

# **Summary Report from Focus Groups on English 001 for International Students Spring 2016**

## **Part 1: Project Description**

### **Background:**

The student-led focus group project at UVM was launched in March of 2016, after a team comprised of one faculty member, one CTL staff member and two students attended a three day training at Wabash College's Teagle Institute over spring break. The training provided examples of successful initiatives at a range of institutions that use student-led focus groups to provide qualitative data on student experiences and incorporate student voices into evaluation of campus initiatives.

Under the direction of Provost's Faculty Fellow for Assessment J. Dickinson and CTL staff member Henrietta Paz-Amor, the team sought out units and programs interested in piloting the focus group service. The FWIL Director expressed interest in using student focus groups to gather student feedback on a new set of sections of English 001 offered exclusively to international students beginning in Spring 2016.

### **Preparation and Challenges:**

Prior to attending the Teagle Institute training, Jennifer Dickinson met with Libby Miles to gather information about key topics and questions for the focus group. During the training, the UVM team used this information to develop a draft moderator guide for this first set of focus groups. Graduate student and UVM staff member Emma Swift, who provides advising to international students, was a member of the UVM team and offered helpful insights into appropriate questions and phrasing for the moderator guide. After finalizing the draft guide, it was sent to Libby Miles for editing and approval. A copy of the moderator guide is attached to the end of this report (Appendix A).

The most significant challenge of this project was recruiting participants and incentivizing them to show up. Emma Swift was extremely helpful for recruiting students and offering advice as to how to incentivize participation. Initially two focus groups were scheduled for March 28<sup>th</sup>. However, only one of those times had a viable number of students sign up, with four attendees. A second focus group was scheduled for April 10, and extra credit was offered by many instructors. This helped significantly in increasing participation in the second group, which had eight participants.

## **Part 2: Summary of Findings and Recommendations**

### **Summary of Findings:**

On most of the questions regarding specific components of ENG 001, such as practice writing, practice reading, and how helpful the projects were, reactions were varied and mixed. This was particularly true for discussion of the writing projects. For every student who found the projects repetitive and boring, another had a clear idea of how the projects

were helpful in progressively building skills. Some students found the projects too easy or boring, while others appreciated that they would be using the same set of sources for several projects, although they were not always clear on how they would be able to mine those sources for more projects than they had already repeated (they were on portfolio 3). Comments on reading and writing practice demonstrated less variation, and these trends are discussed further in Part 3 of the report.

Students had a clear set of reasons for taking an international-student specific ENGS 001 course, as well as ideas about the drawbacks of taking such a course. These reasons can offer insights into student motivations for choosing a particular section and their expectations for these sections, as well as ideas for compensating for some perceived drawbacks of choosing such a section. When asked whether they would take a separate ENG 001 class again or choose a general class, most students said they would take a general (mixed) class, with two choosing the international student class and one saying they would take both versions. Several students qualified that to say that they would recommend the international student only course to students who had not taken GGP.

Reasons students cited for taking an ENGS 001 section for international students:

- These sections were perceived to be “easier” than standard ENGS 001.
  - Students praised faculty who spoke more slowly and explained difficult vocabulary in the international student sections
  - Students noted that in classes with American students, they often had trouble following discussion because the students speak very quickly and use unfamiliar vocabulary.
  - Access to the professor was cited as a positive, and faculty were seen as more attentive or sympathetic to student needs, since the faculty member already knew all of the students were international students.
  - A couple of the students did indicate that they took the course expecting an ‘easy A.’
- In these sections, they felt they wouldn’t be compared to or graded in relation to American students
- Two students in the first focus group noted that they had understood that international students were expected to take these sections; one also indicated that she heard you had to apply to be able to select a standard section or you would be disenrolled. All of the students in the second focus group knew that enrollment was voluntary and wanted to be in an international section.
- One student in each focus group also indicated that they enrolled in the course based on an advisor’s strong recommendation. One student had dropped ENGS 001 in the fall for unspecified reasons and chose the section based on schedule and the instructor, who also teaches in the GGP.

- The opportunity to discuss course materials in Chinese during the class or with classmates was cited as a positive by some participants in both groups.

Drawbacks noted by participants:

- One student noted that few students participated in her international student-only section. She was frustrated by the lack of interaction in the class.
- One student noted that peer feedback on their writing would not be helpful in an international student-only section, contrasting this her other courses with native speakers where they would offer her feedback on her writing.
- While the ability to discuss topics in Chinese was cited as a positive to choosing an international-only section, it was also cited as a minus as some students can 'get off track' and not focus on coursework such as discussing a peer's text. The opportunity to develop friendships with American students was missing.
- Students that Emma Swift identified as being more advanced English language learners (attendees at the March 28<sup>th</sup> focus group) indicated that this course felt like a repeat of material from the GGP, so this course may not be well-suited for students with more advanced skills.
- Non-Chinese students were frustrated by frequent student use of Chinese in the classroom

### **Recommendations:**

Some recommendations that emerge out of these focus groups include:

- Recommend international-only ENG 001 for students who would benefit from the more comfortable atmosphere in an all-international student course, or who have not taken the GGP. More advanced students or those seeking a more challenging experience should be encouraged to try a standard ENG 001 course.
- Clearly articulate the purpose and value of ENG 001 to students, particularly STEM students and GGP students, and make it clear that it is a FWIL pathway for students of many backgrounds and majors. Establish ENG 001 as distinct from GGP writing courses (perhaps through collaboration with GGP faculty). As an alternative approach, a student asked whether ENG 001 could be incorporated into the GGP to reduce overlap while also ensuring that students receive the training that does not overlap between the two programs/courses.
- Help STEM students understand why the course includes types of writing that may not directly correspond to their current coursework, or offer assignment options that are more valuable to STEM majors.
- Encourage discussions between the GGP and ENG 001 programs about whether use of language other than English is appropriate in ENG 001. While some students

liked the ease of speaking Chinese, this was problematic for non-Chinese speaking students and does not usually allow the professor to join in the discussion or redirect students.

- Rethink the use of peer review in these classes. This might mean choosing a different revision technique, or it might mean modifying the way peer review is conducted. Inadequate peer review feedback was cited almost as often as the use of Chinese in class discussions as a drawback of these sections.

### **Part 3: Discussion of Focus Group Themes and Student quotes**

#### **Positive aspects of being in a class with only other international students:**

Students highlighted that the International-only English 001 courses were oriented towards English language learners, creating a more comfortable atmosphere for discussion. Several students cited the approachability and availability of the professors and the individual attention and feedback they received from them as positive aspects of the course:

“I feel kind of left out in American class because they speak too fast and have a lot of words I don’t know. So it’s easier to speak in international section.”

“The teacher will speak slowly and wait for the class to understand and she will explain some difficult words to us.”

“I didn’t do the GGP, so this was a new experience for me. I liked that everyone was at the same level.”

“It really helped me understanding English. And after class we can make appointments with our professor. Because we are international students, she is more attention to teach us, so I think it’s really helpful.”

#### **Negative aspects of being in a class with only other international students:**

Some students felt that certain components, particularly peer review of each other’s work, was not helpful in a group of non-native speakers. Several students pointed out that discussions were often in Chinese, and they felt that undermined the purpose of the course:

“Yeah we have peer review party in the class and the international students we read others essays on paper...I cannot revise my papers to be better based on their suggestions. It’s hard for me to revise, so I always look for writing partner American so they could maybe show me how to improve my writing skills. And when we (the international students) work together, we always like to discuss other things. Like they use Chinese.”

“When we start to speak in Chinese, no one can stop it. But maybe like sometimes I really want to speak English but no one can.”

“I’m the only person not from China. People are supposed to talk in English but often don’t when in groups.”

### **Positive and Negative perceptions of the rigor of the course:**

Some students mentioned examples of class members not doing reading or preparing insufficiently for class. The perception that the class would be “easy” was also mentioned throughout both focus groups. Students were divided as to whether the level of reading was helpful and appropriate to the course; some liked that the readings served as models for the writing assignments, while others felt they were not challenging enough for a college-level course.

“There’s barely conversation or discussion going on. I feel like with other students, we are the only students that like to talk or respond to professors.”

“I have four other classes that seemed really hard so I’d rather take an easy one rather than a regular American class.”

“The professor assumes the students don’t do the reading.”

“[The level of the reading assignments] just kind of kept me on the same level like, ‘okay I can just do that’ and no further.”

### **Comparisons to GGP:**

Students cited examples of faculty reusing materials from the GGP course they took, and some also indicated that the material covered was either a repetition of GGP, or less rigorous than GGP due to the professor’s desire to give the students a positive experience in English 001. While one student pointed out that the GGP focused on grammar and word choice, while ENG 001 focused more on style and structure, most other students felt that there was in fact a great deal of overlap (one student estimated 80%, another 60%). One student supported this claim by saying that a classmate was able to cut and paste a GGP project into an assignment.

“Because English 001 is a requirement for I’m not sure maybe international students. So I have to sign up for this class. But I think it’s similar to some writing classes in GGP so I don’t know why it’s a requirement for international students.”

“I think in GGP the writing part, like the Writing 2 is deeper than English [001]. Of course the professor’s requirement is different. I think English 001, my professor is a kind person, and sometime she just includes the assignment to us, and she just doesn’t [grade it rigorously]. The only requirement is that you [send in] your assignment...”

“We repeat some material from the GGP, like citation style. Some students don’t pay attention in class because they think they already know the material and will get an A, then they are not prepared for discussions.”

“The writing skills, I mean almost the writing skill is the same [as the GGP]. How to structure the essay and the citation, MLA APA are the same. I mean nothing’s new.”

“When there are tons of folders [with information] in course materials [on Blackboard] it’s too much to look at. A lot of the materials repeat GGP info.”

**Usefulness of the course:**

Students with science majors tended to be more critical of the types of writing practiced in the course. In particular narratives were sometimes cited as “not academic writing” or “not useful.” However, other students had positive comments about the experience they gained, particularly in using research tools at UVM, and praised faculty feedback on major assignments:

“In the GGP we wrote research papers, not narratives. Narratives are not useful in my major.”

“I think it depends on what major you have at UVM. So for example in my [STEM] major we don’t have to write anything...I really don’t understand why I need to take 001.”

“I’m a science major so I don’t really care about this class. I just want an A.”

“I never used the UVM library before so it’s really helpful, I can find more than really before I used Google.”

“I think the process is more important than the article. That I know how I can find resources and use these sources so that some sources the resources are hard to understand.”

“[O]nce I make a mistake on the citation, and [the professor] told me how to modify it and how to improve and how to avoid it. And then I learned to do it.”

## **Appendix A: Moderator Guide**

### **English 001 sections for International Students (2 groups out of 7 courses)**

**As students come in:** Greet each person, and ask people to sign in with their name and email. Then invite them to get some pizza and sit down, and to write a pseudonym on the name tent in front of one of the places. They can choose their own name if they want, but a fake name is fine too – just make them aware that this will be the name used for the focus group.

#### **Welcome:**

Welcome and thank you for joining us for this group discussion. I am \_\_\_\_\_ and I'll be leading our discussion today. [Turn to notetaker to allow notetaker for an introduction and to explain the notetaker role]. We are part of a new initiative at UVM that helps programs get student feedback on specific areas where they would like to improve students' educational experience.

Today we are going to have a conversation about your experiences with sections of English 001 that are just for International Students. So all of you should be in an English 001 class with just international students right now. Is that correct? [Politely ask anyone who does not qualify to leave.]

The leader of the English 001 program has asked us to conduct a series of group discussions with International students to find out more about your experiences with this class, and to find out what you think should be kept or changed in the program. They really value your honest feedback, so I am going to ask you to think about all of the questions carefully and answer them honestly. We'd like you to focus on your own experiences as much as possible. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to the focus group questions. We want to hear many different viewpoints and would like to hear from everyone. We hope you will be honest even when your responses may not be in agreement with the rest of the group.

The information we gather today will only be used to evaluate and improve the English 001 program, and all comments we include in our report to the College will be anonymous.

Please respect the privacy of others in the focus group and keep this the contents of this conversation confidential.

**Consent form:** We will have a notetaker writing down the main ideas of what you say in the discussion, but we will also be recording so that we can make sure that our notes and our understanding of your main points are as accurate as possible. The recording will not be shared with the English 001 program, and it will be erased at the end of the semester, after we complete our summary of what you tell us. We have this short consent forms at

each place, outlining that you agree to be recorded, with the understanding that all quotes will be anonymous, the material will be used only for program evaluation, and that the recording and all copies will be erased by the end of May, 2016. Please take a moment to read over the consent form and sign it.

### **Questions:**

Now we are ready to begin. Our first question will help us to learn more about your path to UVM and what you are studying.

**Question 1:** Tell us your name (the name they chose for the focus group), major, and how you started at UVM (ex: USPP, GGP, Direct Admit).

**Question 2:** Please tell us a little bit about why did you sign up for your section of the ENGS 001 class.

Followup questions:

- a. Did you know that the course was just for international students?
- b. Did you want to be in a class with only other international students?

**Question 3:** Now we will ask about your experiences in this class.

- a. What did you like about being in a class with only other international students?
- b. Were there any pieces that you did not enjoy about being in a class with other international students?

*Now we are going to have a conversation about the academic aspects of your ENGS 001 class. We want to understand the impact this class is having on your academics. Please*

**Question 4:** How helpful was the class in giving you practice in writing academic English?

- a. How about practice with college-level reading in English?
- b. Was practice finding appropriate sources for research papers and writing with those research sources helpful to you?

**Question 5:** What were some things that your professor did that were helpful to improving your academic English skills like your writing, reading, speaking, or listening?

Followups:

Was the peer review part of the class helpful?

Was there anything the professor did that was not helpful?

**Question 6.** In this class, you had projects that help you practice different kinds of writing. What did you think about the projects?

a. Did the class repeat things you had learned before?

**Question 7.** If you could rewind time, would you sign up for an ENGS 001 section just for international students again?

**Followups:**

Would you recommend this class to other international students taking ENGS 001?

Why?

Overall, do you think we should keep sections like this as an option?