Simon Fraser University’s Semester in Dialogue is now 15 years old, an appropriate age at which to survey alumni to explore whether their Semester had an impact on who they became in the world and what they accomplished. The survey revealed that the Semester in Dialogue has indeed been highly successful at fulfilling its core objectives: to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility, encourage their passion for improving society and provide them with the tools they need to be effective agents for positive change in their communities.

- 131 alumni responded, 24% of those contacted, an unusually high survey response rate indicative of the connection alumni still feel with the program.
- Overall satisfaction with the Semester was notably high; 83% of respondents rated the program an 8 or higher on a 10 point scale, and 95% have or would recommend the Semester in Dialogue to someone they know. Many wrote that their Semester was the most transformative experience of their undergraduate education, deeply impacting their academic, professional and personal lives.
- Responding alumni exhibit a great variety and depth of professional employment, in government, non-profit, academic, business, arts, media, law and health-related jobs. Whatever the sector, employment is commonly focused on community issues including housing, environmental conservation and education, literacy, health, social entrepreneurship, sustainable food and international development.
- Almost half of respondents have gone on to further education through a graduate or other professional program.
- 91% of respondents reported that the Semester in Dialogue helped them define their goals, beliefs and interests by identifying future career paths, offering hands-on experience, and re-igniting their passion for learning.
- Many respondents noted that they graduated from the Semester with an increased sense of confidence in their ability to engage with the world and pursue their passions. Others noted that learning and sharing dialogue skills improved their relationships with family, friends, partners and colleagues.

"Dialogue changed my life. Simple as that."
• 95% of respondents found that they developed key dialogue skills during their Semester, including suspending judgment, engaging in deeper listening, sharing perspectives and appreciating nuance in complex public issues. 93% have used dialogue in their education, work, community, or personal lives, including strategic planning, facilitating meetings, stakeholder consultations, community engagement, research, training, planning events and programs, and interpersonal interactions.

• Respondents graduated from the program with an increased understanding and interest in public issues: 97% reported that they had a deeper understanding of their Semester’s theme, while 86% had an increased general interest in public issues. Respondents highlighted how the Semester encouraged them to ask questions and engage in critical thinking about the world around them, and increased their commitment to civic engagement.

• Many respondents focused on how they gained skills in media relations and writing for both public audiences and as a reflective practice. The collaborative nature of many of the Semester’s projects also helped in their understanding of group dynamics, ability to work with diverse team members and their sense of responsibility and trust in group projects.

• 97% of respondents felt they had a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, factors, and processes involved in multi-stakeholder issues. This deeper understanding of public issues and civic processes increased their sense of civic responsibility, empowerment, and agency.

Simon Fraser University’s Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue was founded in 2002, and quickly became one of SFU’s signature programs. Its mission was simple: a one-semester, intensive learning experience to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility, encourage their passion for improving society and provide them with the tools they need to be effective agents for positive change in their communities.

The initial two years were a pilot project, one semester/year, the first on the subject of “Nature, Environment and Society,” followed by the 2003 “Urban Experience.” In 2004 the Semester began offering two semesters/year, and by 2006 had expanded with a third, shorter summer offering. In total, 44 Semesters in Dialogue have been offered, hosting a total of 820 students (up to and including Fall 2018).

The Semester’s learning approaches are unique, and even today remain at the forefront of innovation in Canadian education. Our approach is based on a triad of interacting elements:

• Dialogue: deep listening and learning to discover meaning among diverse participants. Class time is structured to encourage conversations in which students are on equal footing with guests.

• Experiential: emphasizes learning through doing. Students apply skills in the real world, reflect on the results and use this learning to provide context for their future activities.

• Community engaged: Students partner with community organizations on projects, convene community dialogues to address pressing issues and host community thought leaders in the classroom.

While these core elements of the Semester in Dialogue (SID) have continued, we have diversified the contexts and structures of our offerings. In addition to the traditional 13-week SID, we now offer a shorter seven-week summer Semester and a CityStudio Semester in collaboration with the City of Vancouver. We are also beginning to assist SFU Departments and Faculties to offer their own Semesters in Dialogue; the first such “Semester In” program will be offered in Spring 2019 through FCAT.
focused on Alternate Realities. Full details about the SID and our pedagogy are available at our website and through a learning guide we prepared (available to interested faculty upon request).

We conduct extensive evaluations at the end of each semester, and student satisfaction has always been very high. However, we wanted to ascertain whether students remain positive long after graduation, determine what they are doing now, and explore whether SID had an impact in what they do professionally and personally, and how they do it. It’s our 15th anniversary, an appropriate time to celebrate with … a Survey!

We were able to contact 550 of our alumni, and 131 responded, 17% of all alumni and 24% of those we were able to contact, a notably high response rate indicative of the close ties alumni still feel with our program. The survey was designed with a combination of quantitative (range of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" and "1–10" options) and deeper, more thought-provoking questions.

Overall, the survey confirmed that our alumni move quickly and successfully into their professional lives, with varied careers that hold in common a commitment to community engagement. It was also clear that the Semester in Dialogue’s learning objectives have been successful, as our graduates overwhelmingly emphasized how they have incorporated what they learned into their personal and professional lives.

What they are doing
GOVERNMENT
Seventeen respondents have current government employment, including a mayor, a city planner, a community transportation planning engineer, a legislative intern, and employees of the BC Public Service, Work Safe BC, WorkBC, BC Hydro, an MLA office, and the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. Additionally, one respondent described how they ran as an MLA candidate in a recent election.

“I ran my own business, co-founded a community sustainability organization, worked as a community facilitator, and now am the Mayor of Prince Rupert, BC.”

“I worked as a foreign service officer for 4 years, working on humanitarian and security concerns in Africa and the Middle East. I also spent 2 years working on Canada’s responses to natural disasters abroad, including the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. I represented Canada at the United Nations and negotiated humanitarian resolutions on behalf of Canada in 2009 and 2010.”

DIALOGUE
Eight respondents are still working in dialogue, including the current Executive Director of SFU Public Square, the Program Director of SFU’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, and three alumni who have worked in short-term roles as research assistants and communications coordinators at Public Square and the Centre for Dialogue.

“Working for the Berghof Foundation in Germany on innovative dialogue formats for conflict transformation in conflict-affected countries and regions. Working with Mediators Beyond Borders in Sierra Leone, training leaders in dialogue facilitation to host community dialogues to prevent pre-election violence, and more recently to respond to individual and community needs following the Ebola epidemic.”
“My best friends, my community, my professional network and every project I’ve ever worked on has roots in the Dialogue classroom.”

Non-profit or social impact sector
At least 17 are supporting initiatives in housing, environmental conservation and education, literacy, community health, social entrepreneurship, sustainable food systems, and international development. Positions include instructors, outreach workers, program coordinators, public relations professionals, volunteer and fund development managers, and marketing specialists. One respondent became an ordained Minister.

“I moved to Toronto to work for the Canadian International Council, worked with Teach for Canada, Munk Debates, Donner Prize, Asia Pacific Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation. Currently I’m the Director of Ideas & Insights at the Institute for Canadian Citizenship.”

Private sector
Fourteen respondents work in the private sector, in finance, communication and technology, transportation, design, agriculture, tourism, natural resources, and environmental consulting.

Academia / education
At least 11 respondents work in higher education, including five respondents who have held positions as faculty members or instructors, and six who are working in administration or student services in post-secondary institutions. Additionally, at least six respondents are currently working in local, national, and international research projects, including one respondent who is a research coordinator at BC Children’s Hospital. Four respondents pursued careers in K-12 education, and one pursued a career as a librarian.

Arts, culture and media
Nine respondents work in the arts, culture, or media, including journalism, music, design, videography, photography, writing, editing, and community arts programming.

“I received a Fulbright scholarship to attend Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. I worked for several years in local Vancouver media, first at The Vancouver Sun, then at CBC.”
LAW AND MEDICINE
Four respondents completed medical school and are currently finishing their residencies, one completed a master’s degree in occupational therapy and is working at BC Children’s Hospital, and another is active in the field of midwifery. Two respondents pursued careers in law.

“During law school I worked in the fields of environmental and indigenous law, assisting with the campaign to stop the Northern Gateway pipeline. I also worked for a legal clinic representing low-income clients that had been charged with crimes. After graduating in 2012 I have been working with the City of Toronto as a labour, employment, and human rights lawyer. I also serve on the board of Aboriginal Legal Services.”

GRADUATE EDUCATION
Twenty-one respondents reported currently pursuing further education through graduate school or other professional programs, while at least 32 others completed programs beyond their undergraduate degree.

VOLUNTEER
Respondents described a wide variety of volunteer initiatives, including volunteering for non-profits and community organizations, serving as board members, engaging in activism, and working with children and youth.

Satisfaction with Semester in Dialogue
83% of respondents rated the program an 8 or higher on a 10-point scale, and 95% of respondents have or would recommend the Semester in Dialogue to someone they know. Many responding alumni spoke of the Semester in Dialogue as the most transformative experience of their undergraduate education, deeply impacting their future academic, professional, and personal lives.

“Looking back on my university education, the Semester in Dialogue was the most influential experience to shape who I am, and what I am able to contribute to the world today.”

Professional and Academic Impact
91% of respondents reported that the Semester in Dialogue helped them define their goals, beliefs, and interests, and 52% of respondents reported that the Semester in Dialogue helped them find employment.

“The Semester in Dialogue transformed the way I saw myself in the world. It gave me the opportunity to explore the questions, purpose and passion that underlie the things I most care about in the world.”

“I met my future boss.”

Many respondents described how the Semester helped them identify suitable career paths by exposing them to various sectors and offering opportunities to get hands-on experience with skills or tasks related to particular careers.

“I changed the focus of my studies after attending the Semester in Dialogue. I learned a lot about myself, what I really cared about in life and what type of career I wanted to pursue.”

The Semester in Dialogue had impact on respondents’ relationship with education and future academic pursuits. Several described how the Semester’s experiential and interdisciplinary approach to pedagogy re-ignited their passion for learning. One described how their experience motivated them to finish their degree and “stay on track.” Some sought to bring the spirit of dialogue and experiential learning into their future studies.

“I learned that education and university courses could be interactive, practical and engaging.”

“The idea of attending yet another 200-student lecture hall courses at SFU was making my skin crawl. I wanted to get out of lecture halls and off the mountain! The Semester in Dialogue program reengaged me into learning and put my passion to work. That hunger ... propelled my career and the success that I’ve enjoyed to date.”
“On a personal level, my Semester in Dialogue really helped me to slow down and reflect on the way I was leading my life.”

“Many of the skills I learned and developed (including leadership, community engagement, communication) have been invaluable to me during my medical training.”

Personal impact

Several responding alumni noted that they graduated from the Semester in Dialogue with an increased sense of empowerment and agency in their own lives. Many stated that the Semester helped them “find their voice,” appreciate the value of their lived experiences, and gain confidence in their ability to engage with the world and pursue their passions. Some respondents felt that the Semester increased their sense of self-awareness, and offered them valuable skills in self-reflection that support their ongoing personal development.

“I took ownership of my own education (and life more broadly) deciding who and how I want to be in the world. It began an ongoing process of self-discovery where I feel more capable of taking action and speaking out.”

Additionally, many respondents found that learning and sharing dialogue skills improved their relationships with their family, friends, and partners.

“I feel I am a better partner, colleague and friend because of the skills I learned in the program.”

“I really became aware of my emotions during a conversation. I learned to be less judgemental and more understanding. This helped because I was finally able to communicate more effectively with my dad.”

Many responding alumni stated that their experience with the Semester in Dialogue expanded their worldview or changed their outlook on life. Alongside concrete skills and impacts, respondents described how they continue to be inspired by the overall values, practices, and ideas they engaged with during the Semester in Dialogue.

“I continue to live the principles I learned during the course.”
Dialogue Skills

A central goal of the Semester in Dialogue is to model the spirit of concentrated conversation among equals and deep listening that is the essence of dialogue, in an environment encouraging mutual understanding between diverse perspectives. Students have opportunities to participate in, facilitate, and reflect on dialogues with peers and members of the community. Faculty members challenge students to let go of judgement and remain curious while exploring issues from a variety of perspectives.

95% of responding alumni found that the Semester in Dialogue helped them develop key skills to engage in dialogue, including how to suspend judgement, engage in deep listening, and share their perspectives in open-minded conversations. Many respondents described how the Semester in Dialogue helped them understand the value of listening to others, be aware of power dynamics, develop key listening skills, such as patience, empathy, suspending judgement, and curiosity, and shift the energy in a room.

“I am better able to openly and actively listen to others, and make space for a diverse range of opinions, and facilitate ways to allow voices not commonly heard a better chance to be represented.”

The Semester in Dialogue helped many respondents feel more comfortable engaging with complexity and ambiguity. Several respondents feel more equipped to respectfully navigate disagreement and differences and consider diverse opinions from a non-adversarial perspective.

“I was a very ‘right versus wrong’ person. The world that once was black and white to me became many shades of grey.”

Respondents also described how the Semester in Dialogue helped them develop a deeper understanding of the value collaborative and consensual approaches provide for group processes and decision-making. 95% of respondents feel more comfortable using dialogic and consensual approaches in collaborative group work after participating in the Semester in Dialogue.
93% of respondents have used dialogue in their education, work, community, or personal life, including strategic planning, facilitating meetings, stakeholder consultations, community engagement, research, training, management, communicating with colleagues, and planning events and programs.

“In my new role as mayor of our community I utilize the tools and education I learned from the Semester in Dialogue to help facilitate community interests - particularly helping find consensus on council, engaging First Nations, mobilizing volunteers and community groups into coordinated community projects, and negotiations with large multinational corporations investing in Prince Rupert.”

“In my work as a foreign service officer, I was often required to represent Canada in meeting with officials from other countries and international organizations. The relationships built using the principles of dialogue were so important to my role as a diplomat representing Canada.”

“In my work as a case manager in Mental Health, I was often working with individuals who were fragile, upset and angry. The ability to actively listen and be empathetic to others was especially important to help others in their time of need.”

“I am always trying to recreate the dialogue spaces I experienced in the Semester in Dialogue in my own classrooms today. I aim for plurality of voices, active listening, mediating difficult conversations, and teaching students to reach for others who are different from them, rather than reject, condemn, or become angry with them.”

Respondents also described how they apply dialogue skills and approaches to help navigate conflict and complex issues in their work and personal lives.

“I introduced the practice of dialogue as a means to navigate complex workplace relationships and sensitive topics within my team.”
“I use dialogue at the dinner table with my family, in school meetings, in my current experiential education program, and at work.”

“I think another really key skill I learned in SID that I’ve taken to heart is the art of saying thank you. I believe it has made deeper connections for me with friends and clients alike.”

“Everything from my romantic relationships to the position I take as a manager in my office has benefited from [a dialogic] approach.”

Civic engagement
Respondents graduated from the program with an increased understanding and interest in public issues: 97% reported that they had a deeper understanding of their Semester’s theme, while 86% had an increased general interest in public issues. Several respondents described how the Semester encouraged them to ask questions and engage in critical thinking about the world around them.

“I developed a greater awareness of sustainability, in particular the more nuanced issues that are often overlooked. I developed a greater toolkit for taking action on local and global social issues.”

“The Semester in Dialogue made me appreciate and look at the world in a more analytical/critical way and not just take what the media, etc. says at face value.”

97% of respondents felt they had a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, factors, and processes involved in multi-stakeholder issues. This deeper understanding of public issues and civic processes increased many respondents’ sense of civic responsibility, empowerment, and agency. One described their realization that “things which may seem complex or out of reach [can be attained] with the right amount of background knowledge and hard work.”

“As I tackle the polarizing issues of environment and energy, I am better equipped to listen to all sides and share stories that resonate with people.”
"I can break down complex problems into their relevant components. I understand that most issues are very complex and there cannot be a solve-all solution; finding the right problem is extremely important before even starting."

**Communication skills**

Respondents described how the Semester helped them reflect on the impact of their language choices and delivery, and gain skills in media relations, design, and writing for both public audiences and as a form of reflective practice.

"[I learned] what is needed to create an effective oral presentation. Brevity & clarity!"

"The Semester in Dialogue directly led to increased leadership skills and improved my public speaking."

84% of respondents feel more confident interacting with key decision makers after participating in the Semester in Dialogue, empowering them to reach out to community leaders in order to build their professional networks or address issues of concern.

The collaborative nature of many of the Semester in Dialogue’s projects helps students develop their understanding of group dynamics, their ability to work with diverse team members, and their sense of responsibility and trust in group projects.

One respondent described how in their previous educational experiences, group projects involved “splitting responsibilities and combining each individual section,” whereas in the Semester in Dialogue they worked collaboratively through the whole process. “This was the most taxing, emotionally fueled and problematic portion of the project,” the respondent states, “but it is more applicable to real world experiences where individuals must come together to decide on an initiative/movement they wish to pursue, and this opens the door to potential disagreement due to the differing personalities/identities and beliefs each member holds.”

“I gained the confidence to reach out to community leaders, government and organizations that were doing work I was interested in.”
Conclusion

The survey revealed that the Semester in Dialogue has indeed been highly effective at fulfilling its core objectives: to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility, encourage their passion for improving society and provide them with the tools they need to be agents for positive change in their communities.

We ask our students to consider who they want to be in the world during their Semester, and the survey responses indicate that they take that directive to heart. Our triad of dialogue, experiential learning and community engagement has been valuable at growing engaged, focused students whose learnings during their Semester in Dialogue continue as important elements carrying them forward into professional and personal lives that are rewarding for themselves and for the society to which they contribute.
