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Arrive Prepared: An Academic College Transition (ACT) Program for Precollege International Students

Chinese nationals entering colleges and universities in the United States as international students often find it difficult to adjust academically and socially (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). At Wake Forest University (WFU), a recent faculty needs assessment revealed that international students' primary challenges were academic writing, citing sources, and communication with faculty. WFU offers first-year academic transition programs designed to bolster international student adjustment and academic writing skills; however, we wanted to investigate whether a precollege academic transition curriculum could effectively improve students' academic writing skills, understanding of plagiarism, and confidence communicating with faculty.

To better facilitate international students' transition to campus, the WFU Center for Global Programs and Studies, in collaboration with the Writing Program in the English Department, designed an Academic College Transition (ACT) program to be taught in the home country of precollege students to help them prepare for university life before arriving on U.S. campuses. Although the ultimate goal of such a program was to work with incoming WFU international students, the pilot program ran in collaboration with an international high school because of convenience and prior relationships. As WFU's undergraduate international student population is majority Chinese, we targeted China for the pilot ACT program.

Program Information

The primary challenge in developing the ACT program was to identify a foreign high school to create, in partnership, an adaptive curriculum that would build on the students' current schoolwork so as to meet their zone of proximal development (i.e., extend students beyond what they know without overtaxing their ability to learn or perform new skills). After some background work and relationship development, we successfully



Professor Jon Smart and students in the Academic College Transition program at Wake Forest University discuss writing expectations for college students. Photo credit: Wake Forest University

collaborated with a private high school using the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in Qingdao, China. The ACT program featured a non-credit academic course and additional programming elements condensed into a week of instruction (i.e., 15 contact hours across six days with an additional six hours

Nelson C. Brunsting
Director of Global Research and Assessment

Jon W. Smart
Assistant Teaching Professor, Writing

Jamie Eisner
Global Outreach Intern

Tina Liu
Global Outreach Intern
Wake Forest University

Travis L. Coverdell
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Wenbo Sun
Global Outreach Intern
Wake Forest University

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of cocurricular programming) in classrooms at the students' high school. Students taking the IB curriculum were invited to apply to the ACT program; 12 second- or third-year high school students did so, with 11 selected to participate in the course. One of the 12 did not meet expectations for the level of academic writing.

The course was designed to significantly increase learning outcomes of the ACT program: understanding how to write an academic research paper, including correct use of citations; understanding plagiarism; confidently interacting with a U.S. university faculty member; and feeling capable of succeeding at a U.S. university. The intensive course gave the students a unique opportunity to work directly with a U.S. professor, while also receiving academic and cultural support from three current WFU students who served as teaching assistants. Two of the teaching assistants were native Chinese, so they could share personal experience adapting to the U.S. environment and education style. The third teaching assistant was a U.S. national who provided advice on U.S. culture and university life and academics from an American perspective. Each instructional period was divided into more traditional classroom activities and lectures, one-on-one workshops with the faculty instructor and assistants and, in the evenings, question-and-answer sessions with the assistants about university experiences.

The faculty member who taught the ACT course was recruited specifically for his more than 10 years' experience teaching academic writing with a focus on supporting English-language learners. He selected the U.S. teaching assistant based on the Writing Program's recommendation. The two Chinese teaching assistants helped develop the ACT program and were Qingdao natives. The faculty member provided the teaching assistants a two-hour training before the program that focused on reading academic texts critically and incorporating sources into written arguments.

In the month before the ACT program, the authors sent a packet of materials to the students that included assigned readings, comprehension and reflective questions on the readings, and vocabulary activities based on the readings and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), consisting of words most frequently used in academic writing. During the program week, the students completed brief in-class writing tasks and gave short oral presentations. For the course's major project, each student developed a 1,000-word written argument synthesizing multiple sources on a shared topic: the effects of social media use on personal well-being. Given the course's short timeline, the faculty chose a small set of articles and readings for students to pick from to build their arguments; these texts represented a range of genres and often contradictory perspectives on issues related to social media and well-being. Students received faculty and peer feedback on the drafts of their papers and could revise their work with the help of the faculty member or teaching assistants. On the final day of the course, each student presented arguments to an audience of their peers and the program faculty and staff.

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What We Learned

To assess the program's potential impact, the 11 student participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey one week after program completion. The survey included questions designed to compare student knowledge or confidence in academic writing and communication with U.S. university faculty before and after taking the course. It included three open-ended questions to capture student insights about the program: its most valuable element, its most challenging aspect, and what changes could be made to improve it.

Table 1
Comparison of Student Ratings of Knowledge and Confidence After Completing the Program

Construct	Before	After	ΔM	t
Knowledge of academic writing	4.50	6.74	2.24	$t(7) = 7.80^{***}$
Ability to write a research paper	4.86	6.99	2.23	$t(7) = 5.87^{***}$
Understanding of plagiarism	6.53	8.12	1.59	$t(8) = 3.68^{**}$
Confidence to communicate with an American professor	5.59	7.59	2.00	$t(8) = 4.93^{**}$
Confidence to succeed at a U.S. university	4.86	6.50	1.64	$t(8) = 3.93^{**}$

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows results from the nine students who completed the survey. Students reported significant increases in knowledge, ability, and confidence in academic writing; writing a research paper; understanding plagiarism; communicating with American faculty; and succeeding at a U.S. university. Responses to open-ended survey questions showed that the opportunity to work directly with an American faculty member and the three teaching assistants was students' most valued experience. They found completing the 1,000-word research paper to be the course's most difficult aspect, particularly having to formulate an argument from multiple sources. Four students noted a preference for more time for non-academic program activities focused on fun and relieving stress. Although the faculty and teaching assistants did not complete a formal post-program assessment, they did complete a group debrief with the program director to propose adjustments to the program, discussed below.

Although the results are significant, caution in interpretation is necessary because of the low number of students who completed the survey.

Program Adjustments and Future Implications

A review of the program assessments and discussions with the faculty, teaching assistants, and school associate principal yielded three main areas for improvement of

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the ACT program: better pre-program assessment; increased 1:1 interaction between high school students and faculty/teaching assistants; and enhanced post-program evaluation, including direct assessment measures.

Although the authors were diligent in communicating with the high school faculty about student knowledge before the course, the discussion was broad in nature and did not convey in detail the variation in student academic preparedness. Future iterations of the program will include pre-program assessment to give instructors a better understanding of individual students' needs and current knowledge, allowing for a smoother transition on the first day of the course. Maximizing learning in the allotted time is critical to the course's success, as post-program assessment confirmed that a one-week course was the preferred timeframe.

Students and instructors reported 1:1 interaction as the critical context for students to make gains on the program's student learning outcomes, specifically academic writing and confidence to communicate with faculty. One-to-one interaction occurred naturally during the program, and instructors paid special attention to ensure a relative parity of interaction by students. Given the importance of such interaction, we recommend more opportunities for 1:1 meetings between faculty/teaching assistants and students, both formally in an instructional context and informally during other programming (e.g., lunches, breaks, assistant-led socially focused programs). Another option to increase individual student attention without expanding the preferred one-week timeframe: Increase post-program communication between faculty and students (e.g., completing an assignment that can be submitted to a university-level writing contest). Such an assignment would also provide data to help directly assess students' gains in academic writing, especially when compared to a pre-program writing sample. This would also further enhance program assessment, which thus far used an indirect strategy via students' perception of their knowledge and confidence in academic writing and communicating with U.S. faculty.

Conclusion

The Wake Forest University ACT program gave precollege international students a unique opportunity to experience a U.S. university-style course and interact with faculty and student teaching assistants. Because the program took place at a local high school and not at a U.S. university campus as is typical for U.S.-led precollege programming, the students could focus on a successful academic transition without simultaneously having to navigate a social transition in a new time zone. Students reported increases in their knowledge and confidence with academic writing and interacting with U.S. faculty, highlighting the success of the ACT program's first implementation. Based on the results of this pilot course, WFU successfully implemented an upgraded ACT program for our incoming first-year undergraduate Chinese students in Beijing in July 2017. We invite universities interested in replicating, adapting, or collaborating on the ACT program to contact the first author. 

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Contact

Nelson C. Brunsting
brunstnc@wfu.edu

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