

Why The RGASC's 30th Anniversary Matters: Reflecting on a Culture Shift

Old news articles and an interview with RGASC retiree Thomas Klubi shine a light on how the RGASC changed UTM's academic culture for the better.

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“It doesn't sound innovative right now, but it was very much groundbreaking and innovative at the time.”

The Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre (RGASC) celebrates its 30th anniversary this year in 2026. Though “groundbreaking” and “innovative” probably aren't the words that a student at UTM would think to use when describing the Centre, retired Learning Strategist and Program Manager, Thomas Klubi, remembers a time when they suited it well. Facilities like the RGASC that support students and help them succeed in university feel like a given for any campus nowadays, but this wasn't always the case.

“[The RGASC] was probably the first time in Canada that anybody actually tried this.” Klubi says.

Before the RGASC launched, students at UTM (known then as Erindale College) sought academic support from the Learning Centre. According to a report in *The Medium* from 1995, this facility did not adequately fulfil the range of services necessary for a student learning centre and was subsequently being revamped into an academic skills centre. This centre would be led by an experienced lecturer and counselor who would be its director. Though the team behind *The Medium* didn't know it at the time, the campus already had a name in mind: Cleo Boyd.

In 1995, Boyd was the director of a writing lab at St. Michael's College on the St. George campus and was a long-time contributor to Woodsworth College's writing lab. She was also contributing to campus programming in the Faculty of Pharmacy, Faculty of Medicine, and the Faculty of Engineering. When UTM reached out to her, it was Boyd that proposed an academic skills centre that would tackle math and study skills alongside writing. She envisioned a facility that would help students identify which skills needed improving and train staff and faculty to better teach students.

Almost thirty years later, the RGASC serves as UTM's hub for learning and teaching. Students can book appointments with instructors to address their personal areas of improvement in math, writing, and study skills. Faculty and instructors have access to pedagogical consultations, resources, and events to develop and improve their teaching. There is a variety of programming offered by the RGASC, like Head Start, an onboarding program that helps incoming first-year students transition from high school to university over the summer, and the Facilitated Study Group (FSG) program that provides students with mentors and peer group study sessions for specific courses.

“After a while, the campus itself develops what I would call an institutional memory. Head Start has been running for about 25 years, and I can't imagine the campus not having a Head Start now. It's almost like a no-brainer. The FSGs and all the other learning communities [...], that's an institutional memory..” Klubi says.

Over 30 years of operation, the RGASC became a part of UTM's culture. It's synonymous with the campus now. Students and staff alike are directed towards the RGASC when they need academic support, and it only grows more popular over time.

“Maybe two years ago, you know, I'd get three or four students show up over the hour, now I'm averaging six or eight, sometimes as many as eight or ten, so it can get quite busy. [...] I think it's a combination of more awareness by students, but there is also definitely a trend where we see students from certain courses consistently, which tells me that the instructors know about it and are telling them to come in,” says RGASC writing and study skills instructor Sean McPhail in regards to the Centre's Writing Studio Drop-In hours.

But as Klubi recalls, the academic culture at UTM was completely different thirty years ago. He joined the RGASC right after its launch in 1996, and both he and Boyd faced an uphill struggle with the Centre for many years. The concept of supporting students to the extent that the Centre does now was unheard of.

“A lot of setbacks. This was not a straight line in terms of development. There was a lot of in-fighting. There was a lack of buy-in from some departments, some professors. You don't change a culture in a day or even a year. It takes decades. [...] And so we'd have good years, then we'd have setbacks. And then you'd make another step forward, and then you'd have another setback,” Klubi says.

Much of this struggle came from the fact that the campus was set in its ways and didn't care to change or evolve. It prided itself on excellence, and its primary measure for excellence was putting students through rigorous academic challenges and seeing if they would sink or swim.

“We would regularly run into professors who would say that the high failure rate is an example or is a demonstration of how difficult university is and how demanding University of Toronto's standards are, which is ridiculous,” Klubi says.

The gap between high school and university expectations was growing at an alarming rate, and students were falling behind as a result, particularly first-year students. Many of these students would struggle with the transition to university, fall into academic probation or suspension, and eventually fail to recover and drop out. Students with English as a second language or disabilities were even less fortunate.

“Any institution, whether it's a government, any type of agency, it has feet of clay, and it will not respond instantly. And sometimes it doesn't respond until it's too late. It'll take time, but time is of the essence here,” Klubi says.

And it did take time. But slowly, Boyd's work started to shift the culture at UTM. She developed diagnostic assessments for first- and second-year students that wouldn't test or judge them, but collect data that was used to redesign curriculum and develop transition programs for students like the Head Start program. Similarly, she used diagnostics to collect data on students dealing with academic suspension/probation, which eventually helped to lay the groundwork for establishing the Promoting Academic Skills for Success (PASS) program, an initiative designed to support at-risk students and get them back on track through a series of skills-based small-group sessions.

These diagnostics also enhanced the teaching process for staff, allowing them to help students reflect on their work without worrying about grades. Boyd emphasized the importance of working with these students, and not just assessing them with marks, but helping them learn to assess themselves.

“You can't teach a stressed student because you just can't get their attention,” said Boyd in a report in *The Medium* from 1998.

These principles are now in place everywhere within the RGASC. A prime example is the one-on-one appointments, which have remained a staple of the Centre since its inception. By design, they are catered to the student who brings in an assignment and seeks support. These instructors aren't doing the work for the students; they're talking them through an approach to the assignment and identifying the gaps in the students' understanding.

The FSG program functions similarly, where a peer mentor will run study sessions that focus on the skills required to be academically successful in a specific course. "That was a program that's based on building learning communities," Klubi says. Mentors don't teach new content during these sessions but instead focus on creating an environment where the students are able to help each other review and learn, while the mentors guide them along the right path.

Boyd retired from the RGASC in 2015, and Klubi followed seven years later in 2022, but their work and the Centre's work has left an indelible mark on UTM and how it operates. The UTM Cleo Leland Boyd Teaching Excellence Award for Sessional Lecturers and the Tom Klubi Academic Peer Mentor Award respectively were set up in their honour following their retirements.

"For a long time, like over a decade, our staff was basically Cleo, myself, and whoever was on the front desk. That was it. Everybody else was part time or a volunteer. And it was almost like, is this ever going to change?"

Today, the RGASC operates out of its own space in the MN building, and the staff is over fifteen members strong.