

University of Idaho

Situational Analysis Assignment: International Graduate Student English Language  
Support

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# Situational Analysis: International Graduate Student English Language Support

## *General Overview*

According to a 2010 National Science Foundation report, “Although about equal numbers of all foreign students are in undergraduate and graduate programs, graduate students far outweigh undergraduates” (Burrelli). *Business Insider* likewise notes that the number of international students coming to the United States for graduate school has jumped by nearly 4% since 2006” (Rogers). The University of Idaho’s American Language and Culture Program currently supports ninety undergraduate students but only three graduate students. One reason for this disparity may be that language support services for international graduate students are often inadequate and, for some students, nonexistent.

Presently, there are 544 international students on the University of Idaho campus. However, graduate students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) lack the level of English language fluency that they need to be retained and fully succeed in their degree programs. Approximately 80 percent of these students entered the University of Idaho by taking an English placement exam such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Johnson Interview). Such students who “TOEFL” or “IELTS” into the university have lower retention rates than students who take a course or matriculate in from an Intensive English Program that uses an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum to bolster advanced academic literacy. This is especially true for international graduate students who need additional English language support in order to complete the rigorous reading and writing requirements of their degree programs. International graduate students should have a blended course offered on Bblearn and in-person once a week in the evening in which they are able to develop higher-level proficiency within the content of their own degree programs to develop the English language proficiency necessary to be retained by the University of Idaho.

Research supports English language support services for international graduate students in the sciences as a successive predictor of retention. Levis & Levis (year) discuss a course aimed at teaching research writing to graduate student English Language Learners who were to join science or engineering departments at two tier one research universities in the U.S. The course was facilitated with a project-based approach using the four-part Introduction, Methods, Research and Discussion (IMRAD) format. Students strengthened their writing skills and better understood research writing to help prepare them to write a thesis or dissertation. Over a seven-year period, these students had an 85% retention rate compared to the average of 41%. This serves as a model for the newly proposed English language support course at the University of Idaho.

## *Background*

This problem of lack of English language support for international graduate students at the University of Idaho has been caused by an increase in total international student numbers due to the University of Idaho's mandate of internationalization which was put into place in 2009. Internationalization has occurred without a corresponding increase in English language support services for international graduate students. Further, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported that "the number of international students enrolling in American colleges and universities grew at a faster clip in 2010 than a year earlier, reaching a high of 723,277 ("International Enrollments"). At the University of Idaho, support services for international undergraduate students exist, but little or no support has been given to international graduate students.

As can be seen below, international student enrollment at American universities is steadily increasing at all types of institutions of higher education. This will necessitate more English language support services immediately across the United States and especially at the University of Idaho. The University of Idaho fits into the

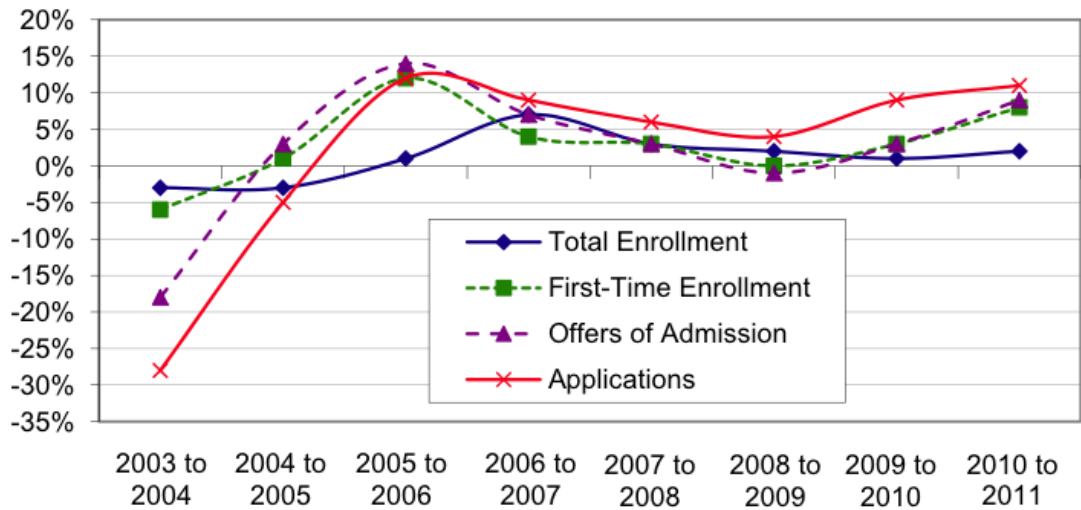
category of “Other Institutions” in the chart below. These institutions have experienced a 6% growth over the 2010-2011 academic year between August and May despite a lagging global economy. As economic conditions improve, international student enrollment is projected to increase dramatically, especially at land-grant institutions such as the University of Idaho. The primary populations expected to grow are Chinese, Saudi Arabian and Libyan (Harder Interview).

Table 1: Growth in international student enrollment in U.S. Universities, 2010

	<b>10 Largest Institutions</b>	<b>25 Largest Institutions</b>	<b>50 Largest Institutions</b>	<b>100 Largest Institutions</b>	<b>All Other Institutions</b>
<b>International Total</b>	11%	9%	10%	10%	6%
<b>Country/Region of Origin</b>					
China	27%	23%	24%	23%	13%
India	-8%	-4%	1%	2%	4%
South Korea	-9%	-5%	-4%	-2%	-1%
Middle East & Turkey *	18%	10%	13%	14%	20%
<b>Field of Study</b>					
Arts & Humanities	9%	6%	9%	5%	3%
Business	15%	5%	13%	12%	7%
Education	44%	10%	12%	12%	-2%
Engineering	14%	11%	10%	9%	7%
Life Sciences	4%	3%	7%	8%	5%
Physical & Earth Sciences	3%	4%	8%	11%	11%
Social Sciences & Psychology	0%	1%	4%	2%	3%
Other Fields	14%	21%	18%	16%	6%

As can be seen in the chart below, international applications to U.S. universities and total enrollment are steadily increasing and this is expected to continue indefinitely (Harder Interview). As the international student population grows, all available resources should be considered and used to support the success and retention of these students.

**Figure 1. Year-to-Year Percent Change in International Student Participation in U.S. Graduate Education, 2003 to 2004 through 2009 to 2010**



Sources: CGS International Graduate Admissions Survey, Phases II and III, 2004 to 2011

Although international graduate students at the University of Idaho do have access to programs that share culture and offer logistical support through the International Friendship Association, this type of support does not include assistance with language proficiency.

Kathryn Schiffelbein, ALCP Coordinator, noted that in 2010, an English language support service for graduate students was created at the University of Idaho. Specifically, a teaching assistant position was created within the American Language and Culture Program (ALCP) to help international graduate teaching assistants acculturate to the American university classroom and to provide them with additional language support. Unfortunately, this position was cut after two semesters although it had been widely used due to budget constraints. Further, the ALCP offers a level six graduate curriculum, which offers appropriate language support to international graduate students. The level six curriculum is structured to support students with deferred admission to the UI. This means, when a student passes level six, he or she may enter their degree program without taking the TOEFL, IELTS or another English

placement exam. However, because of budget constraints, level six, which includes a reading composition, listening speaking and academic skills research writing course, is typically offered together with an advanced undergraduate level course, which supersedes the graduate level curriculum and fails to provide international graduate students with the individual attention necessary for increased English language proficiency (Schiffelbein Interview).

While previous efforts have been made to support some international graduate students on teaching assistantships, many are not teaching assistants and at any rate, that service is no longer available. Further, the vast majority of international graduate students cannot take ALCP courses offered during the day because the ALCP classes are scheduled at times when students typically must attend classes for their degree programs. Finally, the ALCP level 6 courses taught through a content theme that may be irrelevant to the students' fields (Schiffelbein Interview).

### *Scope and Urgency*

The English language support course should be implemented by the beginning of the 2012-1013 academic year. This will allow the university to address growing concerns about how to support the expected addition of 100 more international graduate students by fall 2012 in addition to the population already at the University of Idaho (Johnson Interview).

Over 270 international graduate students on the university's Moscow campus have little or no access to English language support services and cannot take daytime course in the ALCP (Johnson Interview). The lack of English language support services currently affects students, UI staff and the University Writing Center, which lacks an ESL-trained tutor and a sufficient number of staff members to assist with a greater number of English language learners who require a different type of assistance with writing than do native speakers (Brinton, Snow & Wesche).

The number of international students on campus is expected to increase exponentially

over the next several years. The number of international graduate students on campus is projected to double to 550 by 2015 (Johnson Interview). If support services are not increased in the ALCP, this will negatively affect international students' major professors/advisors as well as the University Writing Center, which will not be able to handle the increased number of clients and which lacks staff with the expertise and training to assist international graduate students.

Most importantly, if this problem is not addressed, international graduate student retention will steadily decrease as students will be unable to complete their degree programs without adequate English language support services offered at flexible times. Further, faculty and major professors/advisors will be reluctant to take on more international graduate students because of the time commitment and level of English language support often required of advisors at the graduate level. This will decrease the internationalization of the University of Idaho and fail to support the University Mission.

Bob Harder, Interim Director of International Programs at the University of Idaho, noted that due to the university-wide mandate for internationalization and the cap on domestic enrollment at many peer institutions, University of Idaho is in a unique position to demonstrate how and why this uniquely important group of students can and should be supported using the American Language and Culture Program faculty's expertise in teaching advanced academic literacy for international graduate students. There's also an opportunity to publish research on how to support international students and to continue to demonstrate that the University of Idaho is a leading institution for internationalization (Harder Interview).

This problem should be addressed immediately because it affects students, faculty and staff. Failure to address this problem will make it difficult for international students to contribute and it will also prevent the university from achieving its mission of becoming an international university that welcomes diversity.

### *Target population data*

Support services are needed for international graduate students ages 22-50, from various countries including but not limited to Saudi Arabia, China, Libya, Japan, Korea, Peru, Ecuador, Spain, Italy, Germany, Brazil, and Turkey. Approximately 80% of international graduate students at the University of Idaho are male and all international graduate students have obtained an undergraduate degree in their country of origin or from another university in the United States prior to applying for a graduate degree program at the UI (Johnson Interview).

International graduate students would be motivated to take a graduate-level English language support course for the following reasons:

- To increase English language proficiency
- To better acculturate to the university
- To interact with other international graduate students
- To understand the writing requirements of publishing for professional organizations in their fields
- To be better prepared to write a Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation
- To prepare for future careers in academia

There are many reasons why international graduate students should take an English language support course. However, potential barriers for international graduate students to take the course include the following:

- A perceived lack of time to take the course while concurrently working on course work for degree programs
- Lack of funding to pay tuition for the course
- Lack of encouragement from advisors/departments to take the course
- Potential for ridicule from other graduate students who do not need English language support



- Failure to recognize that additional English language support is needed

The major barrier preventing this population from enrolling in an English language support class is a lack of funding and the lack of recognizability of the American Language and Culture Program and International Programs on campus. Many UI departments do not know the ALCP exists and few are familiar with the types of English language support the ALCP offers. Some may have a negative impression of ALCP support services due to administrative inconsistency in the past. Further, students and their respective departments may not understand how an English language support course would enhance student chances for retention and success at the University of Idaho. The fact that many students have already passed the TOEFL or IELTS and still need English language support is not unusual, but, for cultural reasons, some students do not want to formally enroll in an English class. The reality is that many students do not understand second language acquisition theory and the increased demands of advanced academic literacy for international graduate students.

The university currently does not offer English language support services for this group that specifically aim to develop the advanced academic literacy necessary for this group to succeed and be retained in their degree programs. International students who are undergraduates can be placed into five levels of English support, yet international graduate students are still placed with undergraduates and lack individual attention and support in combined level 5 and 6 courses. Although the graduate level 6 curriculum is helpful, it is difficult to re-align course learning outcomes when the two levels are combined, which has occurred every semester (with the exception of Spring 2009) for the last four years (Schiffelbein Interview).

The International Student Forum reports that international students obtain information regarding support services and other pertinent information through electronic media (“International Student Forum”). Therefore, targeted mass media messages are likely to provide an excellent means of reaching international students enrolled in graduate degree programs at the University of Idaho.

### *Available resources*

The mandate for internationalization on the UI campus as well as a projected increases in the number of international students mandate that all available resources be used to communicate the news about the new course offering. Resources available to communicate the new international graduate student English language support course include the international student e-bulletin sent through the International Programs Office, the Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA), and the ALCP Facebook page. These are the best forums for reaching at least 50 % of international graduate students. Most importantly, international graduate students need to receive news about university programs from a source they can trust.

International graduate students trust the opinions of the International Programs staff and their colleagues in their respective language groups, ALCP teachers, the cultural missions for their countries as well as their major professors/advisors and department heads. It is imperative that a brochure concerning course specifics and benefits to students be delivered through a variety of online networking including but not limited to the international student e-bulletin, GPSA and ALCP Facebook page. A paper copy of the brochure should also be sent directly to department heads and to all international student advisors to share with international graduate student populations during new student orientation before the fall 2012 semester begins.

A brochure that could be distributed and available in department offices and also sent via e-mail would be the most efficient and cost-effective way to communicate the message regarding this important new course to those who most need it. The brochure could be sent and posted in areas of high- traffic including the International Programs Office. All of the communication can be done with the help of the Marketing and Recruitment Assistant for International Programs, Shawn Greenfield.

However, to obtain funding to initially run the course, the proposed instructor, Kate Hellmann, could use the course for a research study and obtain funds through the Student Grant Program since she is a Ph.D. student in Curriculum and Instruction.

Funds may also be available from the Diversity and Human Rights Grant program since the new course would aid a diverse group of students who contribute to the University's internationalization. The College of Graduate Studies may also assist in funding the course.

The Marketing and Recruitment Assistant for International Programs, Shawn Greenfield, has offered to develop and send a news release about the new program at no charge to partnership organizations on campus. Information could also be disseminated through the partnership organizations listed below:

- International Programs Office
- American Language and Culture Program
- College of Graduate Studies
- Chinese Student Association
- Office of Multicultural Affairs
- Graduate and Professional Student Association

### *Summary*

The time to provide English language support services for international graduate students at the University of Idaho is now. Through the American Language and Culture Program, this newly-scheduled course will support the success and retention of international graduate students at the University of Idaho. This English language support class will help serve the mission of internationalization at the University of Idaho. It is imperative that information concerning the course be sent to partnership organizations and posted online on the University of Idaho website, at the ALCP Facebook page, and as a paper brochure by the end of the spring 2012 semester so the course can be implemented by the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic year. Funding can be obtained through the Student Grant Program, Diversity and Human Rights and through the College of Graduate Studies. If the University of Idaho is to continue to be a leader in internationalization, it also needs to support the

international students it is recruiting by offering this course every semester, beginning in the fall of 2012 and by promoting the course among international students.

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