

Knowing the Path, Walking the Path: The UT3 Program Through Tutors' Eyes

"I think asking questions is the easiest way to tutor because they typically find the answers themselves and feel a sense of accomplishment. And the module about tutoring students with disabilities was helpful for neurotypical tutoring as well—it was a reminder that all students learn differently. This module should be mandatory."

— Survey respondent on key techniques the UT3 modules helped cement for them

"I wanted to share my personal email with the student to share resources and links with them after our session ended... but I remembered that I am not obliged to do so, and that creating such boundaries is important. Additionally, I made it clear that I can't solve a student's homework, otherwise it would be academic misconduct. This made me more comfortable saying no to certain things, as well as establish boundaries as to what I can and what I can't help with."

— Survey respondent on how a particular module proved valuable in practice

"To hear those 'oh' moments that they have: that's the big reward that I look for as a tutor. To help someone go from, 'I have no clue what this is,' to 'oh, this is what this concept actually means' or 'this is the way that these concepts actually work.' That's been my most rewarding experience as a tutor so far."

— Interviewee on what they find gratifying about helping others unpack concepts

Created and run by the Peer Programming team at the Centre for Learning Strategy Support (CLSS), the University of Toronto Tutor Training (UT3) Program is a series of free training modules that any current undergraduate student on the St. George campus can complete to learn effective, ethical tutoring methods. Certified by the Canadian Tutor Standards, which are maintained by the Learning Specialists Association of Canada, UT3's nine modules cover academic integrity, referral best practices, assignment analysis, learning strategies, communication skills, and accessibility. Once fully trained, students earn co-curricular recognition (CCR notation) and can, if they choose, operate as independent contractors on the UT3 Directory, hosted on the Nimbus Learning platform. Students wishing to attract tutees through the UT3 Directory must pass a recommendation check from a postsecondary subject matter expert like a faculty member, supervisor, course instructor or teaching assistant, and must have received $\geq 73\%$ (equivalent to a B or a 3.0 GPA at the Faculty of Arts & Science) in the specific courses they hope to tutor.

To evaluate students' experiences with the UT3 Program and Directory to date, our team surveyed three constituencies: all students who had completed the program since its launch in September 2023 (57 invitees in early June 2025, of whom 11 responded), all students who had contracted at least one tutoring session through the UT3 Directory since the latter's launch (111 invitees and 4 respondents), and campus-wide administrative and instructional colleagues through our department's monthly newsletter (321 staff and faculty subscribers, of whom 144 and 149 opened the two relevant issues and 2 completed the survey). Even with a standard reminder at the halfway mark, the response rate among *tutees* and *colleagues* was clearly lower (not abnormal for unincentivized surveys). However, the 19.3% response rate that our survey of *tutors* attracted, despite no pledge of grades or gift cards, was quite competitive against an industry average for customer satisfaction surveys of about 10%–20%, which speaks to the UT3 curriculum's impression on participants.

Distinct from these surveys, CLSS's Curriculum Coordinator, Peer Programs, was trained in the foundations of ethnographic interviewing and resourcefully facilitated two focus groups of UT3 tutors, who were invited to weigh in on the rewards, challenges and aspirations that shaped their experience of the program ($n=4$, out of 6 initial volunteers who had expressed interest in taking part in a focus group). Our findings are summarized below and include recommendations from tutors who've now had real-world occasions to leverage the UT3 modules' lessons and reflect on their practical value.

Snapshot of Students’ Experiences

“I know personally that being a good student doesn’t automatically translate to being a good tutor / mentor, so these modules were helpful as a foundation for developing the soft skills required for effective tutoring.”

— Respondent on why they valued the UT3’s holistic curricular model

“Some students are afraid of expressing their thoughts and without you asking them questions they might not want to express their concerns. I realize this increasingly as I tutor more and more students.”

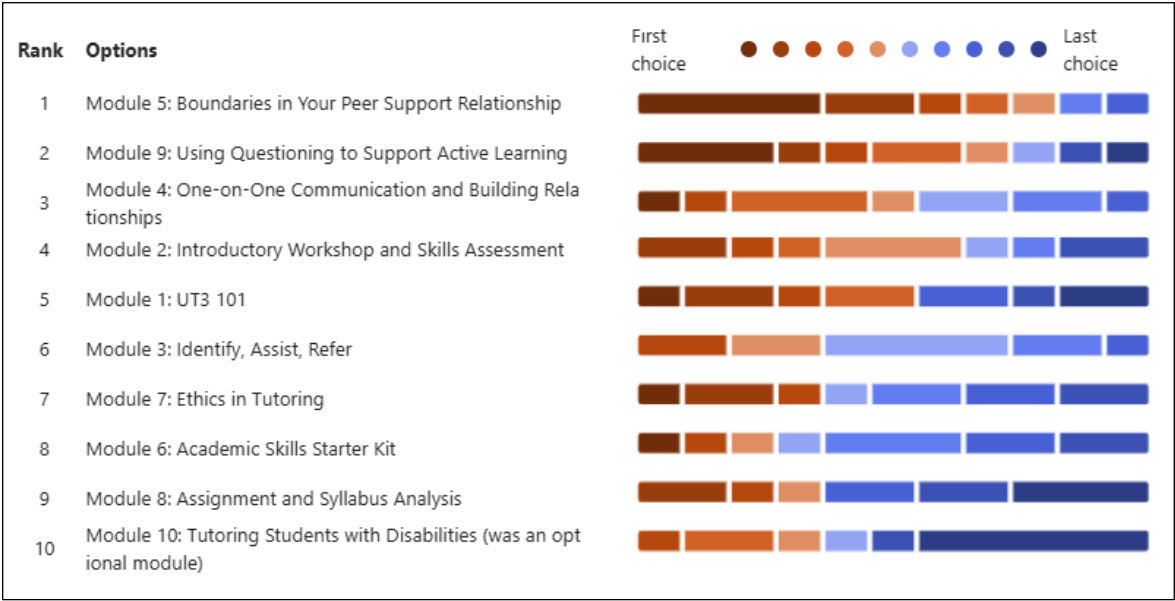
— Respondent on their evolving appreciation for certain modules

“After our third session, the student was able to apply certain rules while solving problems, which was so rewarding because they did not understand the rules or know how to apply them on our first session.”

— Respondent on an especially rewarding teaching experience

Of the *tutors* who completed our survey (n=11), nine ultimately chose to list their tutoring services on the UT3 Directory and eight were able to tutor at least one student by the time they were surveyed. Even if few in number, respondents were engaged and offered valuable comments that highlight new ways to frame the program’s merits—e.g., one respondent noted it’s rewarding to notice their own command of course material improving, and another realized that learning to ask the right questions helps tutees “feel a sense of accomplishment” that lowers pedagogical barriers. *Tutees* who completed our survey (n=4) implicitly agreed: three of four returned for more than one tutoring session, and all four indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the tutoring they received, felt the fees they paid were fair, and were able to get tutoring in a timely fashion. The four tutees who completed our survey were also unanimous that they’d sought support from the UT3 Directory instead of campus services due, in essence, to UT3’s accessible structure: campus services may have been free, but they didn’t run on evenings or weekends, were seen as understaffed, and generally weren’t available at the same times as tutees (or, per one respondent, were too far away). [Complete survey results can be found here \(UTOR SSO\).](#)

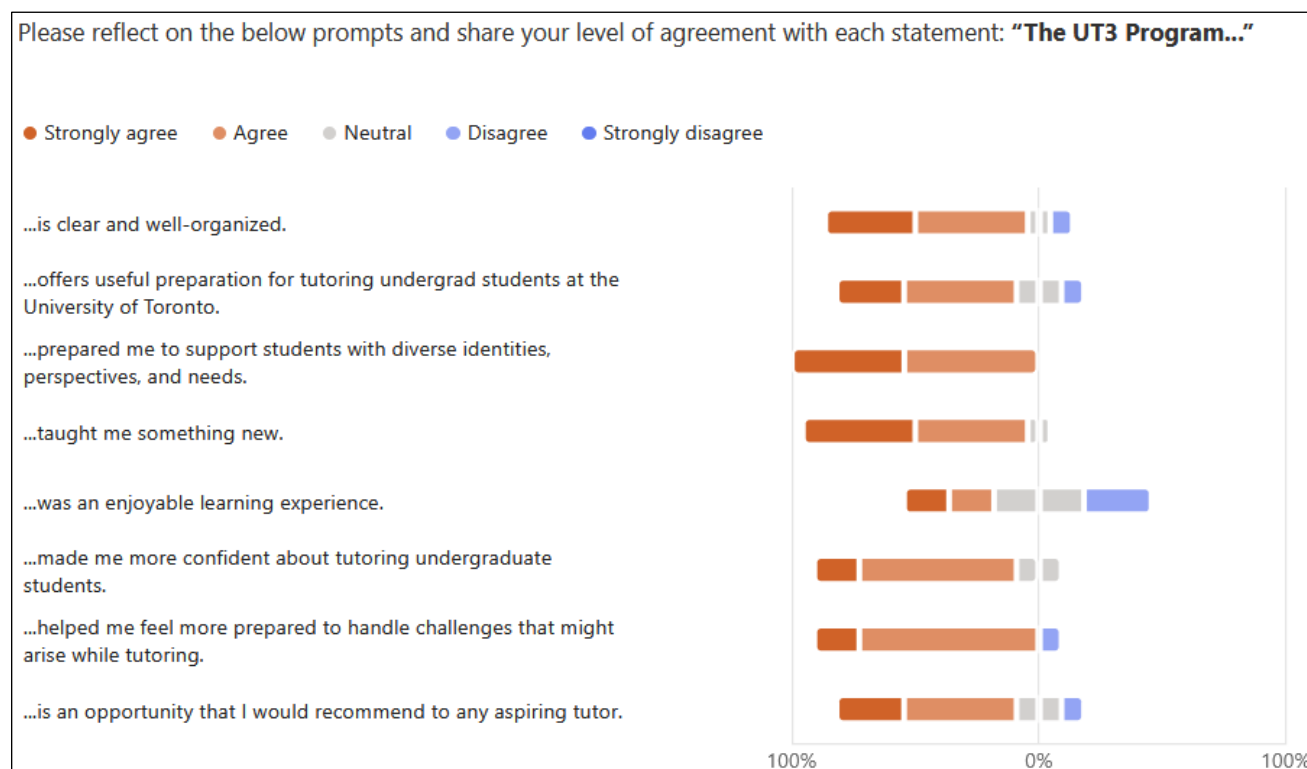
When prompted to rank the program’s modules, tutors revealed a clear appetite for transferable professional skills (e.g., establishing client–provider boundaries, building rapport through active questioning) that depart from skills felt to be amply emphasized in academic life (e.g., academic integrity, studying effectively). Seven respondents (63.6%) ranked “Boundaries in Your Peer Support Relationship” among their top three modules, with “Using Questioning to Support Active Listening” close behind (45.5% ranked this in their top three).



The lower ranking of “Tutoring Students with Disabilities” may have been an artifact of its elective status in the UT3 curriculum. Survey respondents were reminded in a bold, blue typeface to rank that module in the middle if they didn’t complete it, but this instruction may have been missed, and the prompt should be disaggregated into a separate question in future surveys. Even so, as one respondent reminds us, the module’s ranking needn’t shape its perceived worth: “it was a reminder that all students learn differently” and its lessons are essential to our team’s accessibility commitments.

Although respondents characterized the study skills and syllabus analysis portions of the curriculum as repetitive—seven offered a variation on the remark that they “already” knew this genre of content—it’s worth remembering one tutor’s thoughtful reminder that “The lowest ranked modules are not unhelpful” *per se* (“They are still helpful, but for me personally, I think I already possess these skills or learned them from somewhere else”). Indeed, aspiring tutors may feel drawn to tutoring specifically because they feel, prudently or not, that they “already” excel at studying. With this in mind, it’s helpful to recall that practical experience can recontextualize past learning: in the same way that one tutor remarked that the UT3 module on boundaries helped them realize that they needn’t communicate with tutees on unpaid time when that scenario arose in real life, respondents who had some level of directory activity or tutoring activity were likelier to indicate they’d learned certain skills, including skills relevant to assignment analysis and academic misconduct, elsewhere characterized as “forgettable.” To wit, deploying a skill in real life helps one to discover how well one has actually learned it.

When prompted to reflect on a set of value propositions that capture higher-order learning objectives, respondents saw clear merit in the preparation they received, overall. The proposition that drew the most ambivalence (“was an enjoyable learning experience”) was arguably the most subjective of the set, but dovetails with an observation, made both by survey respondents and focus group participants, that the live modules felt “too long.”



Our survey of colleagues attracted two respondents: one instructor and one administrator. The instructor hadn't heard of the UT3, whereas the administrator had, further noting they'd referred students to the UT3 Directory. They also shared this contextual tidbit, a vital reminder of the many cognate services that University of Toronto colleagues endorse, promote and maintain: "Many of our graduate students offer private tutoring and we can vouch for their past experience teaching precisely the courses that undergrads struggle with. Students who are currently TAs are not permitted to be on our in-house directory of potential tutors." We appreciate the glimpse this offers into companion services that either complement our own or represent opportunities for partnership.

Tutors' Reflections on the Program and the Directory

"I'm also just thinking of specific types of courses that I've taken, and a lot of them deal with sensitive topics as well, like racism and colonialism. I'm thinking that, like, a cultural sensitivity—or some kind of module would be really useful in that case."

— On trainings this tutor may value if expanding her practice beyond math

"If I had to say something about the training it's that it feels very long. And it feels as if we're trying—there's, like, a bunch of core skills we're trying to hit, and we're trying to hit all the skills, even if a lot of people come into the program already are familiar with these."

— On the challenge of tailoring programming to all levels

"I like that there was a more open discussion about academic integrity and stuff, because I felt like that's something that might even benefit—I think it would benefit every single student in university, not just tutors."

— On UT3 filling some perceived campus-wide gaps

The four students who took part in our focus groups came from a mix of fields: economics and public policy, mathematics and statistics, life sciences, engineering physics and equity studies. Three characterized themselves as experienced tutors whose attraction to the UT3 Program was practical: chiefly the appeal of outsourcing the task of **recruiting customers** to an institutional directory, along with the need to earn **income**, and a desire to gain **teaching experience** as professional development. One participant identified as quite new to tutoring and was drawn to the UT3 Program out of curiosity. Among our participants' wide range of impressions, four noteworthy curricular themes recurred:

1. The perception that synchronous sessions were *hard to find time for* or too long, in contrast with asynchronous sessions that students felt freer to work on whenever convenient. One participant cited the example of a friend who graduated before being able to complete all necessary synchronous modules. Another noted that the number of breakout rooms made the live sessions feel "extremely long." Although this was a top recurring theme, it needn't imply that more modules warrant recorded editions, and it might simply suggest a realigning of live sessions' start times with historically popular start times.
2. The desire for more techniques they characterized as *practical*, in contrast with what some saw as timeworn reminders about general skills or worthy qualities they "already" had or "already" knew ("It's like, 'hey, you have to be empathetic, hey, you have to listen'—which, yes, but also, I feel like I've been told this five times already throughout the workshop series").
3. The desire for more guidance working with students in computational fields where success still hinges on a *baseline command* of idiomatic Canadian English—e.g., students who misinterpret a math problem's phrasing will embark upon a sensible solution to a question that wasn't asked without realizing this has happened. Tutors may feel less confident helping students pinpoint where and why certain linguistic misunderstandings happened, or explaining how to interpret a problematic, yet critical, turn of phrase.

4. The perception that more *subject-specific training*—even up-to-date, *course-specific* insights—would have helped to avert quandaries that arose while tutoring courses that had changed dramatically since the tutors themselves had taken those courses (e.g., ENG 100, MAT 135).

This last theme punctuates a need to heighten tutors' understanding of how their training hones skills that are subject-agnostic. Tutors who are versed at eliciting questions that cut to the core of a reading (even if the reading list has changed) or helping students decipher and dissect assignments (even if the assignments have changed) will find these skills handy no matter how a course changes, as all courses invariably will.

It's worth noting that the tutor who struggled to help her tutee through a radically changed ENG 100 was, at the time they tutored this course, a second-year life sciences major. It seems less likely that an upper-year English major would have found the changed syllabus quite as daunting (and it's understandable that a second-year life sciences major would find this daunting). The underlying issues are beyond the scope of our project, but there may be merit to reminding trainees more overtly that being an adept student isn't the same as being a subject matter expert. An overhauled course may rattle a tutor who believes they hold the duties of a subject matter expert—and they'll contend more deftly with this challenge if they understand it's the analytic skills of studenthood that effective tutors apply to new problems, and if they feel confident delineating what is and isn't their responsibility or their wheelhouse.

Secondary recurring themes included the observation that tutoring involves a startling administrative workload, spanning everything from learning how to reasonably price one's services to learning how to manage a fluctuating schedule whose moving pieces are housed in multiple calendars (although students did clarify that they don't see these administrative gaps as a shortcoming of the UT3). Participants also had ample UX/UI-related commentary and suggestions for the Nimbus Learning platform, which was described as being "janky" in specific ways. Even knowing we can't swiftly amend these deficits, they nonetheless offer a window into tutors' experiences:

- Nimbus treats rescheduled appointments as cancellations, and it displays each tutee's cancellation frequency, which feels punitive when rescheduling is sorted out by mutual agreement well in advance.
- Nimbus's booking system doesn't integrate well with third-party calendars, making it challenging at times to foresee and preclude scheduling conflicts.
- One tutor also relayed an incident where Nimbus's calendar was displaying only *past* dates to prospective tutees, potentially resulting in lost income. (Four survey respondents also independently described Nimbus as slow in one way or another—either "laggy," "lags," or as incurring an unanticipated two-day delay between tutors' sending of messages and tutees' receipt of those same messages.)
- Nimbus's desktop and mobile interfaces don't include the same features. In particular, when accessed through a desktop browser, the interface is significantly limited in contrast with its mobile counterpart. This was also noticed by a survey respondent ("The website does not work nearly as well as the app").

Rigours, Rewards, Recommendations

“I think that the trainings are really great to have, like, a theoretical foundation of, ‘Okay, this is what you should do, this is what we know works best from prior experience, this, this, this, that.’ But there always is going to be that period after the training where you do some tutoring—you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s where that comes in,’ or ‘Oh, that’s where that comes in. That kind of transition period of application. So, [although] I personally appreciate the more specific skills in the training, because those are the stuff I didn’t know, I still found all of the training to be applicable... it’s just, it took time to really digest it. And in order to digest it, you really have to go and do the tutoring.”

— Participant on how firsthand experience recontextualizes past learning

When evaluating the insights UT3 attendees generously shared with us, it’s vital to recall how common it is for young people to feel that certain lessons are old hat until specific events spark realizations about the value of those lessons. In the same way that aspiring tutors train up in the principles behind key study strategies—interleaving, spaced repetition, dual coding, retrieval practice—to help fellow students hone their *learning* skills, they also learn firsthand that the enterprise of honing one’s *tutoring* skills requires that same successive, cumulative practice. As one tutor remarked when describing how consequential asking the right questions can be: “I realize this increasingly as I tutor more and more students.” There’s no substitute for experience, and gathering perspectives from more seasoned tutors another year down the road may be a worthy venture.

The foregoing pages bring into sharp relief three themes whose actionability range from the immediate to the eventual. First, students perk up to material they see as **novel for their developmental stage** (e.g., approaches to setting boundaries will tend to feel newer to twentysomethings than study skills they believe they “already” know) and as **practically packaged** (e.g., not just reminders to actively listen and be empathetic, but the mechanics of formulating questions that demonstrate that you’re listening). This perhaps speaks to a need to lightly reframe how certain skills are presented. Second, the recurring comment that the trainings were “too long” must be understood against a backdrop of students’ busy lives and the nonmandatory nature of any co-curricular activity—i.e., there may be well-attested pedagogical value to breakout rooms, but if the breakout rooms aren’t for academic credit, they’re going to be a harder sell. Given how costly it can be to offer live, facilitated sessions, there may be merit in shortening certain modules or **shifting certain modules to a self-paced format**.

Third, the delicate balance between **subject-specific vs. subject-agnostic** strategies, always topical in our department, was a focal point for tutors who felt unsettled by changes in courses they were technically qualified to tutor. This theme will likely re-emerge as time goes by, affirming a need to remind students that because *all* courses will change, there are certain unifying competencies the program is designed to foster. Some may include skillsets that aren’t yet built into UT3’s modules (e.g., language training for math tutors whose duties ineluctably involve deconstructing word problems with multilingual students). Some include the dogged wherewithal to root out how specific courses are changing, which perhaps ought not fall to tutors or the Peer Programming team in isolation, and could perhaps inform new interdepartmental partnerships with academic units.