

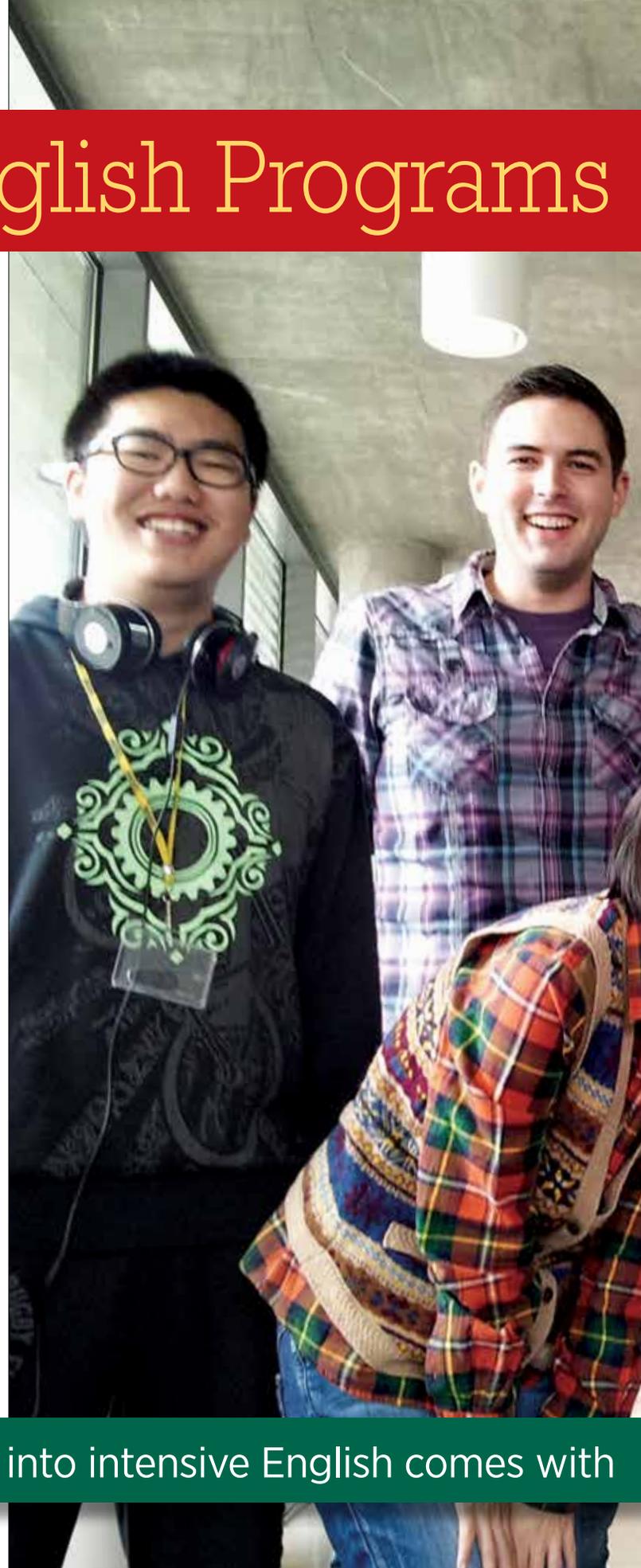
Intensive English Programs

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM is that there's no way to learn a language like immersing oneself in it, and convention wisdom isn't necessarily wrong. That's the basis for intensive English-language programs that have met great success at many universities across the United States. But now some are exploring a broader question than just teaching language: How to get international students thinking globally about their studies while they're mastering spelling, grammar, and syntax in pursuit of a degree.

Those who manage intensive English programs (IEPs) have started thinking that way and making concrete steps toward getting their students from around the world to ponder and plan for how their studies in the United States will affect the world as their careers take off after graduation. To that end, they've established programs that are designed both to make students from overseas feel at home as quickly as possible at school and in their neighboring communities and to spark some deeper thinking on why what they're doing opens up even more doors.

Program managers say that while most of these efforts are only a few years old, they've met with great feedback from both student and volunteer participants who often serve as guides or mentors. And that, they say, can keep the thinking and conversations going long after graduation, which is exactly the point.



Incorporating global learning into intensive English comes with

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Embrace Global Learning

The Intercultural Community Bridge Program at Drexel University helps English language learners (ELL) get a better understanding of global learning in their programs.

This photo depicts a Drexel University "Community Family," which includes three ELL students, two matriculated U.S. students, one Drexel employee, and a local Philadelphia family (a husband, wife and two small children).



a host of benefits.

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Getting to Know You

Drexel University's IEP currently hosts about 140 students who come from all over the world. Some come just to learn English and some arrive to master the language before continuing on for a Drexel degree in a different area. Students get all the benefits of being Drexel students even if they're only enrolled in the IEP, and that means some programs that bridge academia and being a little more social.

Five years ago, the university launched its Intercultural Community Bridge Program for IEP students. The program brings together IEP students, campus volunteers, and volunteers from around the surrounding community for about seven months to get together regularly and do something—anything—together. Small groups of IEP students are paired with faculty, staff, or matriculated students who've asked to be part of the program, along with people who live or work near the university and want to feel connected.

"We call these groups families," says Drexel Communications Coordinator Massah Lahai. "And we don't really care what they do together.

The point is for them to get outside their comfort zone and outside the box and meet new people, have conversations, and connect. We want them to go do things they wouldn't normally do."

Community members, she says, are vital to that last part and frequently help students navigate the town around campus, finding restaurants, coffee shops, museums, and attractions that aren't always terribly visible from dorm rooms, and widening their view on casual outings. "The community members introduce our international students

to the area," she says. "Someone who comes here from another country isn't familiar with Philadelphia and they might not venture out of the immediate neighborhood otherwise. This program fosters them learning about their larger community and the people. They get to really know their neighbors."

They get creative about their activities. "Some of them simply have a game night together or meet for coffee," says Lahai. "They



English as a Second Language Students (ESL) at Drexel University

might go to a museum. Some of them have groups where students teach the rest of the members how to make food from their country. We don't dictate what activities they do; we want it to be as organic as possible and help our students make real connections."

That flexibility makes the mandatory program feel like a perk after awhile. "We don't want our students to feel like they're in a have-to or a forced relationship. At the end of the day, they're forming real relationships."

Organizers interview all participants at the end of the year to see where changes

might be necessary. "In the five years we've run this, it's gotten positive feedback from volunteers and our students," Lahai says. "The students hate it at first because they have to do it, but by the end of the year they tell us they're so glad they got to participate because they would have never done something or learned about something otherwise."

Students aren't paired up by country, so the program also forces everyone to practice their English, which is a huge plus. "Students don't always get the practice they should, especially when they sequester within their respective groups," says Lahai. This program gets them speaking English in a social setting while learning from a diverse group of people about the community around them, which helps spark more thinking globally in school.

Making Friends

Across the country at Washington State University, about 800 IEP students enjoy learning English with vibrant discussions about social issues that encourage them to ponder what's going on outside their own communities.

The Campus Friends program matches IEP students with an intercultural communications class for structured activities and lots of conversation. It offers, says Director Katherine Hellmann, PhD, the chance for students from different cultures to compare and consider how centralized issues or news affects them.

"We had a discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement," says Hellmann. "What does that mean for a student from Saudi Arabia? Seattle? Beijing? There are very interesting conversations that involve looking and thinking about things happening inside and outside of the classroom and pairing it with students' lives. The whole point is to get a degree that establishes you as a global learner. We don't want anyone to

walk away having not had a sustained global learning experience.”

Another program, Engage the World, gives students the opportunity to hear—or give—presentations to or from those from other areas or disciplines. “It gets students interested in what exactly an international experience is,” she says. “Why should I do this? Why does it matter? Students can talk about the time they went to Spain and had an experience, or they talk about a festival that takes place in their own country. We push students to think about those things as social justice issues. Think about this in terms of solving problems and what are the larger ramifications of their experiences.”

Hellmann says it’s quite rewarding to watch what students learn and how they grow as students and people throughout these programs. They make great connections with others from around the world and they access prior knowledge and think

differently to come up with their own global-focused opinions and priorities, which goes far beyond just learning English. And because of those opportunities, most students in the program participate in the extra programs even though they’re not requirements for graduation.

“They make connections with students who are different than they are,” she says. “Global learning is a bigger, deeper thing than intercultural communication.”

The university plays a big role in its small-town setting and the international student government, Hellmann says, creates a lot of opportunities for non-native students to feel more at home. “Many institutions have something like this and it’s worth looking at,” she says. “You know you have this pocket of X number of Chinese students, so what can you do to integrate them and get them to think about their experiences? You create opportunities to talk about water issues and

the Three Gorges Dam situation and relate all of that to something going on here.”

Recruiting Volunteers

Universities with IEP programs say one of the big keys to going global with education is recruiting volunteers for these programs, both on and off campus. The good news is that when faculty, staff, and community members hear about the programs, they often jump to take part.

“The faculty we have here, especially in the IEP, get themselves involved in these efforts from the time students arrive for orientation,” says Hellmann. “The push is to definitely get everyone involved. Students are here to learn English but what you do outside the classroom matters. So here’s how we connect things and we add a real experiential learning component to our program to make sure they’re learning outside the classroom.”

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Faculty in the college of communications, she says, collaborated with the IEP program on a photo/voice program that documented the students' experiences. Photos and voice recordings were part of an art exhibit that was quite telling. "A student from Libya took

a photo of people in a park and said they felt safe here," says Hellmann. "A lot of the time we think about global learning being an academic or theoretical construct, but it becomes meaningful when we think about it in terms of people."

At Drexel, recruiting graduates, faculty, staff, and neighbors to the global learning



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program is a huge part of making it all work. And it has benefits beyond global education for non-native students.

"We want our community members to look at the university a little more favorably," says Lahai. "We want them to be more integrated into what the university is doing. We don't want them to feel like there's this big school they live close to but know nothing about." And once involved, the volunteers normally learn as much and enjoy the program as much as the students they're supposed to be helping.

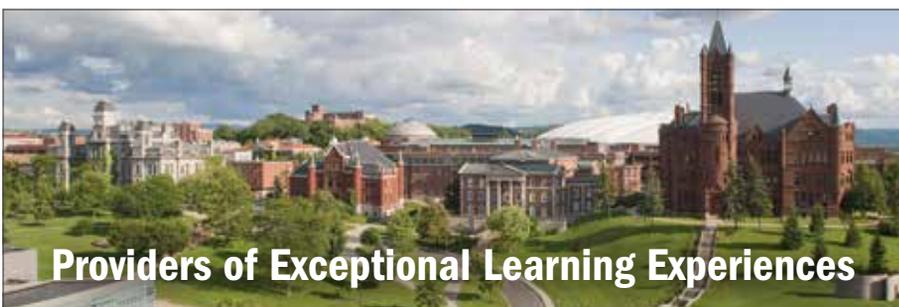
"We have one student from Saudi Arabia who started with us in the intensive program," she says. "He had to participate in the community bridge program the second year we offered it, and he ended up forming friendships he keeps to this day. He's volunteered with us every year since he finished the program. He's a senior now and he's still here. We have a handful of students like that and we have some who graduate, wait a year, and come back as volunteers."

Best Practices

Lahai says she has one definite piece of advice for any university thinking of incorporating a formal global learning component into its IEP: start with one or two very dedicated people.

"We have a faculty member who started this as her brainchild," she says. "She helped from the beginning and she pretty much runs it. You have to have someone who's very passionate about this and will be willing to put in the work. It's not easy to manage people and we all know it's not always easy to recruit volunteers."

Secondly, she says, start looking for partners and fostering buy-in from other



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English as a Second Language (ESL) students participate in Washington State University's intensive English program with an emphasis on global learning.

departments and people on campus. "Find like-minded individuals who can help you," she says. "This is not something one person can do alone. I don't think of this as being something our department runs. It's our program but we benefit from the help of other departments and companies who can help us figure things out." She also cautions that it's important to be aware of legal questions around recruiting and using volunteers for programs like these.

Hellmann says it's important to take a hard look at what resources may already exist. "Start by mapping what's on the campus. Is there a cultural center, a study abroad cen-

ter, civic engagement, art, even STEM areas, too. Think about how we see what's already going on and think about the strength of the institution and people who can advocate for something like this. Before you get to the point of having a game plan, think about doing a mapping or inventory exercise. What are we doing with our curriculum? What's our student life like? What's our campus culture? Get good support and figure out how it relates to your institution's goals."

And, says Lahai, bear in mind that there are terrific benefits to students in programs that open their global eyes and connect them, even to the people next door. "Our

students get this automatic social group," she says. "It's hard to meet people, especially for international students. We hear that all the time. If they don't come with someone or already know someone, they can be very shy. Some of them tend to be very isolated or stay within a cluster of friends and they don't venture out much. Something like this helps them and encourages them to open up and interact and meet new people." **IE**

KIM FERNANDEZ is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "Pathfinders," a story about how study abroad shaped career paths, which was the cover story of the May/June 2015 issue.

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