

Internationalizing U.Va. & Supporting English Language Learners: Involving the Campus Community - Low Costs, High Returns

Dudley Doane
Alyson Kienle

The Center for American English Language and Culture (CAELC)
University of Virginia

Calls for greater internationalization of higher education in the United States are not new, nor is disappointment about the breadth and depth of internationalization efforts. Much of the discourse on campus internationalization has focused on the mobility of U.S. students and faculty along with reform of undergraduate curricula. While commonly acknowledged to be a primary component of campus internationalization, the integration of international students and scholars at U.S. colleges and universities (Ellingboe, 1998; Hayward, 2000) too often receives little attention and few resources. One can argue that in failing to support their international students and scholars, institutions overlook a tremendous internationalization resource and underserve, what for many universities including our own, are increasingly important constituencies.

In the last decade, the number of international students and scholars has grown dramatically at the University of Virginia. These students and scholars bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to the University. They play a significant role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. As newcomers to the U.S., many international students and scholars face a variety of challenges. The challenges often involve language and culture.

In an effort to help students and scholars address challenges related to language and culture, the University of Virginia re-configured and expanded English language support services through creation of the Center for American English Language and Culture (CAELC). Coordination of several existing, and highly successful, ESL endeavors was effected under the banner of CAELC, and additional English language courses and services were created; however, CAELC faculty quickly realized that their students needed opportunities both for conversation practice and for interaction with U.S. peers outside of language classes. For this to happen, CAELC would have to call on members of the U.Va. community.

The faculty also recognized that the capstone course for prospective international teaching assistants, LING 111 Classroom Communication, a class focused on both the development of oral language skills and of teaching skills, would have to be re-designed in order to accommodate more participants. There was a long waiting list for enrollment in the course, and departments needed to fill teaching assignments.

Elizabeth Wittner, the CAELC faculty member who oversees the training program for international teaching assistants, elected to double the size of LING 111 and to create a second section of the class. In the fall of 2002, 48 individuals enrolled in LING 111 whereas in 2001, 12 people took the course. Resources allowed employment of a second LING 111 instructor, but re-design of the course relied heavily on the involvement of U.Va. community members.

CAELC faculty cited increased contact between U.S. students and individuals from different cultures as a significant collateral benefit of the new programming. Interacting with international students and scholars on a regular basis could help U.S.

students develop intercultural proficiency or global competence, an overriding goal in much of the literature on internationalization (ACE, 1998; Hayward, 2000; Green, 2002). The prospect of developing programs that led to more reflexive and insightful U.S. students as well as to increased English proficiency among international students and scholars provided a powerful incentive to forge ahead.

The challenges faced by CAELC faculty were substantially lowered by two existing models for campus community involvement in English language support services. The first involved classroom assistants and tutors and was developed by Dr. Marion Ross, founder of the original ESL program at the University. Ross recruited U.S. students from linguistics, anthropology, foreign language departments, and her own course on the teaching of English as second language to assist with her popular course on American pronunciation. Many of the volunteers received practicum credit for the work, directed by Ross.

The second model, tied to the training program for international teaching assistants, was developed by Elizabeth Wittner. Wittner recruited volunteers to de-brief prospective international teaching assistants on their teaching demos in her LING 111 course and also sought volunteers to meet with her students for conversation practice outside of class.

Today, there are five ways U.Va. community members can assist with the delivery of English language support services: Peer Mentors in the summer English for Academic Purposes program (10 in 2003), Classroom Tutors in LING 105 American Pronunciation (17 in 2003-2004), LING 111 Classroom Volunteers (47 in 2003-2004), LING 111 Classroom Moderators (18 in 2003–2004), and Student Language Consultants,

a.k.a., conversation group leaders (152 in 2003-2004). Since September, 2003, over 350 international students and scholars have participated in CAELC courses and extra-curricular activities that draw on support from the larger U.Va. community.

While the five programs all rely on the willingness of native-English speakers to give of their time, CAELC has been able to provide modest financial rewards for the summer Peer Mentors and the LING 111 Classroom Moderators. This is important as Mentors and Moderators take on more responsibilities than do assistants in the other programs. Additionally, practicum credit continues to be available for the Classroom Tutors, which is appropriate given the training in the teaching of pronunciation provided by Marion Ross. The vast majority of the native-speaker assistants, however, are true volunteers. Levels of satisfaction with the experience appear to be high. The programs have rapidly increased in popularity.

Each type of assistant completes some kind of training at the beginning of the term and is monitored throughout the term. The assistants, who are mostly from the U.S., are not only asked to provide feedback on the language skills of English language learners but also encouraged to reflect on their own assumptions and values along with the difficulties of intercultural communication. This is done through bi-weekly journals.

Organization of the five programs involves recruitment, training and support, and evaluation. The endeavor has required employment of a graduate administrative intern to assist faculty with development and administration of the programs. Given the number of assistants and internationals involved in the programs and the value of participation to both groups, the costs of administration seem small.

By building on existing strengths and practices, CAELC faculty have increased interaction between internationals and members of the larger U.Va. community. This increased interaction has helped English language learners develop their language skills and their knowledge of U.S. culture and helped several hundred U.S. students expand their world view. In the words of Elizabeth Wittner, we are “Internationalizing U.Va. one conversation at a time.”

Information on English language support services at the University of Virginia is available at www.virginia.edu/provost/caelc . Questions should be directed to CAELC at caelc@virginia.edu or 434/924 3371.

Dudley J. Doane, Ph.D. serves as Director of U.Va’s Center for American English Language and Culture and Interim Director of the Summer Session. Alyson Kienle, CAELC’s Graduate Administrative Intern, is a doctoral student in the Curry School of Education.

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