CASE STUDY

Digital media interns: Students as partners for technology support and educational innovation

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ABSTRACT

While COVID-19 dramatically changed the way that we taught during the pandemic, not all of these changes were negative. In response to the pivot to remote learning, Western University employed student digital media interns (DMIs) to support faculty in adapting their courses. This resulted in the formation of the Digital Media Intern program at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry (SSMD), a students-as-partners (SaP) approach that supports faculty in the adoption and use of educational technology. Despite moving back to in-person learning, the DMI program is thriving and has expanded its scope. An understanding of the learner context of technology can be missing when faculty are designing and updating their courses. The DMI program helps bridge this gap by creating a way for students to directly contribute to their education, gain meaningful employment or experience, and provide feedback to instructors. Instructors benefit in two ways: by gaining hands-on support and ongoing, actionable feedback. This case study will outline the evolution of the DMI program, its implementation and its impact. Leader and student perspectives will also be shared. It describes the evolution of this student intern strategy from a band-aid solution to a fully integrated and supported unit in one academic faculty.

KEYWORDS

technology, digital media, partnership, graphic design

The ubiquity of technology in our day-to-day lives, especially amongst learners, has been viewed as both beneficial and detrimental, depending on the context. Indeed, following Prensky's (2001) initial use of the term "digital native" in 2001, assumptions regarding students' "intrinsic" expertise in technology has been a point of debate. Now, the consensus is that many different inputs affect one's proficiency in information and communication technologies (ICT) beyond age, such as gender, income, and access (Evans & Robertson, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, forced educators to quickly adapt their ICT proficiency as higher education had to adjust to remote learning. While academic institutions used different strategies based on their own context, this case study presents the approach taken by the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry (SSMD) at Western University.

HISTORICAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

The SSMD has over 4,000 learners, including undergraduate Bachelor of Medical Science students, medical students, dental students, and a robust graduate program. It employs more than 2,700 full- and part-time faculty. Western University has a centralized teaching resource, the Centre for Teaching and Learning which provides superb training and instructional design guidance and offers numerous workshops and communities of practice. However, Western University uses a "hub-and-spoke" model for supporting teaching: several faculties have their own in-house instructional support. While SSMD previously had some in-house instructional support, this support was not evenly accessible across the faculty. As such, in 2018, Sarah McLean, an Associate Professor (Teaching Stream) in the Department of Anatomy & Cell Biology, facilitated a collaboration with the former associate dean of learning with technology & simulation, called the Schulich Education Enhancement Division (SEED). Amid engaging partners and developing a plan, the COVID-19 pandemic began.

In response to the rapid shift to remote teaching and learning, Western provided faculties with funds to hire tech-savvy students to help transition content fully onto the institution's learning management system (LMS). This first implementation of the Digital Media Intern (DMI) Program took place during the summer of 2020 and employed 30 DMIs. This case study will follow the evolution of the program from being a stopgap measure to being a reciprocal and embedded program embracing a students-as-partners theoretical framework (Figure 1). The evolution of the program to its current state is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Faculty adoption of teaching technology has been explored extensively in the literature. Higher education faculty use technology as a tool to solve existing problems (such as facilitating take-home exams), or to enhance the educational environment (such as by increasing opportunities for student collaboration) (Martin et al., 2020). A framework proposed by Martin and colleagues (2020) suggests that integration of digital technologies by faculty is based on three factors: importance, competence, and motivation (Martin et al., 2020). Faculty need to feel that digital technology is important to the learning environment and also feel supported so that they can develop competence in various technologies. While this framework has implications for professional development programs for faculty, we argue that it can be integrated into a students-as-partners (SaP) approach.

As outlined by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014), SaP facilitates students and staff working together to enact educational change in a mutually beneficial manner. This partnership can be in a curricular or extracurricular context, but importantly is based on principles of respect, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). While the DMI Program was initially a stopgap measure to pivot to remote learning, it has now evolved into a SaP program wherein students work with engaged faculty on co-designing and co-developing educational materials. These materials are largely based in digital media and/or technology. In this implementation of SaP, student DMIs act as coaches and co-creators of digital media. As such, the

DMI program can directly support faculty members' understanding of the importance of digital materials, competence in co-creating digital materials, and motivation to create digital materials.

EVOLUTION OF THE DIGITAL MEDIA INTERN PROGRAM

Year 1 of the Digital Media Intern Program
The DMI program in the summer of 2020 was coordinated by Drs. McLean and Campbell. We had two main categories of DMIs—those assigned to a particular department to transition courses remotely and those assigned to a broader group to develop support resources for faculty members. DMIs were current students at SSMD and were selected based on their technical skills (Table 1). The DMI positions were advertised through multiple means—emails to current students, on a centralized website, and also through word of mouth. The DMIs in the first iteration of the program were selected based on the breadth and depth of their technical skills. For example, on the application form, students were prompted to list their skill/comfort with various programs such as Adobe Photoshop, iMovie, etc. Potential DMIs were also asked to share why they wanted the position, their educational philosophy, and to highlight their skills in working in a remote team environment. Another SaP program that employed students for tech support during COVID was examined by an excellent case study from Riddell et al. (2021) at Bishop's University. In their implementation, their recruitment focused on students' social and emotional skills. While our team did work on developing these skills with the DMIs, due to the significant time constraint with our program during the first summer, we thought it would be more expedient to hire DMIs who already had technical expertise. DMIs were then selected by Drs. McLean and Campbell based on their technical expertise, their degree background (i.e., undergraduate dentistry, basic medical sciences, etc.), and their reflection about their teamwork skills. Due to time constraints, there was no formal training provided to the DMIs, but each group had weekly check-ins (Table 1, Figure 1). At the end of the summer, the DMIs had created an in-depth set of resources on a dedicated page on the LMS and had transitioned dozens of courses fully online.

In response to a concern about ongoing technical issues, the DMI program continued throughout the school year, offering "just-in-time technical support" (JITTS). These tech issues included fixing broken links in the LMS, showing instructors how to set up online quizzes, and/or helping edit instructional videos. DMIs were employed 5–10 hours per week for a designated department.

Table 1. Evolution of the DMI program

Year	Team Size and Composition	Funding	Training	Important contributions
2020 "Rapid & Ramping up"	30 DMIs recruited based on department and skill set	Western University	Weekly online meetings; no formal training	Rapid online transition of courses in response to COVID-19
2021	15 DMIs recruited based	Western University	Weekly online meetings; Curated training	Conducted survey on student

Year	Team Size and Composition	Funding	Training	Important contributions
"Curating & Consensus-building"	on degree program		resources in pedagogy, blended learning and accessibility	experience to inform future DMI work
2022 "Teaching & Team-building"	7 DMIs recruited based on skill-set	Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry	Weekly online meetings focus on building community through icebreakers, online games; still have previous curated training resources	DMI program showcased at Western University's Centre for Teaching and Learning Fall Perspectives Conference
2023 "Modules & Mentorship"	8 DMIs Novel Lead DMI position New DMIs mentored by Senior DMIs	Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry	Weekly online meetings with team-building and mentorship; interactive online modules created by SEED research associates	Hosting in-person Lunch and Learns in collaboration with SEED members

Figure 1. A compare-and-contrast chart of the Digital Media Intern (DMI) program from its inception to its present-day operations
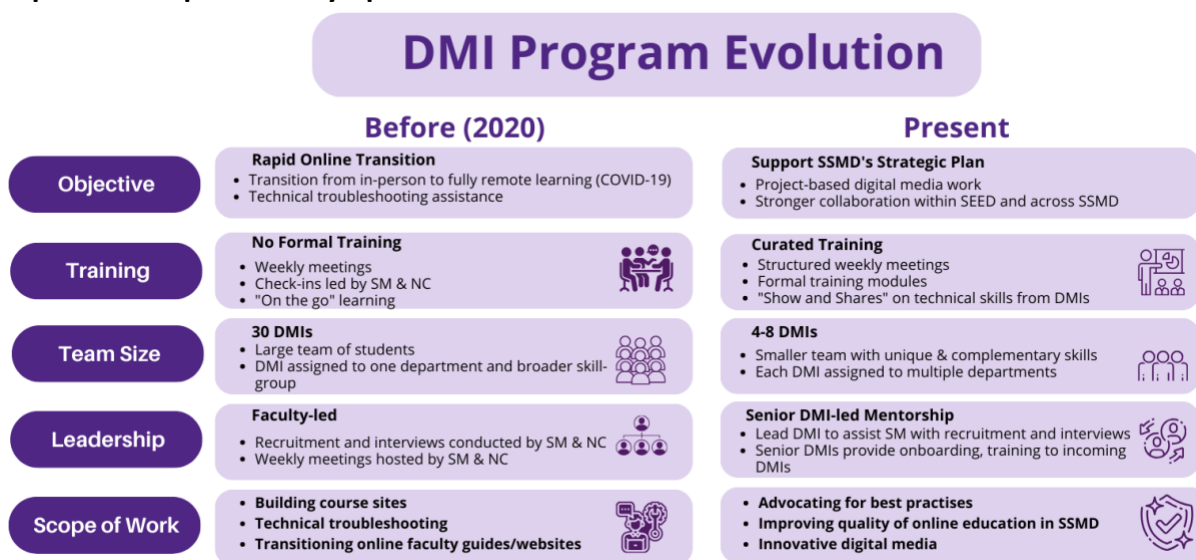
Legend: SEED = Schulich Education Enhancement Division; SM = Dr. Sarah McLean; NC = Dr. Nicole Campbell.

Year 2 of the Digital Media Intern Program
With support from Western University, the DMI program continued in the summer of 2021. The Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry (SSMD) provided funding for 15 DMIs (Table 1). The DMIs hired during this round were assigned units based on their degree program. For example, a student doing a degree in biochemistry would be assigned to the biochemistry department, as they understood the core courses, were familiar with the faculty members, and understood the department's culture. Dr. Sarah McLean also began creating and curating training resources for onboarding DMIs that provided a foundation in pedagogy. DMIs were provided with fundamental instruction in constructivism, accessibility, and blended learning. Furthermore, Dr. McLean was instated as the inaugural director of the Schulich Education Enhancement Division (SEED). SEED was envisioned as serving as a central unit with diverse perspectives to lead the creation of high-quality learning environments by supporting the adoption of technology-enhanced learning. The DMI team was an integral part of SEED and was directly under the supervision of Dr. McLean.

During Year 2, the DMIs' role also expanded from simply transitioning course content to creating digital media and doing project-based work. For example, the DMI team distributed a survey to all students at SSMD to get their feedback about the first year of remote learning. This report was then used to create resources for faculty to enhance the online learning experience. Seven DMIs continued during the school year for JITTS. The DMI program was also asked to participate in other projects, such as continuing professional development initiatives. At this stage, the DMI Program began to find its footing as a centralized SaP resource.

Year 3 of the Digital Media Intern Program
During the summer of 2022, the DMI Program was no longer funded by Western University. With advocacy from Dr. McLean, this team was funded by SSMD to provide ongoing support (Table 1). The DMI summer program also became smaller (7 DMIs) and more structured—the first month of the summer program was dedicated to team-building and skill development. The DMI team and Dr. McLean had weekly meetings and worked on building a culture of collaboration and collegiality. This was when "we" really started to feel like a team. We did this through icebreakers, online games, and weekly "show and shares." The show and shares were a team strategy where DMIs were tasked with teaching their peers how to use a particular technology. This approach both expanded the technical skills of the DMI team and provided the DMIs with leadership opportunities. Importantly, the DMI team also developed more awareness of the skillsets of different team members.

Present-day Digital Media Intern Program
The current DMI Program is a key support within SSMD. This year we hosted "lunch and learns" on topics such as creating engaging videos and creating a warm online environment, among others. These sessions were facilitated by a faculty/staff member and a DMI. The DMIs delivered content and provided their insights as students. The summer DMI Program has also introduced the role of one senior lead DMI. One of the responsibilities of the senior lead DMI is the recruitment of new DMIs as well as taking and sharing meetings minutes. This approach establishes the collaborative nature of our SaP initiative and gives greater input to the DMI team. Finally, the training process was formalized. Online learning modules were created by SEED research associates. Senior DMIs were designated as those who had been in their roles for greater

than 8 months. Senior DMIs took on mentorship and create content goals. Senior DMIs reviewed the online training modules and provided feedback to the research associates before the modules were released to new DMIs.

The present-day DMI program is fully integrated into the larger SEED network. We hold weekly SEED meetings where instructional design staff and DMIs collaborate and share updates. We have implemented a peer mentorship program. Senior DMIs are assigned a new DMI to onboard, train, and provide guidance. By continuing to value the DMI perspective, this partnership is truly collaborative and reciprocal, offering transformative opportunities for faculty, students, and staff.

COMPARISON OF THE DMI PROGRAM TO OTHER SAP INITIATIVES

SaP programs are a testament to the ever-evolving landscape of innovation in higher education. While our DMI program has unique affordances, similar approaches have been implemented at other institutions.

For example, a robust case study at Bishop's University outlines the implementation of online learning and technology consultants (OLTCs) (Riddell et al., 2021). Similar to DMIs, OLTCs were also employed during COVID to support faculty members' adaptation to remote teaching, provide students with experiential learning, and embed students as collaborators (Riddell et al., 2021). The OLTC program was also built on the ethos of reciprocity and shared responsibility. Finally, the OLTC program and the DMI program both implemented robust training for the student collaborators; however, the OLTC program had this training from its inception. We argue this is a strength of the OLTC program compared to ours.

However, there are a few ways in which this program differs from the DMI program. First, the OLTC program situates the OLTC design team as a group of three: a faculty member, a senior member of Internet Technology Services (ITS), and a student member. The team then worked together to support faculty. For the DMI program, students directly collaborated with faculty members, and Dr. McLean oversaw the program as a whole. Furthermore, the OLTC was centralized and supported faculty across many different programs and disciplines. In our implementation, DMIs were recruited to serve one or two particular units, and we found that faculty members preferred to work with students who had theoretical understanding of their particular discipline. For example, a DMI who was completing an undergraduate degree in biochemistry would serve as the DMI for the Department of Biochemistry. This was beneficial for both the department and the student. First of all, the department benefits as the DMI would be familiar with the various course offerings and would have an understanding of the departmental culture. The DMI benefits as they were able to directly enact educational change in some of the very courses that they had previously taken. Furthermore, this partnership also allowed the DMIs to further develop professional skills and connections in their discipline. In our context, the disciplinary nature of the DMI program is an asset and further allowed DMIs to apply their course-based knowledge to this program. Finally, our DMI program allows additional leadership opportunities through the mentorship program of senior DMIs and junior DMIs. Not only is this approach beneficial to our senior DMIs to build additional transferable skills, but our junior DMIs benefit from a "soft onboarding" and from having a key senior DMI for feedback and training.
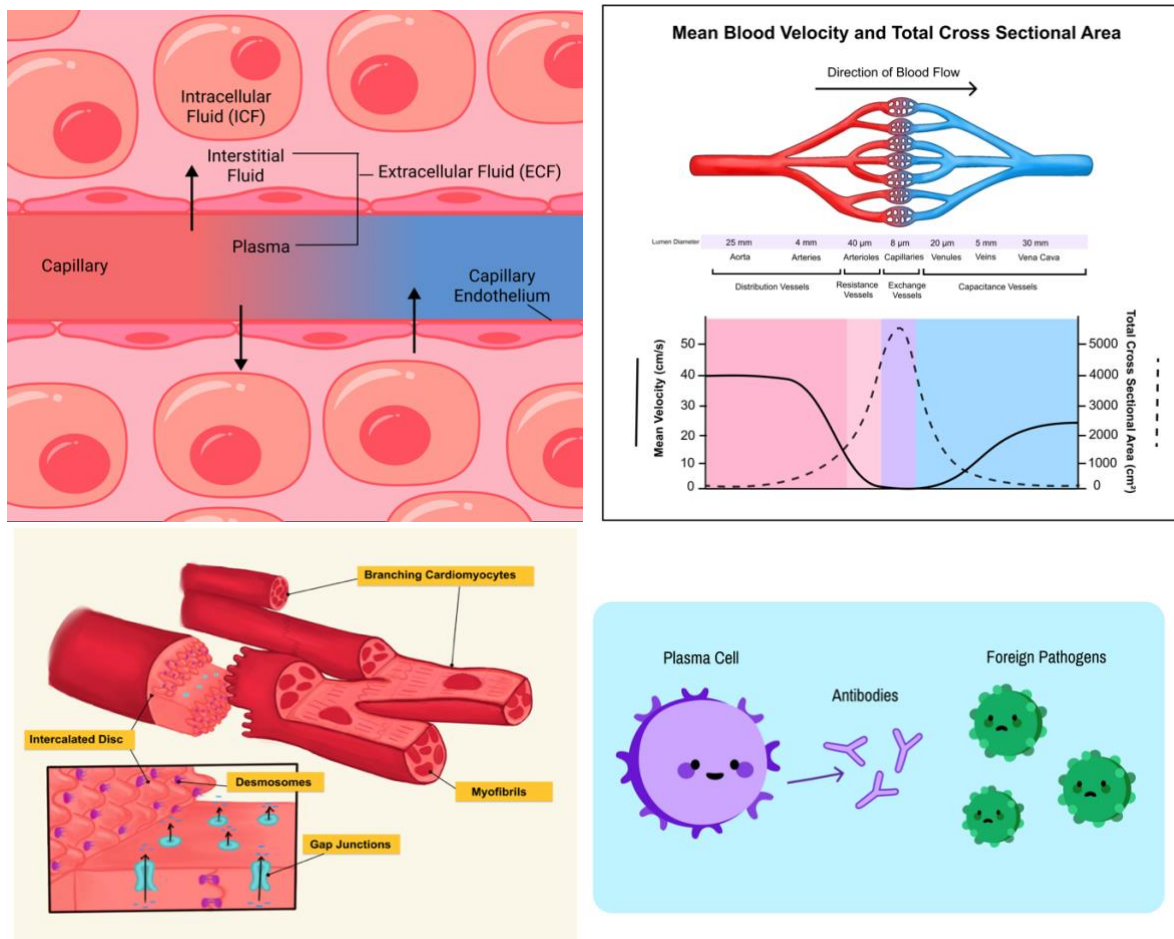
In summary, both the OLTC and the DMI programs show the potential for implementing SaP programs for educational technology adoption post-pandemic. Those interested in enacting similar programs should reflect on the type of mentorship available to student collaborators and whether or not disciplinary knowledge is an asset.

DMI PERSPECTIVE: PRIYA MODI

As a senior lead DMI at the SSMD, I hope to share my perspective to provide key insights into the impact and success of the program. I will highlight the impact of my contributions and the benefits of the program through a discussion of my 2 years of involvement in the DMI Program.

One significant project I undertook was illustrating new lecture diagrams for the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology in collaboration with instructors (Figure 2). Previous lecture diagrams were outdated. I leveraged my graphic design and scientific illustration skills to create new images to improve student learning. Being a medical science student, I had taken the same courses for which I was creating diagrams, allowing me to precisely convey the content in a visual format that resonated with students. This project highlights the power of student expertise in enhancing educational materials in collaboration with instructors.

Figure 2. Illustrations created by Priya Modi as part of her DMI duties for undergraduate-level physiology courses at SSMD

Modi, P., Yeschin, M., & McLean, S. (2024). Digital media interns: Students as partners for technology support and educational innovation. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *8*(2), 82–94. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v8i2.5601

Another significant impact was in designing course sites. Drawing on my advanced graphic design and beginner CSS skills, as well as my knowledge of accessible media and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) gained through DMI training, I built numerous course sites. Having experience using our LMS for my own undergraduate courses helped me to understand the needs and preferences of fellow students. This allowed me to build user-friendly and visually appealing course sites. I collaborated with faculty to advocate for new features and creative ways to display and organize information. One instructor I worked with expressed great satisfaction, stating that "the SEED DMIs have been instrumental in helping me elevate the quality of my course's online presence. They provide the student perspective, which is essential when designing course websites and educational content." This feedback reinforced the value of student contributions and the positive impact of the DMI Program.

Throughout my experience as a DMI, I have always felt a genuine sense of equal partnership. Faculty members recognized and valued the skills I brought to the table, just as I acknowledged their expertise in their respective fields. The mutual respect and appreciation fostered an environment where conversations flourished, and my input as a DMI was always embraced. This inclusive approach enhanced the quality of our collaborations and made me feel valued. The DMI program is fundamental for pushing forward real change towards a better, inclusive, and accessible learning environment.

With this opportunity I have also built extensive teamwork and collaboration skills which allowed me to take on a leadership role within the DMI Program. The DMI team culture has always been fun, dynamic, and inspiring through our mutual passion for a common goal of improving education. I thoroughly enjoy learning from my DMI peers who have their own technical expertise. The DMI program has also supported my personal development and career experience. As a senior lead DMI, I had the opportunity to actively participate in the recruiting, interviewing, and onboarding of new DMIs. Gaining firsthand experience in project management and team leadership during my undergraduate years has prepared me for my future beyond Western. Additionally, the student-faculty partnerships I've built as a DMI have expanded my professional network.

In conclusion, as a senior lead DMI, I have witnessed the transformative impact of student-staff partnerships within the DMI Program. The DMI Program not only benefits faculty but also provides students with unique opportunities for personal and professional growth. The DMI Program creates a unique platform for students to contribute their expertise, foster collaboration, and gain real-world experience.

DMI PERSPECTIVE: MICHELLE YESCHIN

I joined the DMI program as an undergraduate student in 2021 and have progressed in the program by continuing into graduate studies. My involvement in the program as a senior DMI has been a rewarding experience that has taught me a wealth of information about the intricacies of both academia and university-level teaching. The DMI program is unique in its SaP approach, which highlights how students like myself can contribute to the development of curriculum and educational material. The partnerships I've entered with staff, faculty, and educators have provided me with a variety of skills. For example, I have honed my problem-solving skills by

addressing and assessing educational, logistical, and technical difficulties encountered in course delivery. I also developed networking skills that would have taken years to develop.

An influential aspect of the DMI Program was the onboarding process. We were introduced to theory and practical strategies, best-practices, resources, and pedagogy approaches. For example, this was when we learned about ideas such as blended versus flipped classrooms, the innovation adoption curve, and universal design concepts. The training provided me with a previously unknown grasp of different instructional strategies and considerations on how to apply these concepts in teaching. This was extremely useful as I later applied these concepts to my conversations with faculty. I have found confidence in my voice by communicating and collaborating with professors and staff. This has allowed me to interact with faculty members with an assurance of myself and to present my ideas with determination. I have applied these skills into my graduate studies, which have thus far involved relationship-building and networking that would have been far more difficult without my DMI experience.

Many of the partnerships I enter with professors are ongoing, as I both help set up their courses at the beginning of the semester and continue to assist and troubleshoot throughout the academic year. Last year, an instructor I had frequently collaborated with sent me a message saying:

> The level of support you provided me with was above and beyond the level I had experienced before. Thank you for being so responsive to my requests for help. The students and I benefited from your ideas. I am so grateful for your technical skills and efficiency in support [of the course] which saved me hours of work for what would take me way longer to do or I did not know how to do.

It was immensely rewarding to receive such a kind note with firsthand explanation of how the DMI role has made such a large difference for this instructor.

I am grateful for the opportunities I have been provided by the DMI Program for both self-improvement and as a way to give back to my student community. I have personally assisted with 50+ courses in my time as a DMI and have witnessed firsthand how I have helped students. The changes in course development and implementation to facilitate learning and improve educational accessibility have been inspiring. As a senior DMI, being in a position to take instructor enthusiasm, partner it with my student-experience knowledge, and work collaboratively to implement systemic constructive changes in education has been a highly rewarding and enriching opportunity.

DIRECTOR PERSPECTIVE: DR. SARAH MCLEAN

When I undertook the role of leading the DMI program in 2019, it was simply because I thought I had the skillset to help our school during the transition to remote learning. What I have come to realize is how transformative collaborating with the DMIs has been to my own approach to teaching.

One of the most impactful parts of the program for me is the development of a co-creating culture. While I have often used student feedback as the foundation for curricular change, with the DMI program I specifically wanted to centre the DMIs' experience when creating a vision for

SEED. As such, I hosted a retreat with all members of the SEED team where we underwent strategic planning and created our mission, vision, and values (see Figure 3). The DMIs were central in creating this plan and excellently articulated the common culture that we had worked to achieve for years within SSMD.

Figure 3. SEED's co-created vision, mission, and values statement

Created during a retreat with all members of SEED, including the DMIs.

Our culture extends to internal and external dynamics. For example, DMIs work closely with one another and often collaborate when faced with uncertain tasks. Bringing on the senior/junior DMI mentorship program has also helped with the onboarding process and allowed me to give further leadership opportunities to senior DMIs. Externally, our collaborative culture supports inter-departmental innovations. DMIs can act as a conduit through which faculty learn about their colleagues' innovations.

This culture has translated into how I interact with students in the classroom. Students in my classroom are collaborators. Every term they bring in their own unique experiences and ideas, and I end up with a much deeper understanding of both curricular content and my students than

I did at the beginning of the semester. When I took on the director role I thought I was serving my larger educational community and giving back—I had no idea how much I would benefit from this partnership.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

For those seeking to implement a similar program, there are some takeaways that we want to share. First of all, providing DMIs with onboarding, training, and collaborative skills development is essential to the sustainability of the program. We found that faculty members preferred having DMIs who had taken their courses, as this permitted more detailed feedback. Weekly meetings are essential as the work was largely completed remotely. Having icebreakers and checking in with team members allowed members to get to know one another. We have also found that having some in-person meetings and/or socials has helped the team to develop a stronger rapport. Like the OLTC initiative (Riddell et al., 2021), we have found that building students' social and transferable skills has been instrumental to the success of this program.

CHALLENGES

While we believe this initiative is a success, we recognize that there are some challenges. One challenge we have found is the continual promotion of the DMI program. Despite posters, newsletters, emails, and a website, we still find that some faculty are unaware of the DMI program. Furthermore, sometimes faculty are unclear as to whether a task falls within a reasonable request for a DMI. For example, we ensure that DMIs are not asked to do work that would be under that of teaching assistants, such as marking or administering quizzes. To address this issue, we send out newsletters every term highlighting the role of the DMIs. We also have posted our vision/mission/values posters around key buildings on our campus.

For the DMIs, balancing this role with school work can pose a challenge. DMIs employed during the school year attend classes full time. While the DMI team works hard to accommodate one another's schedules, it can be particularly challenging to respond to requests during peak midterm season and during final exams. One strategy that we have found that helps is to create an open chat on Microsoft Teams with all DMIs so that if a DMI is overwhelmed with schoolwork, they can reach out to other DMIs to step in.

Finally, the nature of the DMI program itself, in that it is student-centred, can be challenging. Generally, we try to hire DMIs that will be able to contribute to the program for at least 1.5 years. The majority of DMIs are students that are entering their final year of study, and they are hired at the beginning of the summer prior to their final year. Unfortunately, this also means that there is a relatively high turnover rate of DMIs. This can be challenging in developing partnerships with faculty as well as in helping DMIs get accustomed to their new roles. Using the junior-senior DMI mentorship approach has helped bridge the gaps in turnover and added a sense of continuity. However, we recommend that those looking to use a SaP approach in this manner also have instructional design staff that are able to help with continuity of service for long-term projects. In sum, the DMI Program has its challenges but is ultimately mutually beneficial for students and faculty in a truly reciprocal manner.

IMPACT ON THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE AT SSMD

While we have not completed a formal assessment of the impact of the DMI program on the larger student populace at SSMD, every year we create a SEED impact report that includes data about the DMI program. For example, in our 2023 report, from May 2022 to April 2023, the DMI program supported 124 faculty and staff at SEED. The DMIs created 107 course sites on our LMS and created digital media in the form of videos and modules. As noted earlier, we also engaged in more project-based work and supported 65 education-based projects, such as module design for continuing professional development and graphics for equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. We sent out a survey to faculty and staff about the impact of SEED services, and 74% of our respondents noted that the DMI program increased learner engagement, 79% noted that they had improved navigation of their LMS sites, and 91% noted that their websites were more accessible. Overall, the impact of the DMI program on the culture of learning at SSMD has been positive, and we will specifically evaluate student perceptions of the program in our future work.

CONCLUSION

This case study sought to share the development of a SaP initiative to support educational and technological change during and post-pandemic. We found that in order to support DMI onboarding, offering formalized training, weekly meetings (with informal icebreakers), and mentorship from senior DMIs has been instrumental. This also recognizes senior DMIs' expertise and helps build relationships between team members. Hiring DMIs with a variety of different technological skills (such as graphic design, coding) helped expand the services of the program and allowed the DMIs to support one another during show-and-share sessions. Finally, involving the DMIs' perspectives with regards to the mission, vision, and values of the program provided a truly authentic SaP experience. For those interested in implementing a similar program, ensure inclusion of team-building activities and consider DMI turnover, as this program has ultimately benefitted education culture at SSMD.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Priya Modi *is a graduate of the Bachelor of Medical Sciences program at Western University. She is anticipated to complete her Master of Science in Biomedical Communications at The University of Toronto in 2025.*

Michelle Yeschin *is a graduate of the Bachelor of Medical Sciences and Masters of Epidemiology programs from Western University. She is currently working on epidemiology mental health research with older adults.*

Sarah McLean *is an associate professor in the Department of Anatomy & Cell Biology at Western University. She is the Director of the Schulich Education Enhancement Division and her research interests include in active learning, students-as-partners pedagogies and community-engaged learning.*

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