th , 2017	Tips for Success	- staying on track
Dec. 2 nd , 2016	When you get hit with the pre-exam sickness	- common experience of getting sick and study schedule falls apart
Nov. 30 th , 2016	Online courses vs. in-class	- distance education is good - independent learning
Nov. 28 th , 2016	Do we need final exams?	- exams = rote memorization - prefer application in take home exams or group projects
Nov. 21 st , 2016	Break a leg... but not actually	- strategies for prepping a presentation
Nov. 17 th , 2016	Beat the crunch	- study strategies for final exams in first year
Nov. 15 th , 2016	University Teaching Strategies	- learner participation as motivating - story telling supports knowledge acquisition - questioning in class - learning outcome repetition is good
Nov. 10 th , 2016	University...and then what?	- grad school vs. employment - resources
Nov. 9 th , 2016	Gimme a break, Biology!	- mental health - study breaks - finding ways to stay positive
Oct. 31 st , 2016	The optimal stress – Are you there?	- balance between too much and too little stress - effects of stress - what does optimal stress feel like
Oct. 28 th , 2016	A degree isn't the only thing you leave university with!	- skills for life and school - skills to develop throughout university (soft skills/ affective)
Oct. 24 th , 2016	Middle of the middle, or the beginning of the end?	- midterm stress - positive tone
Oct. 24 th , 2016	Mid-Midterm Meltdown	- midterm stress - negative tone
Oct. 19 th , 2016	Awesome academic resources and where to find them!	- Library resources
Oct. 13 th , 2016	Student vs Pantry	- feeding yourself as a student

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - recipes - midterm meals
Oct. 12 th , 2016	A glimpse into a first year B.Sc. student's learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning experience and transitioning in 1st year - affective skill development and time management over course content
Oct. 6 th , 2016	Course selection already?!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - planning for your future
Oct. 3 rd , 2016	Rookie days – My first month at Guelph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - transition into university - independence, weighting of assignments, supportive UoG network
Sept. 29 th , 2016	Classes with a gazillion assignments – a closer look at PBL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - effectiveness of PBL as teaching strategy - advantages of PBL and student-centred learning
Sept. 27 th , 2016	My unorthodox 4 th year project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4th year research project - transferrable skill development - challenging - self-directed learning benefits
Sept. 23 rd , 2016	How I ended up writing this blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SoTL - purpose to develop a network “where undergrads can talk constructively about their education and be heard”

Major Themes

The purpose of the CoESP student blog, to develop a peer support network, is illustrated through three major themes that emerged throughout the 26 blog posts.

1. Strategies for success

In the majority of blog posts, students included strategies for success for their peers. These strategies ranged from tips and tricks to more meaningful and insightful strategies for managing academic life. Some recommendations were carefully researched and others were personal or anecdotal success strategies.

The most prominent and repeated strategy was time management, which was referenced in relation to studying for and taking exams, course work, avoiding procrastination, finding time for fun, planning writing and group work assignments, prioritization of tasks, using a calendar, dealing with illness, taking online courses, what to do in lectures, preparing for presentations, etc. As noted in the Word Frequency Table, ‘time’ was the most used word throughout the blog.

Other common topics that students provided strategies for included how to work in a team, exam-taking, work-life balance, and what to do on a study break. Frequently cited strategies included “edit your work,” “reduce distractions,” “sleep,” and “review your notes.” Several students dedicated posts to the importance of fitness and nutrition, and recommendations varied from quick and easy meal recipes to campus activities and clubs.

Many students referenced academic resources offered by the university as essential to success. These included references to the Learning Commons, Writing Services, Supported Learning Groups, and the Science Commons.

2. Focus on mental health

Throughout the blog posts, the tone of the students’ writing conveyed their struggle with mental and emotional health. Mostly, they reference feeling stressed, anxious, overworked, a lack of motivation, and “the winter blues.” Students’ concern with their mental health was also revealed in the way they wrote about their

strategies for success. Often, these strategies included means of coping with various aspects of university life. For example:

- “Acknowledging your hard work is enough, and go to bed being satisfied with what you accomplished for the day. A cycle of being content and happy will lower your anxiety and help you live better.”
- “To fight off these negative emotions, bundling up and getting even 15 minutes of fresh air is a quick and easy way to clear your head and break the lethargic routine.”
- “Keeping a journal is a remarkable way to vent off some feelings. Letting your frustration, exhaustion, anger, happiness, sadness, opinions, observations and anything in between flow from pen to paper is a healthy way to privately get the metaphorical elephant off your chest. Sometimes, having your emotions and thoughts in actual words can help you get to the bottom of your troubles.”

A couple of students wrote about their transition into first year university, and, within their posts, the struggle with mental and emotional health was evident. They cited the challenges of transitioning into university, specifically into first year biology, as including “dealing with stress,” “time management,” “independence and self-direction,” and regulating “your own time, your own life.”

3. Thinking about the future

Some students dedicated blog posts to planning for, or, at least thinking about, their future. Students described feeling that they were primarily being prepared for graduate school, but felt that they could receive help with finding employment after their undergraduate degree if they went to Career Services. Students also commented on course selection period and the stress of “trying to choose courses that will take me in the right direction.”

Other students wrote about how university was preparing them for their future. These students recognized that their undergraduate degree was not the only, and perhaps not even the most important, thing they would leave university with. These students wrote about transferable or functional skills, including “giving speeches with confidence and clarity,” “the art of small talk” (i.e. interpersonal and networking skills), “problem solving,” “the art of skimming through textbooks,” and “time management.” A variety of affective skills were also cited, including “independent and comfortable with being alone,” “self-motivation,” “adaptability,” and “being yourself and feeling comfortable and confident with who you are.”

Recommendations for Instructors

Some blog posts provided concrete recommendations for instructors. These recommendations included:

1. Consider the value and purpose of assessments focused on knowledge memorization

Apart from recommending various study strategies or voicing concern over looming deadlines, students also commented on the various means of assessments and their purpose. A theme across the blog was the use of exams and quizzes, specifically those heavily based on multiple choice, as meaningful forms of assessments. Students associated these forms of assessments with strictly memorization, describing how they find this form of knowledge acquisition concerning based on a) their ability to retain this information upon course completion, and b) the ability of the exams/quizzes to assess their understanding of the material.

Student comments include:

- “Success on this exam is totally dependent on that 1-2 hours bent over your scantron sheet.”
- “Retaining information is different for everyone, and the earlier you find what works for you the better.”

- “ They [exams] usually play out like this: countless hours spent at the library or my desk reiterating pathways to myself, doing practice problems into the early hours of the morning and/or rereading my notes until I could recite the slides in my sleep.”
- “Do we need final exams?... Am I actually learning anything?”

These students also offered alternatives to the current mode of testing students, stating:

- “I would rather complete a take home exam or group project. Preferably one that allows us to apply everything we have learnt in class to a real life scenario...I think by doing this, students could apply things they have learnt in class as well as not fret about the typical stresses of a final exam.”
- “Authentic assessments, ones where we get to practice using skills and knowledge in a setting that resembles the real world.”

2. Continue or increase use of active teaching strategies

Several students commented on the variety of teaching strategies they encountered in their undergraduate biology courses. The comments were positive and spoke to the ability of instructors to engage students in deeper learning. Students wrote that, as a result of these active teaching strategies, they were able to process more material, felt more motivated and engaged, and realized they learned how to apply their knowledge. Some of the teaching strategies mentioned throughout the blog posts include:

- Rewarding learning participation through TopHat and Iclickers
- “Hearing a real life story where a concept was demonstrated or an analogy about something you’re learning not only intrigues your interest but makes it easier to remember the material.”
- Use of learning objectives and expectations “was surprisingly encouraging... gave me a sense of accountability.”
- Problem-Based Learning (PBL) “is really good at pushing some of us out of our comfort zones, calling us out on our interpersonal skills and ability to solve problems, all the while getting us to semi-independently learn new content.”

Link to the CoESP Student Blog: <https://guelphbioed.wordpress.com>