

Assessment of the Fall 2011 International Students Trial Program College of Arts and Sciences

by Felicia Beardsley
Associate Dean
College of Arts and Sciences

25 June 2013

Before the La Verne Experience had been conceived or had even entered its planning stage focused on Freshmen Learning Communities, the College of Arts and Sciences initiated a learning community specifically for international students as a response to a call of concern by its faculty and the Academic Advising Office. In Fall 2011, the college piloted the International Students Learning Community, which was, by all measures, an unqualified success. It provided incoming international students with a cross-cultural experience in a supportive environment, facilitated language acquisition and use, and better prepared these students for university-level coursework through an intentional acculturation process that bolstered student confidence, interaction, persistence, and learning. The learning community consisted of three linked classes: HUM 101 (American Traditions & Challenges), WRT 109 (Introduction to Expository Writing), and ESL 105/105P (Communications Skills & Practicum), and was designed specifically for incoming traditional-age, undergraduate-level international students who could place into WRT 109, at a minimum. The overall goal of the learning community was to address a number of issues identified in the recent ESL (2010) program review, including:

1. The lack of resources directed toward the needs of international students, including advising, academic services such as tutoring, and a specialized introductory course/training on American culture and customs.
2. The lack of preparation for university-level coursework and a pervasive stigma attached to ESL and international students.
3. High academic disqualification rates coupled with low graduation rates.
4. A long overdue re/evaluation of admission, curriculum, policies and placement of international students.
5. The need for more cultural immersion experiences, perhaps even a structure following a cohort model to promote group support and awareness.

Recommendations in the program review included:

1. Development of a “First Year Experience” type class for international students.
2. Enhance international student services to include academic advising, cross-cultural training, and student activities.

3. Revise, develop and expand the curriculum to include core content classes and elective/advanced classes with student cohorts for a total of 12 to 14 semester hours of classes each semester, so ESL students can better integrate into regular college classes.
4. Enhance academic support by insuring access to regular ESL tutors in math, writing and other content-specific courses in the Learning Enhancement Center and/or for study skills classes.
5. Include other academic departments and campus programs (such as the Learning Enhancement Center and International Student Organization) in the support network for ESL students, and enhance resources designed specifically with the needs of ESL/international students in mind.

The response to at least some of the ESL program review recommendations was the Fall 2011 trial learning community. As a strategy, the learning community was intended to address the most fundamental elements of the program review issues/recommendations—a curriculum that created a first-year type experience/acclimation to college, prepared for better integration into regular college classes and included academic skills for success, and provided academic support beyond the classroom—in a cohort model that emphasized collaboration, connection and shared learning in a community of practice.

Three existing classes were linked to form this trial learning community, all of which placed a heavy emphasis on navigating the academic landscape of expectations in an American college with English skills as fundamental to college success; students were expected to select a fourth class of their own choosing to round out their semester's schedule. As part of the triad of required classes, an existing class, Humanities 101, was resurrected from the 1985 catalog of existing courses, retooled with up-to-date curriculum and resources, and repositioned with acculturation as a focal point. Linked to this was an existing Writing class (WRT 109) designated specifically for international students only, and led by an instructor trained in the unique requirements of second-language speakers and users; this person was also assigned as the ESL/international student tutor in the Learning Enhancement Center. The third class in the learning community was an additional communication practicum, ESL 105/105P. All students were expected to select a fourth class of their own choosing, based on interest and/or the need to fulfill a general education requirement.

Background

International students in La Verne's traditional-age undergraduate program have suffered from neglect. Their attrition rate was catastrophic (only eleven of the 105 international students enrolled since 2002 had graduated by 2010), they lacked preparation for courses on the main campus, and their minimal acculturation was burdensome to placement, faculty, and advising.

Our international students were falling through the cracks between the International Student Office, Academic Advising, placement in classes with faculty who seemed to lack sensitivity toward the needs of international students, and an underfunded and under-resourced ESL program that was expected to be the academic anchor for these students. The recent ESL program review provides a devastating commentary on the many issues facing this population. At root is a lack of attention and resources, low admission requirements, as well as a reluctance to recognize the University's increasing international recruitment efforts and the accompanying obligations to insure these students succeed.

For the 2011-12 academic year, the university anticipated around 30 new international students in the traditional-age undergraduate program. The College of Arts and Sciences Dean's office wanted to address the most critical population among these new students—incoming freshmen internationals—through a trial program set to maximize academic success and acculturation within a budgetary environment already stressed by a larger than expected entering class of traditional undergraduate students. The underlying challenge was to develop a learning community that could promote an environment of shared purpose among a diversity of learners (by virtue of the range of nationalities present in the classroom), each of whom brought to the table cultural differences in learning, knowing and performing.

Proposed Trial Program

The trial program drew upon a cohort model that included an enhanced orientation and a prescribed (though not required) academic program for the first semester of the first year for incoming freshmen international students. The idea was to create a linked set of courses where classroom sessions would encourage the idea and practice of community, reinforce the notion that collaborative learning is mutually beneficial, develop a community of peers, and ultimately establish deep connections between students, faculty and students, and to the institution. As appropriate, this small group of students was advised into a learning community that co-enrolled them into three classes:

1. A special section of WRT 109, Introduction to Expository Writing, taught by a trained ESL faculty member who also served as the writing tutor for international students in the Learning Enhancement Center (Jose Perez-Gonzales). Those students who qualified could register for WRT 110, College Writing A; these students were exempt from the international cohort learning community and were permitted to register for the full complement of their general education and majors courses.
2. HUM 101, American Traditions & Challenges, re-designed as a First Year Experience class for acculturation, with field trips focusing on Southern California, guest lecturers drawn from the university faculty, and taught in conjunction with WRT 109 and ESL 105/P (Sean Bernard). The course also meets two General Education requirements: Humanities InterArea breadth requirement and Values Orientation.
3. The combined ESL 105/P, Communication Skills & Practicum, an intensive language workshop (Steven Pell). This class meets a General Education requirement for a second semester foreign language for international students.
4. One elective course of student's choice (2-4 units), as appropriate.

Assessment Plan in Original Proposal

The original proposal for the International Students Learning Community called for an assessment of the trial learning community to determine its effectiveness through data coalesced from different points in time: from the Fall 2011 semester, after the following Spring 2012 semester, and for retention rates some point in the second/Sophomore year. The list of data points identified in the original proposal included:

1. WRT 109 pass rate (Fall only)

2. Student & Faculty focus groups (during and after the fall semester)
3. Success rates in WRT 110 (Spring semester)
4. Comparison of Freshman-to-Sophomore retention rates to previous years

Though not explicitly stated in the original assessment plan, the comparison group for the cohort/learning community students was the non-cohort international students who enrolled in other classes offered to the general student population. This comparison, it was expected, would help us gauge the ‘impact’ of the trial learning community on key outcomes for the cohort.

Results

The original intent of the International Students Learning Community was to address some of the deficits highlighted in the ESL program review. The cohort model put in place during Fall 2011 represented a timid step in that direction, where incoming freshmen international students who tested into WRT 109 were co-enrolled into the trial learning community. Of the 15 entering undergraduate internationals, nine were classified as Freshmen and six were identified as Transfer students. Six of the Freshmen students initially enrolled in the trial cohort, and though the group was small it afforded an opportunity to provide more individualized attention to these students. It was our expectation that students testing into the other two WRT classes below WRT 111 (WRT 106 and WRT 110) would be given the option to take HUM 101, as this class was intended in part to be an acculturation experience preparing these students for life and academic requirements in an American university.

Of the 15 entering international students, one (a cohort member) withdrew from the university during the Fall 2011 semester for academic reasons, a second (a Transfer student) withdrew at the end of the Fall 2011 semester (no reason provided), and a third (a non-cohort Freshman) transferred to USC for the Fall 2012 semester.

Following the protocols initially established during the planning phase of the Fall 2011 International Student cohort, we found the following:

1. WRT 109 Pass Rate (Fall 2011 only)

All students passed their Fall WRT courses. Cohort students enrolled in WRT 106, 109 (attached to the learning community), and 110 and passed their respective classes with grades ranging from CRD to A-. Three students were enrolled in WRT 109, one in WRT 106 (Writing Essentials) and one in WRT 110 (College Writing A). Non-cohort students who enrolled in WRT (either 110 or 111) also passed their courses with grades ranging from CRD to A, with one W. Five non-cohort students transferred in the equivalent of WRT 110 and/or 111 with grades of B and C (Table 1).

In addition, by the end of the Fall 2011 semester, cohort students attained a higher average overall GPA than the non-cohort international students: 3.55 versus 3.04 (includes both Freshmen and Transfers). Even when the non-cohort international students are divided by admittance group, the average GPA of cohort students was still higher: cohort—3.55, non-cohort Freshmen—3.24, and Transfer—2.94. All students remained in good standing, with GPAs above or equal to 2.0 (Table 2).

Additional courses completed by cohort students included MATH 102 (Intermediate Algebra), 104 (Algebra) and 170 (Math and Society); all passed with respectable grades from CRD to A-. Two of

the students took SPAN 100 (Elementary Spanish), and one took on BUS 200 (Information Technology); all classes were passed, with grades ranging from C to A.

By contrast, non-cohort international students took a whole host of classes ranging from MATH 102 and 104, Psychology, Spanish, Business, Speech Communication, Humanities, and Art. Transfer students took more upper division and majors courses with the majority specializing in Business. Like the cohort students, all passed with grades ranging from CRD to A (with only one F in the group), but on average they displayed a slightly lower passage rate than the cohort group.

Table 1. Grades Received for WRT Classes, Fall 2011 and Spring 2012

WRT		106	109	110	111
Cohort	Fall 2011	B+	A-	CRD	
			B		
			B		
	Spring 2012		B	B	A
				C	
				F	
Non-Cohort	Transfer			CSWA	CSWB
				B	B
				B	C
				C	C
				C	
				C	
	Fall 2011			CRD	B
				A	B-
				B-	W
	Spring 2012				A-
					A-

2. Student & Faculty Focus Groups

The planned focus groups ultimately became casual interviews with the instructors of each class within the cohort triad, and no interviews or focus groups with the students—this, a victim of higher priority tasks related to 2011-12 academic whirlwind of a year that brought an influx of a larger than expected general student population in the college, the inauguration of our new university president, and the first planning stages of the La Verne Experience initiative. However, in lieu of a student focus group, comments were extracted from the course evaluations generated in the trial learning community.

According to the instructors, students in the cohort quickly gained a degree of comfort speaking in front of others, including their instructors, and with their fellow students. They also appeared more confident than the other internationals in the non-cohort classes taught by these same instructors. Cohort students generally seemed better prepared in class, and in their interactions with the other students who were not part of the overall cohort. These students could more easily navigate the university campus, student services such as the library, and administrative processes like registration for their January and Spring 2012 classes. In general, cohort students acculturated into the American university system with ease and little difficulty. According to the instructors, cohort students bonded with one another, they developed strong supportive relationships between themselves and with instructors, and they seemed to have gained a greater sense of belonging to the university.

According to the cohort students, both their instructors and classes not only encouraged interaction, but were helpful, moved through information at a pace just right for international students, and were taught by instructors who were patient, accessible, and respectful. No question was out of bounds, and instructors promoted a comfortable environment of inclusivity and equanimity. Together, the classes assisted in the acculturation process, helping students to know more about the United States, American culture, and navigating the university. In general, cohort students felt welcomed and part of the university environment, ready to move into and participate with the mainstream population of traditional undergraduates.

Some of the comments made by these students include:

“He was very helpful and patient . . . ”

“He tried to make comfortable environment for students.”

“Very helpful with schoolwork aside from the material such as registration and LEC [Learning Enhancement Center].”

“Helping students know more about the US and the ULV.”

“Helped me very much as an international student getting to know the school, how to register, where to go for help etc.”

“He teaches in a pace that international students can follow.”

One of the benefits in delaying the review of this trial program for a year is the real advantage hindsight brings, and another opportunity to offer the international cohort learning community. In Fall 2012, the international cohort learning community was offered as part of the inaugural Freshmen La Verne Experience. The same three courses were linked—HUM 101, WRT 109, and ESL 105/P. This time, however, the reviewer had an opportunity to meet with students in the co-enrolled cohort. The student discussion offered some insights into the first semester as an incoming international Freshman: it was scary, people (both students and faculty) talk fast and are hard to understand, they missed home and their families, and it took time to get used to life in an American university, schedules for classes and the like. Of their cohort and experience in the co-enrolled courses, these students described the faculty as enthusiastic and echoed the comments expressed above—they experienced a level of comfort in their community of peers that they did not have outside their cohort; they appreciated participation in shared learning; they felt as if they were part of a collective community of support in both their personal and academic lives; they described a sense of connectedness and belonging; and they were genuinely thankful to have a structured and supported pathway for their continued college experience.

Table 2. Average GPA for both Cohort and Non-Cohort International Students for Academic Year 2011-12

	FALL 2011	SPRING 2012	END-OF-ACADEMIC YEAR, 2011-12	
			ULV	Overall
Cohort	3.55	3.03	3.31	3.28
Non-Cohort	3.04	3.13	3.11	3.11
Transfers	2.94	2.89	2.92	2.92
Non-Transfers	3.24	3.72	3.53	3.52
TOTAL	3.22	3.10	3.21	3.20

3. Success Rates in WRT 110 (Spring 2012 semester)

In the Spring 2012 semester, cohort pass rates for the next WRT class in sequence (WRT 109, 110 and 111), pass rates were more varied than in Fall 2011. Four of the five cohort students passed their succeeding WRT course, with grades ranging from A to C. Only one student failed the WRT 110 class with a grade of F. Two of the non-cohort students enrolled in WRT 111, with both receiving a grade of A- (Table 1).

4. Comparison of Freshman-to-Sophomore Retention Rates to Previous Years

Retention rates, calculated from Fall-to-Fall semesters, provide an interesting snapshot of international student success. Between 2002 and 2010, of the 102 international students admitted and registered for their first semester, 52% remained in good standing, 37% went onto academic probation or were academically disqualified, and 10% actually graduated. Retention numbers for these students are rather bleak, with the highest retention of 50% in the 2002 cohort but falling to 9% in the 2008 cohort. There were several cohorts within the intervening years that did not return to the university after one year (information compiled from university Fact Books).

By contrast, the 2011 entering cohort of international students had a retention rate of 85.7%, with 12 of the 14 students attending classes in Fall 2012 (Table 3). This rate is higher than the average retention rate of the main body of traditional undergraduates, which has ranged between 78% and 88% since 2002 with an average of 83.8%. Even the average GPAs of the largest entering international student classes since 2002 (namely the 2008 and 2009 classes) were lower than the average GPA of the 2011 class: 2.15 (2008) and 2.35 (2009), compared to 3.22 (2011). One of the byproducts of the cohort group of international students is that 100% of these students returned for Fall 2012 classes, while 77.8% of the non-cohort students returned for Fall 2012 classes. The suggestion with these numbers is the likelihood that feelings of connectedness among the international cohort group may have played a role in the returns, whether it was connections with one another, with the faculty or with the university.

The caveat to comparing both retention rates and average GPAs of cohort students with international students prior to 2011 is a change in Admissions requirements for these students put into place late in 2010. With little to no consultation, the upper administrative levels of the university unilaterally increased the English proficiency requirement for entering international students (e.g., increasing the acceptable TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] passage rate from 500 to 550) while at the same time removing La Verne's English Proficiency Test in an effort to admit better prepared

students. The first entering class to be held to the increased standards was the Fall 2011 international students. The new standards effectively eliminated the lower levels of ESL courses and expected students to be proficient enough to enter the first levels of the remedial WRT sequence (WRT 106 and 109). Unfortunately, the new standards have also confounded possible comparisons between the 2011 entering cohort and those of preceding years.

Table 3. Retention Rates for International Undergraduate Students, Academic Year 2011/12 to Fall 2012

	FALL 2011	SPRING 2012	%	FALL 2012	%
Cohort	5	5	100%	5	100%
Non-Cohort	9	8	88.9%	7	77.8%
Transfers	6	5	83.3%	5	83.3%
Non-Transfers	3	3	100%	2	66.7%
TOTAL	14	13	92.9%	12	85.7%

What We Have Learned

Overall, it appears that the cohort learning community model trialed in Fall 2011 for incoming international Freshmen students was highly successful. From the standpoint of final grades for that Fall semester, along with passage rates of the succeeding semester, and the higher than expected returns in the Fall 2012 semester, the cohort group exceeded expectations. Students were more confident and felt better prepared to enter the mainstream population of traditional undergraduates. Performance levels within the entering Fall 2011 class of internationals also indicated this, as those students participating in the trial cohort achieved better grades, could more easily interact with others (instructors and fellow students alike), were more fully acculturated into the American culture and university system, and demonstrated greater competence in comparable courses than the non-cohort international Freshmen and transfer students.

In short, the cohort model worked. Cohort students were engaged in what they were learning, they were more connected with each other and their instructors, they passed their classes both within and outside the learning community, they persisted from one semester to the next, and they gained an advantage over the other incoming international students through their accelerated acculturation to American university expectations. The cohort model should be continued, with additional international students placed into the triad of classes that make up this cohort.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Attached are some of the supplementary materials used in creating this review: Outline for the Fall 2011 Trial Program for International Students, and the comment sections of the course reviews for the initial Fall 2011 International Students Learning Community.

Fall 2011 International Students Trial Program CAS Dean's Office

Background:

International students in La Verne's traditional-age undergraduate program suffer from neglect. Their attrition rate is catastrophic (only eleven of the 105 international students enrolled since 2002 have graduated), they lack preparation for courses on the main campus, and their minimal acculturation is burdensome to placement, faculty, and advising.

Our international students are falling through the cracks between the International Student Office, Academic Advising, placement in classes with insensitive faculty, and an underfunded ESL program that is expected to be the academic anchor for these students. The recent ESL program review provides a devastating commentary on the many issues facing this population. At root are lack of attention and resources, as well as a reluctance to recognize the University's increasing international recruitment efforts.

For the 2011-12 academic year, we anticipate around 30 new international students in the traditional-age undergraduate program. The College of Arts and Sciences Dean's office will address one aspect of the problem, incoming freshmen internationals, through a trial program that maximizes academic success and acculturation with the minimal budget available, taking into account the new TOEFL requirements.

Program:

The pilot is a cohort model that includes an enhanced orientation and a prescribed (not required) academic program for the first year. If appropriate, student will be advised into:

5. A special section of **WRT 109 (4)** taught by a trained ESL faculty who also serves as their writing tutor in the LEC (Jose Perez-Gonzales). (Qualified students could go into WRT 110).
6. **Hum 101: American Traditions & Challenges (4)**: re-designed as a FYE class for acculturation, with field trips focusing on Southern California, guest lecturers from faculty, and taught in conjunction with WRT (Isela Pena-Rager).
7. **ESL 105 (2)**: intensive language workshop (Steven Pell).
8. Course of student's choice (2-4 units) as appropriate

We are exploring a special speech class in January for international students. In the Spring 2012, they will take the sequential writing class, another intensive ESL if necessary, and courses of their choice.

Funding Needs:

Faculty can be covered via adjunct salaries at no additional cost; additional budget is needed for ESL lab resources, as is funding for bus/field trips.

Assessment:

WRT 109 pass rate (fall only)

Student & Faculty focus groups (during and after the fall semester)

Success rates in WRT 110s (spring semester).

Compare Freshman-to-Sophomore retention rates to previous years.

University of La Verne -- Course Evaluation Comment Summary - Fall 2011

Instructor:
Main Campus

CRN:

Campus:

Course: **WRT 109: Intro to Expository Writing**
Central Campus

Part of Term:

11. What were the instructor's most satisfactory teaching attributes?

He teaches in a pace that international students can follow

He is very nice. He helps us to know how to write in America.

12. What could the instructor do to improve his/her teaching effectiveness?

Do more writing in class

If he can give the essay back with his advise, that will be better

13. What were the most satisfactory aspects of this course?

Very good teacher

He taught very particular, very easy to understand.

14. How could this course be improved?

Giving more advisings to students.

University of La Verne -- Course Evaluation Comment Summary - Fall 2011

Instructor:

CRN:

Campus:

Main Campus

Course: **HUM 101: American Tradns & Challenges**
Central Campus

Part of Term:

11. What were the instructor's most satisfactory teaching attributes?

He was very helpful and patient when student asking question to him.

He will help students for the questions when students have questions

Very helpful with schoolwork aside from the material such as registration and LEC

He tried to make comfortable environment for studnets

fun

12. What could the instructor do to improve his/her teaching effectiveness?

He can make some correct when he give the homework back.

nothing

13. What were the most satisfactory aspects of this course?

the professor is very nice.

Helping students know more about the US and the ULV

Helped me very much as an international student getting to know the school, how to register, where to go for help ect.

This course helps me to understand Amercian cultures.

not too much work

14. How could this course be improved?

It can cover more areas that is students need for their American life.

The course should be two hours per session so that we can go on trips outside together.

More activities are need to make the more fun class.

nothing.

University of La Verne -- Course Evaluation Comment Summary - Fall 2011

Instructor:

CRN:

Campus:

Main Campus

Course: **ESL 105: Communication Skills in ESL**

Part of Term:

Central Campus

11. What were the instructor's most satisfactory teaching attributes?

His advisings are helpful

he was very nice

12. What could the instructor do to improve his/her teaching effectiveness?

he should more focus on speaking and listening.

nothing

13. What were the most satisfactory aspects of this course?

It is helpful for me to improve my english

14. How could this course be improved?

More focus on speaking and listening. complete the english lab.

nothing

University of La Verne -- Course Evaluation Comment Summary - Fall 2011

Instructor:

CRN:

Campus:

Main Campus

Course: **ESL 105P: Comm Skills in ESL Practicum**
Central Campus

Part of Term:

11. What were the instructor's most satisfactory teaching attributes?

he was very serious and nice.

His advisings were focus on students defect.

12. What could the instructor do to improve his/her teaching effectiveness?

nothing.

he can give more time on speaking and listening areas.

13. What were the most satisfactory aspects of this course?

the teacher was very kindful.

Helping me improve my english language.

14. How could this course be improved?

nothing.

More focus on speaking and listening.