

By Glenn Cook

Smooth Transition

First-Year Interest Groups Help International Students Navigate Transition to College Life

THIRTY YEARS AGO, the University of Washington started a program to help incoming freshmen smoothly transition into life at the Seattle campus. Known as a first-year interest group, or FIG, and led by upperclassmen, the program was designed to “put a face” on the university.

“We have changed dramatically how we communicate with students,” says LeAnne Wiles, the university’s director of first-year programs. “We’ve moved from the model of ‘Come and figure it out when you get here’ to one in which we provide information in advance and engage them at home before they ever arrive on campus. The FIG is one piece that helps them in that transition.”

FIGs are part of the Learning Communities movement, which started in the late 1980s and combines classroom work with a focus on personalization. Now a staple in most U.S. and Canadian universities, these first-year groups are credited with helping students earn higher grades, make friends faster, and graduate at higher rates than those who don’t participate.

For international students, most of whom arrive on campus just prior to the start of classes, FIGs can help them learn to navigate the sometimes tricky transitions they encounter when moving to a new country.

“Strategically, we want our FIGs to be focused on integration, not separation,” says Wiles. “We do specific training for our peer mentors around how to help international students in a FIG program, and we work to link domestic and international students together. Our goal is to help all students have a strong sense of community from the beginning.”

Broadening the Experience

The number and size of FIGs differ depending on the university, but most are held during the fall semester and emphasize training in small groups of 15 to 25 students. The University of Washington started with four FIGs in 1987 for a freshman class of just under 3,300. Today, 159 FIGs serve more than half of the 6,400 first-year students, about half of whom are from other countries.

Patricia Moran Micks, director of the First-Year Experience Office at the University of Texas (UT)-Austin, works with a large freshman class—8,300 in the

fall of 2017. Two-thirds of the class participates in one of the university’s 300 FIGs, which are individualized based on the students’ college or major. Participants take two to four classes together, participate in weekly seminars led by a peer mentor and staff facilitator, and work together in study groups.

Micks says UT’s program “is unique in that it works to develop the whole student,” with equal focus on academic, developmental, social, and emotional learning. International students, in particular, benefit from “the opportunity to be instantly engaged in a learning community of peers” as well as events and other opportunities that target their needs and interests.

Networking with peers and faculty is a hallmark of many FIGs, most of which are offered to students living on campus for their freshman year. Some offer options not tied to campus housing, such as State University of New York-Potsdam in northern New York state and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

SUNY-Potsdam has about 300 students participating in 30 different FIGs, which focus on hands-on applied learning, research, and arts experiences. The university also is piloting FIG cohorts that are aimed at undeclared majors to help work on future career plans.

“Our FIGs generally incorporate a number of high-impact educational practices that improve student retention, completion, and success—and those experiences are particularly important for international students,” says Lisa M. Wilson, director of the university’s Learning Communities Advisory board.

Mixing It Up

Few universities have programs that separately target international students, opting instead to go with blended programs. UT-Austin is planning to start its first international FIG in the fall of 2018, and UW-Madison is looking at its options tailored specifically to students from foreign countries.



Western Washington University, located about halfway between Seattle and Victoria, Canada, offers a FIG for international students to help in their transitions from English as a Second Language classes to regular education. SUNY-Potsdam has a multilingual success FIG that is aimed at students whose first language is not English. “Power, States and Markets,” another FIG focusing on politics, gives students an opportunity to speak to students abroad using teleconferencing.

Nathan Phelps, director of Wisconsin’s FIG program and associate dean of the College of Letters and Science, says the university is looking at a blended FIG focused on Asian studies, language skills, and history. Scheduled to start in 2019, the program will include 10 international students and 10 native English-speaking students, and feature a study abroad component.

“Many of our FIGs are global or international in orientation, but our program is purely academic,” says Phelps. “It’s not part of the student life program, but an alternate to the free seminar model because they are regular classes any student could take.”

At the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, a “Jump Start” program is held for 10 days in late August for incoming freshmen. International students are expected to enroll in the fee-based orientation program, which runs for two weeks and continues with activities throughout the academic year.

“As part of the program, students are grouped into a learning community from their program of study, with a faculty member in their discipline, and alongside two senior peer mentors,” says Provost Andrew Szeri, the university’s vice president of academics. “Jump Start ensures students have a peer connection

at the university before they arrive and throughout the scholar’s first year, which eases their sense of culture shock and provides a smoother transition.”

Wisconsin’s FIG program, which centers around a small cluster of three university courses that are linked to explore common themes and topics, serves 25 percent of the underrepresented minorities in the freshman class as well 25 percent of its first-generation college students, many of whom are immigrants. However, the program has not drawn a large number of the university’s 4,000 international students, in part because FIGs are limited to 20 students and fill up far in advance of the start of classes.

“Our FIGs are unique because there’s no housing component and no freshman seminar,” Phelps says. “We’re aiming to challenge our students just like professors in upper-level classes will later, but in this case, the challenge is supported.”

Szeri says studies on Jump Start’s effectiveness have shown a 5 percent increase in freshman retention rates, with increased chances for students’ long-term academic success and overall sense of belonging to the university. Those statistics are mirrored at other universities that have recognized engagement and connection are key to student success.

“Every university wants every student to have a smaller experience to help ease their transition into college life,” Phelps says. “There’s no one-size-fits-all solution, and every place is different, but helping them with that transition is a common goal.” ■

GLENN COOK is a freelance writer and photographer based in Northern Virginia.