

June 6, 2017

Initial Proposal: "UBC 101"

Dear Dr. Emma Cunliffe and President Santa J. Ono,

The following is my proposal for a new initiative at UBC. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share this idea with UBC. My sincere thanks to Dr. Emma Cunliffe for meeting with me today, and to President Ono for helping to make this meeting possible.

History/Background:

I am a 4th year Philosophy student. I've taken a non-traditional path to completing my undergraduate degree, studying at a reduced load, stretching this undergraduate experience out for about a decade so far with more to come (often working while going to school). My non-typical route has meant I've been an undergraduate student for a long time, and have had an unusual amount of time to consider the experience, and what might be modified/improved upon. In particular, I will admit that even though I have been an undergraduate student for 10 years on and off, including more than 2 years at UBC, I still find post-secondary systems quite complicated and find it difficult to know how to make the most of my time in post-secondary. This proposal is to help the student body and the school itself to have an easier time in various ways. It is something I came up with a while ago, and mention occasionally to people. After talking to an encouraging staff member of UBC about it in a moment of frustration, I finally decided to pitch it via email to the President's office, and I am still very pleased to be invited to meet.

Initiative:

"UBC 101" (placeholder name at least)

Purpose:

(Among other possible benefits) Relieve bureaucratic strain and improve efficiency of UBC systems; Improve school spirit and cohesion of the student body and UBC experience; Help inoculate UBC against some of the culture wars currently playing out on campuses across the continent which result in protests etc, to maintain an orderly and productive academic environment at UBC; Ensure that all incoming UBC students are guaranteed to be exposed to the foundational information UBC wants to provide, and that they understand and retain it; Prevent incoming student mental health burnout, and give them a feeling of belonging and support.

What is "UBC 101"?

UBC 101 is a mandatory 3-credit 1-semester course for all incoming 1st year students (possibly for transfer students as well; I'm a transfer student myself, and might have benefited from this kind of thing. This course would be an unavoidable course the way that WRDS 150 (or ASTU 400A?) are for Arts students.

UBC 101 is essentially an 'introduction to University/UBC'. The course will have several sides to it: academic; cultural; bureaucratic. In effect, UBC 101 is like a more comprehensive and enriched,

extended version of orientation, lasting for the duration of semester I of the students' first year at UBC. Unlike other first-year programs at UBC, UBC 101 would apply to all incoming 1st years, regardless of faculty. The following are some possible functions of the course:

- Academic

UBC 101 will introduce students to the University system. For instance, the course can cover a bit about the history and structure of Universities, the structure of degrees (what are these degree letters? What do they stand for?), the types of degrees, some mention of grad school and what it is, and those sorts of things. As well, details such as "What is a TA? What are office hours? What are midterms?" UBC can determine what is of priority, of course. Basically, academic subjects would introduce students to the structure of a University system, so they can be familiar with it. As well, students can be given a brief overview of the different subject areas (e.g. anthropology, sociology, philosophy, geography, etc) and give them a sense of the types of things they can study, what these topics are about, and what majors they might choose. It's very difficult/impossible for students to take one of every type of subject in their course load, even if they wanted, so it would be nice to have an overview and have all students forced to be a bit literate about what types of things exist to study at UBC. Also, when they graduate, UBC students will not have areas of knowledge that are 100% blank (e.g. they will know what anthropology is, even if they never took a course in it). As well, students can get advice on how to appeal grades, how to use the online registration system most effectively, Teacheval, etc. Just some ideas. Also, encourage students to take giving their profs reviews seriously, to improve the amount of evaluation submissions, by explaining to the students the practical importance of these.

- Cultural

Somewhat overlapping with academic, depending on your definition... UBC 101 can introduce students to University procedures and structures, including the UBC bureaucracy (Who does what? What offices can I go to for what types of concerns? What is an ombudsperson? What do Deans do? What is the Writing Centre and where is it? What is "Write It In" and how does that work?) (etc) Also, students can be taught about the structures of student government, including its shape, the AMS functions, etc. I have spent more than 2 years at UBC, and I still don't understand much personally. Students can also be taught about the history and traditions of UBC, including the "Great Trek", Storm the Wall, Wreck Beach, the Engineering Cairn (and other cairns), possibly engineering pranks, etc, and maybe about some of the famous alumni who attended UBC, give students a sense they are part of a tradition. We can inspire a sense of community and pride, and "UBC 101" can become an experience common to everyone who goes through UBC, regardless of year or chosen program. This way, even a big school like UBC can have a sense of common experiences. Here, students can also be taught about the school sports teams, school colours, fight song, alumni network and benefits of alumni and alumni financial support, how to get involved, what places exist on campus to experience. This course can encourage a sense of belonging and continued involvement by alumni in their alma mater, the idea that students are beginning a lifelong relationship with UBC. Also, students can be taught how to get involved e.g. through resources I discovered by accident in part including Campus Vibe UBC, TheCalendar.ca, UBC Events (UBC Events, the online portal, is something I only found out by being told in a random conversation with someone who works for UBC!)(www.events.ubc.ca/#calendar)

**** Further, and quite important, students can be taught how to learn how to use critical free speech, balancing this off with respect and care, and be familiarized with UBC policies in this area. Making sure that students learn that they should not harass people, but simply offending people is in itself not necessarily a reason to shut down a discussion. Carefully taught, this could help promote a civilized, open, critical culture at UBC and inoculate the school against some of the culture war issues, protests, which I have mentioned. There should also be mention of respect for diversity of thoughts of guest speakers with whom they disagree?*

I am convinced from my experiences at UBC that there is a great need to encourage more viewpoint diversity at this school, while ensuring that the level of dialogue remains productive and respectful. It's a challenging but important balance, and I am very keen on seeing this pursued and achieved more at UBC.

- Bureaucratic

Any remaining bureaucratic priorities, such as ensuring that students know where things are on campus, how to use the health plan, how to use the U-Pass, how to work with TAs and ESPs, what kinds of things are on offer with e.g. career services, counselling, how to load money on the UBC Card, what different bureaucratic departments do, etc. I am convinced that part of the strain on UBC's systems is that every single student needs to learn certain things each time they come to UBC, and so UBC 101 can act like a funnel through which all students pass, to ensure that all students have learned what UBC thinks will be useful. UBC 101 could help make the system smoother and less chaotic than it currently can be.

Closing thoughts:

The above is simply my initial pitch, while this idea is still in very early stages. I am certain that the professionals at UBC can think of many ways to use this UBC 101 format to achieve institutional priorities. I think that UBC could utilize existing staff including bureaucratic workers, professors/sessionals/TAs, specialists from different departments, and rotate these people through UBC 101 to host sessions about particular areas of topics (saves on staffing, and brings in experts). UBC 101 could itself possibly be a Cr/D/Fail (Pass/Fail) type course, 3 credits as typical one-semester courses, and it might be made either impossible to drop it, or mandatory to repeat it before progressing past a certain point in academic progression, or some other incentive to complete it. A model for this could be what I experienced as a transferring Arts student, with WRDS 150.

My above categories of cultural/academic/bureaucratic are not neatly divided, but are meant more as suggestions. In practice, UBC could determine what topics would be of most benefit (statistically, based on internal priorities and research) for students to learn in this course, as they begin their UBC career, and design UBC 101 accordingly. The reason I think this orientation would be justifiably extended to one semester in length, and mandatory for all students, is that I think it could have the benefits described above. This UBC 101 course could be designed to follow students through their first semester, keep an eye on them through midterms and beyond, and educate them in the culture and functions of the institution in a more comprehensive, patient and smooth way. I suspect this would make a lot of other things at UBC potentially function more smoothly.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Franz Kurtzke

Philosophy, 4th year

P.S. As a transfer student from Langara College and an individualist averse to crowds, I never attended any of UBC's existing orientation activities, so I wouldn't be surprised if some of these include some items I am describing here. Regardless of whether something like "UBC 101" is put in place, at the very least I am convinced that UBC orientation needs to somehow teach students during orientation how to have open, critical but civilized dialogue. This is a big part of my motivation for pitching this idea. I think there is a lack of viewpoint diversity on campus, and students need to be encouraged to speak their minds, not self-censor so much, while also knowing the appropriate boundaries regarding harassment etc. Too many students are erring on the side of caution, I feel, not taking risks in expressing and exploring thoughts on campus, for fear of what I would call social 'thought shaming'. Still, I think that a project like UBC 101 could have much more in terms of benefits, as described above.

SINCERE REQUEST: If this proposal progresses, I would like to remain involved somehow please. I care especially strongly about promoting viewpoint diversity on campus, and open, critical speech.