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Student Veterans' Heroic Journey in Higher Education

College campuses across the United States continue to see an increase in student veteran enrollment. This group's nontraditional qualities necessitate that institutions evaluate their climate, services, and understanding of veterans to determine whether existing resources are adequate and strategic for promoting a successful first year.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), all first-year students must complete a first-year "101" orientation. In 2013, several student veterans contacted their advisors about their frustration with the mandatory orientations, which addressed a broad range of topics including how to make friends, formulate a budget, and manage homesickness. A closer review of syllabi from the various first-year classes found the content disproportionately geared toward traditional students. Based on the veterans' unique backgrounds and needs, the school's provost approved development of a first-year course specific to the group. UIUC piloted the course in Fall 2014.



An open-house event brought together University of Illinois student veterans earlier this year. Photo credit: Anna Flanagan

The pilot included eight veterans who were new to campus and agreed to complete surveys and participate in multiple focus groups to share their experiences in the course. The pilot's success led the school to offer four sections of the veteran-focused course, with a total of 41 students completing it. The first-year transition course for veterans is an eight-week, two hour-credit seminar offered in the fall semester to first-year and transfer students. It is designed to fulfill several aims, including:

- welcoming new student veterans and educating them about support resources on campus and within the community;

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- supporting academic readiness through skills development (e.g., note-taking, reading comprehension, effective writing strategies, public speaking);
- creating a safe, communal space where student veterans can reflect on their transition, beliefs, and assumptions and discuss their new mission as students with veteran peers; and
- integrating them into the university via campus activities and student organizations.

Course Structure

A fundamental part of the course was creating a strong community where student veterans felt safe and comfortable discussing their transition from the military to a large, public university, along with communicating their experiences and applying curricula to their personal lives. To facilitate this, we structured the course around concepts contained within adult learning theory—specifically andragogy and transformational learning—and included a mix of formal lectures, discussion, student mentor and academic advisor meetings, and formal writing and speaking exercises (see Osborne, 2016).

It is crucial that veterans have opportunities to reflect on and disclose their experiences. However, the hyper-masculine environment of the military and its cultural emphasis on being strong, withholding emotion, and viewing disclosure of vulnerable personal experiences as a sign of weakness present challenges for educators (Osborne, 2014). For this course, students engaged in numerous reflective exercises along with small-group dialogue to establish a setting of trust and mutuality. To facilitate active reflection, weekly prompts required students to complete a one- to two-page paper and subsequently lead a brief in-class discussion. Some of the prompts included:

- Tell us about your military service and what you're studying at the university.
- What are your fears about being a student?
- What does it mean to live authentically?
- What is your mission or purpose?
- How can this university better support military-connected students?

After completing this process, students said they felt better knowing their peers were grappling with similar issues.

Another vital part of the course involved getting students to think critically. The military often facilitates education through hands-on training and classroom teaching, during which students are evaluated through multiple-choice exams that pinpoint a single correct answer. The first-year course, designed to help develop critical thinking skills, subsequently introduced a technique called the QQC to help identify a question, quote, or comment that arose from students' readings. For example, students read an article about the top five barriers to nontraditional students graduating college and had to

“ The (QQC) exercise helped students develop active-reading skills and prepared them to enter class with defined speaking points about what they read and how it affected their thinking. ”

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identify three QOCs. The exercise helped students develop active-reading skills and prepared them to enter class with defined speaking points about what they read and how it affected their thinking.

The Hero's Journey

Expanding on curricula to support introspection and the development of shared community, The Hero's Journey, a narrative pattern identified by mythologist Joseph Campbell (1990), was a popular theme explored and discussed throughout the course. The Hero's Journey is a common template in comparative mythology and world religion to explain a broad category of tales about a hero who embarks on an adventure that leads to various crises and feats, culminating in victory and a return home with new knowledge and wisdom (Campbell, 1990). The military and college experience can be seen as a rite of passage, and students enjoyed contextualizing their own life stories within the framework of a journey. The transformative theme and associated symbolism of ritual and initiation of The Hero's Journey were prominent topics that generated much discussion in the course. As one U.S. Navy veteran explained,

The Hero's Journey really opened my eyes about movies and books that I've liked since I was young. The different stages of the journey helped me think about my time in the Navy. It was a heroic journey of sorts. It's not like I was in war, but going away from home at that age and living with a bunch of strangers in close quarters and sailing abroad were transformative experiences that made me grow up a lot faster than my friends back home.

The mission-oriented focus of The Hero's Journey is a metaphor that aligns closely with military service and was positively received by student veterans.

In post-course surveys, 35 of 41 students said The Hero's Journey was their favorite part

of the curriculum. Feedback suggested it was an effective construct to help them think critically; for example, students applied the stages of The Hero's Journey to various films, such as *The Karate Kid*, and readings, such as Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, while further linking it to their service background and current status as students.



Student veterans attend an open house event at the University of Illinois. Photo credit: Anna Flanagan

“ Students applied the stages of The Hero's Journey to various films, such as *The Karate Kid*, and readings, such as Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, while further linking it to their service background and current status as students.”

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Implications and Portability

We evaluated the course at its midpoint and conclusion through a combination of surveys and focus group discussions. Of the 41 student veterans who took the course, 40 completed their first year on campus and persisted to their second year. Individual and group interviews showed the course was effective at creating a welcoming environment for student veterans and giving them a safe space to develop community and competencies that promoted their transition and academic readiness. Several students noted their apprehension toward pursuing a degree at a rigorous public university after a break in their education or as older learners. By completing the various course exercises, these fears were lessened. As one student shared in his post-course evaluation:

The reflective essays forced me to think deeply about my thoughts and how I'm going to express them. Through this, I discovered my true feelings on the topics. In particular, the essay about my fears as a student and listening to the others made me realize I wasn't alone. I was concerned about coming to this big campus and being able to keep up and fit in, and it helped hearing that others felt the same way. The class was easier than my others academically, but I value the knowledge I am taking away higher.

Another noteworthy observation was the course's effectiveness at revealing students' problems early on. For example, weekly check-ins, in which students gave a brief overview of how their week was progressing, uncovered various obstacles that were immediately addressed by referring students to support offices. Some students shared academic or personal circumstances affecting their transition to the university and their academic performance. One student said he was having memory issues and headaches, possibly because of his service in Iraq, and this led to a referral to our disability office and the student registering for academic accommodations. Simply stated, the course was an effective means to identify problems early on and provide remedies that supported students' persistence.

Since adding the first-year course for veterans, we have developed an additional eight-week course focusing entirely on careers. Veterans cite career preparation as the primary motivation for obtaining a college degree. The career course helps students learn how to translate their military experiences for civilian employers, expand on the soft skills they acquired in the military, and begin to network while on campus. The course instructor has built relationships with numerous high-level companies and industries, helping to secure various internship and professional development opportunities.

To best serve the unique needs of student veterans, we encourage colleges and universities to examine their campuses' climate and existing resources to identify gaps and to leverage support and creative curricula for a diverse student landscape. Although some veterans return home with the scars of war, these should never overshadow the gifts, leadership, and motivation they bring to higher education. [e](#)

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Faculty See Benefits of Teaching a First-Year Seminar

At Southeast Missouri State University, a regional, public university enrolling about 11,900, all students with fewer than 24 credit hours are required to take the three credit-hour UI100: First-Year Seminar course. Most first-year students (about 1,800) enroll during the fall semester; about 300 enroll in the spring.

Between Fall 2012 and Fall 2016, a total of 86 faculty and staff taught the course. Of those, 62 were full-time faculty, 17 were adjunct faculty, and seven were staff members. Full-time faculty are recruited to teach the course by their department chairpersons, who often work in conjunction with the director of University Studies. All faculty teaching the course must attend a one-day training session in August for orientation. While the institution's faculty are frequently made aware of the positive impact on students who take the first-year seminar, little discussion is provided on the benefits of teaching the course.

Rather than examine the effects of the course on students, then, and because so many full-time faculty teach it, researchers wanted to know whether the first-year seminar encouraged different teaching approaches from faculty members' regularly assigned, discipline-specific courses, and whether teaching UI100 made instructors feel more connected to the institution.

Researchers invited faculty and staff teaching the course between Fall 2012 and Fall 2016 to participate in a study via e-mail that included a link to the study survey. The end of the survey included an optional interview portion. Of the 86 potential participants, 23 faculty responded to the survey request; of those, 11 volunteered to be interviewed.

Survey questions asked participants, for example:

- how often and why they teach UI100;
- the types of teaching methods preferred in discipline-specific courses versus UI100 courses;
- assessment methods used in both discipline-specific courses and UI100;
- whether they perceived changes to their teaching or overall connectedness to the institution since teaching the course; and
- how teaching the course has affected their overall perception of their teaching.



Students listen to instruction in a UI100: First-Year Seminar course at Southeast Missouri State University.

Photo credit: Southeast Missouri State University

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After results were collected, two researchers interviewed the 11 faculty volunteers and transcribed the interviews. Questions focused on the participants' teaching and pedagogical strategies and assessment methods used in UI100 versus their discipline-specific courses. Researchers also directly asked participants whether teaching UI100 made them better instructors.

Effectiveness and Connectedness: Findings From the Survey

The UI100 course contains broad objectives regarding information literacy, critical thinking, and communication along with some student success objectives; therefore, it has minor content requirements that differ from other discipline-specific, content-driven courses. This course pliability allows faculty to use UI100 as an opportunity to experiment with classroom strategies.

Among the survey questions, faculty were asked to gauge how teaching the course affected their use of teaching strategies as well as their own connectedness to the institution. While teaching UI100, 65% of respondents said they "experiment with a variety of teaching strategies, some of which are new." Respondents said in most of their courses, they preferred using a combination of lectures, class discussions, collaborative projects, and tests, indicating faculty in this study already use multiple teaching and assessment strategies beyond the give-a-lecture/take-an-exam teaching model.

Most faculty (73%) also reported that since they began teaching UI100, they are "now very aware of the support services and departments available on the Southeast campus," as training allows faculty to get information about various support services. Many campus partners, including advising centers, career services, counseling services, and tutorial services, are available for in-class presentations, which let UI100 faculty contact and interact with professional staff across campus, thereby expanding their network circles. When faculty allow for this sharing of information in their classes, it helps students while also making faculty aware of the services themselves, further connecting them to the institution.

Better Instructors: Findings From the Interviews

The format of UI100 requires at least one written assignment as well as an oral presentation and includes units on information literacy, sexual violence prevention, and career options. The rest of the course content aims to orient first-year students to the structure and purpose behind higher education. Students in these courses come from an assortment of majors, requiring broader and less prescriptive content in UI100. This format encourages (and, for some, actually forces) faculty to venture from the traditional pedagogical/teaching strategies used in their home disciplines.

The survey interviews gave researchers additional context and allowed for follow-up questions to survey responses. Overall, faculty said the freedom to venture away from traditional teaching strategies afforded them academic flexibility. The interviewed faculty

“ Many campus partners are available for in-class presentations, which let UI100 faculty contact and interact with professional staff across campus, thereby expanding their network circles.”

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found themselves experimenting with new ways of teaching, in some cases abandoning approaches and methods they had used for years. Several said they did so because they had the creative opportunity and relative freedom to try fresh approaches.

One longtime faculty member attributed his enjoyment of teaching UI100 to increased opportunities to be more “freewheeling,” whereas he felt he had to provide more structure in the courses within his discipline. Another faculty member said the UI100 course allowed for more collaboration in the classroom than the courses in her discipline did. And another said her teaching style evolved because teaching UI100 forced her out of her comfort zone of traditional lecturing techniques.

Researchers were particularly interested in responses to the question, “Do you believe teaching UI100 has made you a better instructor?” In the survey, 72% of faculty respondents said it had. When asked to expand on their responses in interviews, faculty reported that teaching the course required them to think outside of their usual disciplines, be more flexible in their teaching, and become aware of resources for



Theresa Haug-Belvin, standing, talks with students in her UI100: First-Year Seminar course.

Photo credit: Southeast Missouri State University

students. For example, a math instructor learned how to use a holistic rubric, a grading tool she was unfamiliar with that traditionally is used for scoring highly subjective writing products. She now finds opportunities to use it to reduce repetitive feedback when grading mathematical processes and says it has improved her teaching.

As another example, a faculty member noted he had more opportunities to explore different teaching strategies while teaching UI100, which carried over to course offerings in his discipline. By working with non-majors in his UI100 sections, he was able to broaden his perspective in all of his courses. One faculty member new to the university introduced more experiential scenarios and case studies into her other courses as a direct result of teaching UI100, after experimenting with those types of learning strategies in the seminar. Finally, a faculty member said her experience teaching UI100 caused her to reflect on her approach in other courses and switch to a more empathetic stance. After knowingly working with a student population that didn’t understand expectations and institutional structures, she reframed her teaching to account for information she now assumes students don’t know.

“The interviewed faculty found themselves experimenting with new ways of teaching, in some cases abandoning approaches and methods they had used for years.”

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What Now?

Based on the survey and interviews, the researchers concluded that teaching UI100 is productive for faculty, staff, and the university community. Moving forward, researchers would like to see more opportunities for faculty that encourage experimenting with various teaching strategies. Institutions can support this through various means, such as small grants for faculty to research new and emerging pedagogical strategies. College administrators can give faculty opportunities to share and publish their work through internally sponsored research conferences or publications. Because the first-year seminar experience lets faculty experiment with strategy and technique, allowing temporary amnesty from negative teaching evaluations in performance reviews for their UI100 courses could encourage more experimentation. Similarly, extending amnesty to teaching in faculty members' home disciplines could also boost experimentation, with ideas and tactics beginning in UI100 leeching into other fields of teaching, and supporting those teaching shifts with additional student evaluation forgiveness would encourage adoption.

Overall, the researchers see potential in encouraging faculty to think outside the box when engaging with students. Using first-year seminars to help facilitate faculty innovation in the classroom could be a practical way for institutions to construct a culture of personal and professional development. [e](#)

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Arrive Prepared: An Academic College Transition (ACT) Program for Precollege International Students

Chinese nationals entering colleges and universities in the United States as international students often find it difficult to adjust academically and socially (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). At Wake Forest University (WFU), a recent faculty needs assessment revealed that international students' primary challenges were academic writing, citing sources, and communication with faculty. WFU offers first-year academic transition programs designed to bolster international student adjustment and academic writing skills; however, we wanted to investigate whether a precollege academic transition curriculum could effectively improve students' academic writing skills, understanding of plagiarism, and confidence communicating with faculty.

To better facilitate international students' transition to campus, the WFU Center for Global Programs and Studies, in collaboration with the Writing Program in the English Department, designed an Academic College Transition (ACT) program to be taught in the home country of precollege students to help them prepare for university life before arriving on U.S. campuses. Although the ultimate goal of such a program was to work with incoming WFU international students, the pilot program ran in collaboration with an international high school because of convenience and prior relationships. As WFU's undergraduate international student population is majority Chinese, we targeted China for the pilot ACT program.

Program Information

The primary challenge in developing the ACT program was to identify a foreign high school to create, in partnership, an adaptive curriculum that would build on the students' current schoolwork so as to meet their zone of proximal development (i.e., extend students beyond what they know without overtaxing their ability to learn or perform new skills). After some background work and relationship development, we successfully



Professor Jon Smart and students in the Academic College Transition program at Wake Forest University discuss writing expectations for college students. Photo credit: Wake Forest University

collaborated with a private high school using the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in Qingdao, China. The ACT program featured a non-credit academic course and additional programming elements condensed into a week of instruction (i.e., 15 contact hours across six days with an additional six hours

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of cocurricular programming) in classrooms at the students' high school. Students taking the IB curriculum were invited to apply to the ACT program; 12 second- or third-year high school students did so, with 11 selected to participate in the course. One of the 12 did not meet expectations for the level of academic writing.

The course was designed to significantly increase learning outcomes of the ACT program: understanding how to write an academic research paper, including correct use of citations; understanding plagiarism; confidently interacting with a U.S. university faculty member; and feeling capable of succeeding at a U.S. university. The intensive course gave the students a unique opportunity to work directly with a U.S. professor, while also receiving academic and cultural support from three current WFU students who served as teaching assistants. Two of the teaching assistants were native Chinese, so they could share personal experience adapting to the U.S. environment and education style. The third teaching assistant was a U.S. national who provided advice on U.S. culture and university life and academics from an American perspective. Each instructional period was divided into more traditional classroom activities and lectures, one-on-one workshops with the faculty instructor and assistants and, in the evenings, question-and-answer sessions with the assistants about university experiences.

The faculty member who taught the ACT course was recruited specifically for his more than 10 years' experience teaching academic writing with a focus on supporting English-language learners. He selected the U.S. teaching assistant based on the Writing Program's recommendation. The two Chinese teaching assistants helped develop the ACT program and were Qingdao natives. The faculty member provided the teaching assistants a two-hour training before the program that focused on reading academic texts critically and incorporating sources into written arguments.

In the month before the ACT program, the authors sent a packet of materials to the students that included assigned readings, comprehension and reflective questions on the readings, and vocabulary activities based on the readings and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), consisting of words most frequently used in academic writing. During the program week, the students completed brief in-class writing tasks and gave short oral presentations. For the course's major project, each student developed a 1,000-word written argument synthesizing multiple sources on a shared topic: the effects of social media use on personal well-being. Given the course's short timeline, the faculty chose a small set of articles and readings for students to pick from to build their arguments; these texts represented a range of genres and often contradictory perspectives on issues related to social media and well-being. Students received faculty and peer feedback on the drafts of their papers and could revise their work with the help of the faculty member or teaching assistants. On the final day of the course, each student presented arguments to an audience of their peers and the program faculty and staff.

“The intensive course gave the students a unique opportunity to work directly with a U.S. professor, while also receiving academic and cultural support from three current Wake Forest University students who served as teaching assistants.”

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What We Learned

To assess the program’s potential impact, the 11 student participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey one week after program completion. The survey included questions designed to compare student knowledge or confidence in academic writing and communication with U.S. university faculty before and after taking the course. It included three open-ended questions to capture student insights about the program: its most valuable element, its most challenging aspect, and what changes could be made to improve it.

Table 1
Comparison of Student Ratings of Knowledge and Confidence After Completing the Program

Construct	Before	After	ΔM	t
Knowledge of academic writing	4.50	6.74	2.24	$t(7) = 7.80^{***}$
Ability to write a research paper	4.86	6.99	2.23	$t(7) = 5.87^{***}$
Understanding of plagiarism	6.53	8.12	1.59	$t(8) = 3.68^{**}$
Confidence to communicate with an American professor	5.59	7.59	2.00	$t(8) = 4.93^{**}$
Confidence to succeed at a U.S. university	4.86	6.50	1.64	$t(8) = 3.93^{**}$

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows results from the nine students who completed the survey. Students reported significant increases in knowledge, ability, and confidence in academic writing; writing a research paper; understanding plagiarism; communicating with American faculty; and succeeding at a U.S. university. Responses to open-ended survey questions showed that the opportunity to work directly with an American faculty member and the three teaching assistants was students’ most valued experience. They found completing the 1,000-word research paper to be the course’s most difficult aspect, particularly having to formulate an argument from multiple sources. Four students noted a preference for more time for non-academic program activities focused on fun and relieving stress. Although the faculty and teaching assistants did not complete a formal post-program assessment, they did complete a group debrief with the program director to propose adjustments to the program, discussed below.

Although the results are significant, caution in interpretation is necessary because of the low number of students who completed the survey.

Program Adjustments and Future Implications

A review of the program assessments and discussions with the faculty, teaching assistants, and school associate principal yielded three main areas for improvement of

“ Responses to open-ended survey questions showed that the opportunity to work directly with an American faculty member and the three teaching assistants was students’ most valued experience.”

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the ACT program: better pre-program assessment; increased 1:1 interaction between high school students and faculty/teaching assistants; and enhanced post-program evaluation, including direct assessment measures.

Although the authors were diligent in communicating with the high school faculty about student knowledge before the course, the discussion was broad in nature and did not convey in detail the variation in student academic preparedness. Future iterations of the program will include pre-program assessment to give instructors a better understanding of individual students' needs and current knowledge, allowing for a smoother transition on the first day of the course. Maximizing learning in the allotted time is critical to the course's success, as post-program assessment confirmed that a one-week course was the preferred timeframe.

Students and instructors reported 1:1 interaction as the critical context for students to make gains on the program's student learning outcomes, specifically academic writing and confidence to communicate with faculty. One-to-one interaction occurred naturally during the program, and instructors paid special attention to ensure a relative parity of interaction by students. Given the importance of such interaction, we recommend more opportunities for 1:1 meetings between faculty/teaching assistants and students, both formally in an instructional context and informally during other programming (e.g., lunches, breaks, assistant-led socially focused programs). Another option to increase individual student attention without expanding the preferred one-week timeframe: Increase post-program communication between faculty and students (e.g., completing an assignment that can be submitted to a university-level writing contest). Such an assignment would also provide data to help directly assess students' gains in academic writing, especially when compared to a pre-program writing sample. This would also further enhance program assessment, which thus far used an indirect strategy via students' perception of their knowledge and confidence in academic writing and communicating with U.S. faculty.

Conclusion

The Wake Forest University ACT program gave precollege international students a unique opportunity to experience a U.S. university-style course and interact with faculty and student teaching assistants. Because the program took place at a local high school and not at a U.S. university campus as is typical for U.S.-led precollege programming, the students could focus on a successful academic transition without simultaneously having to navigate a social transition in a new time zone. Students reported increases in their knowledge and confidence with academic writing and interacting with U.S. faculty, highlighting the success of the ACT program's first implementation. Based on the results of this pilot course, WFU successfully implemented an upgraded ACT program for our incoming first-year undergraduate Chinese students in Beijing in July 2017. We invite universities interested in replicating, adapting, or collaborating on the ACT program to contact the first author. 

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Global Citizenship in the First Year: Making a World of Difference

As the undergraduate experience increasingly prioritizes a global perspective, higher education professionals must examine how current institutional internationalization affects students' sense of global citizenship, while also developing innovative strategies to integrate global curricula into the first-year experience (FYE).

Admittedly, it can be difficult to engage first-year students in global learning. Though internationalization has become a cultural norm, many high school graduates have a limited understanding of how contemporary local and global issues are interdependent. Higher education professionals face the task of remedying this gap. A further complication is limited participation in the United States, where the number of students studying abroad has never exceeded 10% of the undergraduate population; at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in Kennesaw, Georgia, that figure has never exceeded 4%. First-year students can be especially reluctant to study abroad, particularly if they identify as people of color, working-class, or first-generation college (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012).

As part of its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), Global Learning for an Engaged Citizenship, KSU aims to give first-year students equitable opportunities for global education. People of color represent nearly 43% of the student population at KSU, which enrolls more than 24,000 full-time undergraduates. The QEP's comprehensive review of curricular and cocurricular learning experiences, then, led to the development of learning goals designed to build our diverse student body's global awareness, cross-cultural communication skills, and commitment to social justice in a rapidly changing world.

Two distinct internationalization initiatives targeted first-year students at KSU: the Global Fellows Learning Community (GFLC) and the Global Engagement Scholar Experience (GES). With more than half of all KSU undergraduates identifying as people of color or first-generation college, the school is also working to increase global education awareness and study-abroad opportunities through first-year learning communities that target traditionally underserved student populations. Together, these initiatives aim for equitable access to transformative learning experiences that can develop students' global literacy, help them identify academic interests and strengths, and build social and cultural capital.

The Global Fellows Learning Community

Academic programming that builds a foundation for lifelong learning and global citizenship guides the development of first-year international education at KSU. GFLC provides one example of an innovative, high-impact practice during the first weeks of college. The initiative offers a shared intellectual experience, including a first-year seminar, required general education courses, collaborative assignments, and research activities within a 14-week, blended study-abroad format. KSU's first-year seminar aims to help develop college-level skills for academic success by focusing on life skills, academic strategies, connections with campus and community, and foundations for global learning.

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In GFLC, first-year students address some of the problems of the college transition head on by identifying academic and social support networks in a seven-week, on-campus learning cohort. The same students then share in a learning-by-doing adventure in Montepulciano, Italy, for the final seven weeks of the course. Throughout GFLC's duration, learning outcomes geared toward academic and social adjustment challenge students to think critically about their own agency in goal setting, time management strategies, communication in group settings, and civic engagement, as well as the interconnectivity of local–global issues.

GFLC begins recruiting from the general student population and targets first-year students during summer orientation, offering info sessions and sharing fliers before the fall semester. A maximum of 25 students are selected for each cohort. Since GFLC began three years ago, 68 students have taken part. A scholarly approach to instruction—including classroom observations, one-on-one interviews, and journaling assignments—helps to frame thinking about academic and social adjustment within this global learning community. One key finding involved using social media, specifically Instagram, to encourage authentic critical reflection about campus and international experiences. In GFLC, students dialogue in a way that underscores both existing and new social networks of support, using a collective hashtag (e.g., #AbroadsfromAtlanta) as a repository of their experiences and memories of transition and transformation. Via Instagram, students share their time management successes/failures, strategies to promote social justice, and local solutions to global problems (e.g., climate change, human rights). Further, by sharing what studying abroad looks like to other peer groups, students help demystify the process and challenge the “not for me” mentality (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012) that can limit participation for general and underserved student populations.

In the future, we aim to use formal selection criteria for GFLC based on financial need and academic performance as the program grows and competition increases for seats.

The Global Engagement Scholar Experience

Despite high numbers of first-generation students and students of color at KSU, the institution continuously finds that its study-abroad participation is below the national average for both. To expand access to global education, the university provides internationalization opportunities via the GES. This program aims to cultivate global citizenship across a broad demographic by threading learning from the first-year seminar with a week-long, all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C. Each cohort is made up of 10 students selected by essay competition annually, with nearly 40 students participating to date. Underserved populations (e.g., students of color and first-generation college) are represented in the cohorts at a rate reflective of the KSU student population.

Learning outcomes correspond with those of GFLC, while the curriculum reinforces global learning from the first-year seminar by exploring how defense, diplomacy, and civil society shape the U.S., the world, and our daily lives. Experiential learning activities include guided visits to various organizations in Washington and meetings with officials from the Department of Defense, the Department of State, Congress, and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Additionally, this short trip empowers learners to

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regulate their own experiences by selecting tourist sites, using public transit, navigating urban culture, and consuming diverse cuisine in their free time.

Experiences outside the classroom allow for deep processing and reflection by students. Through journaling, they reflect on culture, social justice, academic planning, and internship experiences, and how their guided visits inform and affirm thinking about academic interests and social/cultural capital resources (Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2015). Specific journal prompts (e.g., How will you apply both coursework and activities from this trip in your own professional and academic goals?) are designed to capture new knowledge that broadens students' awareness of their agency as global citizens (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011; Sanders et al., 2015). Journal reflections about these experiences reveal feelings of self-actualization, empowerment, an increased ability to regulate emotions, and increased mindfulness about the interdependence of human and natural systems.

Underrepresented Students and Study Abroad

Both GFLC and GES were designed with the aim of equitable access to international education for diverse first-year student populations; to increase the number of traditionally underrepresented students abroad, KSU is working to develop more intentional outreach strategies. The institution employs both external and internal funding and support to fuel faculty engagement in these areas. During 2017-2018, three first-year learning communities (the African American Male Initiative, Understanding the World Through Multiple Perspectives, and First-Gen Owls) will coordinate to send up to 20 students to Lima, Peru, on a two-week study-abroad program. Faculty will help mitigate barriers to underrepresented populations' access to studying abroad by helping students apply for aid; addressing resistance from employers, family, or friends; and managing culture shock. A social justice-focused curriculum guides the program while emphasizing student leadership and building global competencies, helping students form strong international networks of support for long-term academic and professional success (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011).

Conclusion

Given the changing demographics in higher education, it is no surprise that stakeholders now intentionally design programs to cultivate global learning at the onset of the academic journey. As part of KSU's long-term plan to connect all undergraduates with transformative global learning experiences, the university has developed several initiatives to incorporate globally focused curricula and travel opportunities into the first year. Early internationalization can positively impact goal setting, academic planning, identification of social and cultural capital, and ultimately post-graduate achievement. Equally important, however, are the personal transformations possible when students step outside the mental and physical spaces of their native countries and cultures. In today's interconnected world, it is critical that institutions of higher learning parse out the ways that local actions have global impact, while easing the path to international education for increasingly diverse student populations. 

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Redesigning Assessment Plans: A Focus on Student Learning Outcomes in General Education

Christina Hardin
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Until the fall of 2007, all Freshman Composition I (ENC1101) students at Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, had to complete and pass a standard written exit essay exam. Its purpose was to weed out those students who did not demonstrate college-level writing after completing a semester of ENC1101. Only students scoring a C or higher on the exam could continue to English Composition II or the equivalent, regardless of their earned course grade in ENC1101. Students failing the exit exam had to retake Freshman Composition I.

This form of assessment focused solely on the students' ability (or inability) to write under pressure and did not take into account their overall performance in ENC1101, nor did the exercise lend itself to determining whether students were meeting the course learning outcomes. In addition, with 5,000 to 8,000 students enrolled in ENC1101 at the college each term, grading the exit exams was tedious for faculty, often requiring day-long reading/grading sessions. After serious consideration, administrators and English faculty found the mandated exam to be an intensive, ineffective assessment tool and subsequently terminated it.

College leaders then sought a new plan under which the students would not be graded, but rather ENC1101 as a course would be assessed. Under their proposal, administrators at Valencia, not faculty, would collect a sample of student essays from a specific term and evaluate them using a holistic rubric, with the goal of determining the effectiveness of instruction received. Essentially, administrators wanted to know whether faculty were giving students the instruction and skill set to produce college-level writing. However, following the first two assessment sessions (held in the spring for two consecutive years), faculty members were confused as to the assessment's purpose. They were unsure whether it was to evaluate student work on an individual basis or the ENC1101 instructors' ability to grade consistently, neither of which was the evaluation's intent. Further, faculty were not clear on how to deal with findings from the assessment. Ultimately, the college solicited a new plan created by faculty, rather than administrators, to solidify the assessment's purpose.

The Task at Hand

Three faculty members in the college's English department (the design team) volunteered to help redesign the assessment plan. In their discussions, they noticed the ENC1101 common-course outline was outdated and not aligned with the prerequisites for the course, so they first rewrote the outline. Next, to move away from the old, stagnant assessment process, which included collecting hundreds of student learning artifacts (i.e., essays), they chose to assess a different course outcome and also request a sample of student work.

For context, each course at Valencia follows a set of common-course outcomes, which include performance objectives that students taking the course must demonstrate by the end of the term. ENC1101, for example, includes course outcomes such as information lit-

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eracy, college-level writing, and critical thinking. Within each course outcome lies a set of student performance objectives or indicators, that measure ability to demonstrate a certain set of skills. Not all of the ENC1101 outcomes are meant to measure students' writing ability; rather, the college aims to give students a wide variety of skills.

Many of the English faculty were concerned that the old writing assessment did not focus enough on course learning outcomes; thus, the design team would examine those outcomes to determine a more suitable plan. Rather than trying to assess college-level writing, which allows for broad definitions and expectations, the team selected something more measurable: information literacy. Within that outcome are four indicators of student learning that became the focus of the assessment plan (Figure 1).

Information literacy: Locate, evaluate, and effectively use information from diverse sources.

While the following four indicators do not include all student performance indicators for this Gen Ed outcome, they will be used for this assessment project.

Students will be able to

- select appropriate material from which to summarize, paraphrase, and/or quote;
- integrate source materials into the documented essay;
- cite sources using parenthetical documentation; and
- construct a properly formatted works cited/reference page.

Figure 1. General education course learning outcome to be addressed

Focusing on the information literacy outcome and its clearly stated student learning indicators allowed the design team to consider alternative assessment tools to better measure student learning. For example, instead of rating a student essay as “accomplished” or “not accomplished” in terms of college-level writing ability (which led to myriad interpretations), the new assessment tool would be more focused and yield simple “yes” or “no” answers in a checklist format—e.g., whether a student could cite sources using parenthetical documentation. This became known as the Student Artifact Assessment Checklist, i.e., the rubric.

When the design team presented the new assessment plan to other faculty and administrators, it met with some hesitation. The administration feared such a simple tool would not yield the robust assessment it wanted, and deans feared it would be detrimental to the department to assess anything other than college-level writing. However, the design team ultimately won approval to move forward with the new plan.

The New Assessment Tool in Practice

During the pilot of the new assessment plan, instructors collected a random sample of essays from students enrolled in ENC1101 during a spring term. The college's Learning Assessment Office determined the sample size ($n = 100$), which was roughly 5% of all

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students enrolled in ENC1101. Each ungraded, documented essay had to include a works cited/reference page; this was the only specific assignment parameter given. Instructors also gave the assignment topic and submission requirements for each student essay to help evaluate their work. Later, instructors e-mailed their students' papers to the design team leader after removing any identifying information other than students' IDs, which were used to track submissions.

Of the 100 essays requested, only 54 were submitted. These were divided into four sets of 10 and one set of 14. At the college's annual Assessment Day meeting, participating ENC1101 instructors (33) were assigned to one of five teams based on a campus sort to ensure fair representation from the four campuses. Each team read its set of essays and completed a Student Artifact Assessment Checklist as a group for each essay.

What We Found

Using the rubric, the teams collected simple quantitative data to determine whether the essays demonstrated the desired learning outcomes. Those results helped guide an open dialogue in which more qualitative responses were gathered. In turn, the qualitative responses were used to determine whether the English department, as a whole, was working toward the required student outcome of information literacy and whether an improvement plan was needed for the subsequent year. No shared texts were used for this purpose, and the learning outcomes for information literacy were the only standard by which instructors were expected to teach.

Generally, findings indicated that faculty should make a more concerted effort to teach students in ENC1101 how to integrate source materials into an essay and document those sources properly (i.e., using citations in text and having a correctly formatted works-cited page). The majority of faculty (68%) reported that source materials were not properly integrated, nor were the sources properly documented (72%).

The post-assessment discussion yielded much more positive feedback than previous meetings. An assistant vice president within the college's Learning Assessment Office commented afterward, "I have never heard such a robust and deep conversation about English assessment." Faculty felt that the clear-cut rubric, with its simple yes/no questions, provided a more focused learning outcome evaluation. The purpose of the assessment—ensuring student learning was taking place—was also clarified. Based on the findings and discussions, the 33 faculty participants voted to work on improving instruction of information literacy skills. To accomplish this, each campus English coordinator would work with their respective faculty to address the two objectives and develop a campus-based

“ Focusing on the information literacy outcome and its clearly stated student learning indicators allowed the design team to consider alternative assessment tools to get a better measurement of student learning. ”

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improvement plan to increase students' ability to properly integrate source materials into an essay and document sources within. The four campus coordinators worked together toward an improvement plan for the English department as a whole.

What We Learned and the Future of Assessment

Redesigning the assessment plan taught us that having faculty drive such a process allows them to better connect with the work. We also found that a simplified checklist assessment tool allowed for greater understanding and deeper analysis of student work. Efforts to assess the ENC1101 course outcomes are ongoing and have spread to other disciplines, including humanities and speech. [e](#)



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