

## Designing and Implementing a Bridge: IEP to M.Ed.

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### Abstract

*Traditional IEPs while worthwhile, often fail to address the linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of international students preparing to study at graduate level. At our university we developed a series of courses to address these concerns, and our presentation addressed what we have learned from the process. First, we discussed the ways in which we designed and created our bridge courses. We also explored the continued administrative challenges and resolutions in this method. Second, we addressed the practical aspects of teaching the courses; what worked, what did not, and what we will do next. Last, we discussed the advising aspect necessitated. Since its inception, two cohorts of students have been able to use this pathway towards graduate study. We hope to give practical advice to other IEP programs or Higher Education instructors looking to add bridge courses to help support graduate-level international students transition into their appropriate fields of study.*

At a dinner with the university president's wife, a group of female Saudi students voiced their struggles to gain admission to the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program. These women were visibly stressed about the upcoming entrance exam, and many were sure they would fail. After careful investigation by the Office of International Programs and the Department of Education, it was found that the entrance exam was going to be beyond these students' current reach. Faculty and staff met several times to determine what could be done for this group of students who also told of future students coming to Washburn University interested in the same degree. Finally, the Foundation Program was created

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jointly by the two departments as a pathway program from the Intensive English Program to the graduate program.

### Program Overview

Initially, there was a group of nine students applying to the M. Ed. program in Education Technology. These students did not pass the entrance exam even with two extra hours for the test mostly because of lack of background knowledge and reflective writing skills even after they had completed the Intensive English Program. These students also researched other master of education programs in Kansas and found that others did not have such a test. Washburn University decided to provide a foundational semester of 3 courses to set them up for success and admittance into the program. It was decided that if they passed all three courses with a B or higher, they could be given full admission to the M. Ed. program if they had also already completed the Intensive English Program (IEP) and had a 3.0 cumulative GPA for the last 60 hours of instruction for in their bachelor's degrees. This Foundation Program added a semester to their degree, but all involved concluded that it would be worth it to ensure success.

The following courses were adapted or created for the program:

- **IE295 Special Topics: Enhancing Skills for Graduate Studies** (new): This course used the Department of Education's Graduate Admission Test (GAT) rubric to help create the syllabus.
- **ED472 Issues in Modern Education** (cross-listed with an existing face-to-face undergraduate course): This course provided content background knowledge on US Education.
- **ED550 Graduate Pro-Seminar** (new): This course invited professional educators to speak every week and required students to do a reflective writing about every two weeks. This course covered the 4 core areas of the M.Ed. in Technology program.

It is evident that this was a joint project with the education department and the Intensive English (IE) department each creating a new course and one course cross-listed with an existing introductory education course. All three courses complimented each other giving a solid overview and background in American education.

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### Student Academic Needs

Some of the needs assessment for each student was encompassed in the portfolios completed by students the semester previous. In addition, the instructor was able to view some of the assessments done by the education program in their entrance exam and see many of the deficiencies the students needed to address to be able to accomplish the style of writing required by the M.Ed. program.

First, the students needed to improve their academic vocabulary and context specific vocabulary. They needed to have a better grasp of the jargon associated with the field of education and, in particular, education in the U.S. For example, “Common Core,” “Race to the Top,” and even what a U.S. “school district” was, were all new topics for the incoming students. Also, the sentence patterns of higher level academic writing were all new to them. They did not use phrases like “X overlooks the deeper pattern that,” “X rests upon the questionable assumption that,” or “X’s claim is problematic because it fails to show that” in their writing, and it added to a perception of lack of depth in their responses.

Furthermore, the students needed to improve their context clue techniques. Many students at the beginning were translating word for word the academic readings. Often this not only took unnecessarily long, but also impeded their understanding as some meanings can only be understood through phrases. They also needed to understand how not only to get meaning from context, but also how to get overall meaning without focusing on any one particular set of words.

Besides employing context clue techniques, it was clear from assessment that students needed to improve their reading strategies for academic texts and content specific texts. Previous reading work they had done in the IEP had been with well-known American literature, which, while important, did not adequately prepare them for how to read research articles on education. As well their style of summarizing and responding to information they read in their texts did not match what the Education Department was looking for in their M.Ed. students. To help prepare the students, the instructor met with the professors from the Education Department multiple times in an effort to make sure the style of writing she was teaching helped students address the work they would need to do in their M.Ed. studies.

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Finally, students continued to struggle with proper paraphrasing of articles and could not always distinguish where problems with paraphrasing bled over into lack of proper citation and plagiarism. They needed to improve their research techniques in general and know how to proficiently search academic databases. In addition, they needed to become more comfortable with higher pressure writing. Most of the students were used to having at least a week to work through a first or second draft. In a Master's program, though, more advanced writing was expected of them without that leeway to draft and redraft work, and they often froze at the prospect of summarizing and responding properly in only 2 hours.

### **What Was Covered in the Class**

The book chosen was *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2010). It addressed students' exposure to sentence patterns and high level summary and reflection. In addition, each student was required to do one research project using only scholarly articles in the appropriate field and a presentation on their project. Vocabulary for each research project was then used for five vocabulary quizzes throughout the class. Six summary and response essays were done in the class: two were timed for 2 hours only, and 4 were process essays. There was also a midterm exam and a final exam. Both of these exams were timed essays and were assessed based on the previously mentioned GAT, using the same rubric and articles from scholarly journals.

### **What Was Effective**

*They Say, I Say*, proved a very positive book for the class, and student writing improved accordingly. The students themselves also spoke to its worth and appreciated the templates for academic sentence patterns and summary and response tips that it contained. Additionally, they appreciated the informal style of the book, often calling it "easy to read."

The assigned research project and presentation each student did was helpful and effective. It gave them a stepping stone to move through the databases and journals associated with their field and increased their familiarity with what peer-reviewed writing entailed. As well, the vocabulary quizzes resulting from the research were useful and increased vocabulary knowledge and familiarity with the online testing format used in many of the education classes.

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### Improving the Course

*At the time of this writing the IE 295 course is now being offered a second time and students getting their Master in Business Administration and Master in Psychology are part of the new cohort.*

This next iteration of the course has a number of changes involved to improve upon the first run.

First, the instructor and students have been focusing on textbook skimming and scanning. While students studied peer-reviewed articles in depth first semester of the foundation courses, they still were hampered by their lack of ability to read a textbook efficiently. Also, more emphasis has been placed on research techniques, and time in the library spent accordingly. In addition, the program now has students from other disciplines in the course with the M.Ed. students. This has added to the diversity in research projects and lent some interesting perspectives from other disciplines. Furthermore, a great deal more emphasis has been placed on addressing plagiarism and paraphrasing from day one. We have used a book called *Essential Academic Vocabulary* by Helen Huntley (2005) to add examples for proper paraphrasing mixed in to everyday activities. The response to plagiarism has also been stricter from the first day.

Another important change has been spending time talking to the students about how to address critiques from professors. While in the first run of the course time was spent helping students try to avoid plagiarism, little was discussed about how they should properly respond to making any kind of mistake, whether intentional or not. In that semester, a student's inappropriate response to a professor's serious critique of her work resulted in an extremely difficult situation. Therefore, this semester the instructor deemed it appropriate to spend time reminding students how important their professional relationships with professors were at the graduate level and how important a professional response to errors could be. All students subsequently were asked to sign a promise that not only did they understand plagiarism and its consequences, but also they would pledge to accept responsibility professionally for their mistakes and learn from them.

### Advising Challenges

The department of education and the Office of International Programs realized that the students needed careful advising before, during, and after this Foundation Program semester. Not only did the

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students need background content knowledge of the American education system, but they also needed experiential knowledge of how graduate programs function in the US. This cohort of students did not realize that after the core courses are met, the electives would be chosen by them on personal preference with little guidance from the program director. In addition to help making a study plan, they did not understand the time required to complete the program, when courses were offered, and even how to enroll in courses and get instructor permission. Monthly meetings were held to address the needs as they came up. The IE instructor involved and the coordinator became cultural liaisons between the departments helping with cultural, language, and advising challenges. For example, it was not clear to the students who they should ask when they had questions. They often asked questions to the International Programs office instead of the Education Department because they were more familiar with the IP office. They even asked the IE instructor to call and ask the Education department questions that they needed to begin asking for themselves.

To further complicate the situation, these students were all on Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission education scholarships. They needed as many face-to-face courses as possible. The course in the Foundation Program labeled IE295 was problematic to the stipulations of their scholarship and letters had to be written to carefully explain the courses and the program. The scholarships also required the students to gain full admission to the program within a time limit and obtain a degree within a time limit. These constraints are still being dealt with each semester as the program is continuing, especially now that there are not enough numbers to sustain a new cohort each semester.

### **Success**

Putting all these challenges aside, there was success in the program. Six out of nine of the original cohort finished the program in the spring of 2015 and gained full admission to the M. Ed. Education Technology program. At the time of this writing they have completed their first full semester in the graduate program successfully. They report that the program was instrumental in their success in the first semester.

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One more of the original nine completed the foundation semester in fall of 2015 and is currently enrolled full time in the education technology program now. The others are working their way toward their goal with more coming in behind them. All these students report that they are better writers. Instructors report that they are more reflective and can now respond critically in writing.

Though there was a large amount of time crucial to leading the students to success, they are well on their way toward their goal. The program provided another pathway for these students to get into the program and experience success they otherwise might not have been able to accomplish. Currently, the IE295 course is being expanded to include facilitating the preparation of prospective graduate students for other programs besides education, such as a master in business, nursing, or psychology.

**McClendon & Springsteen - Designing and Implementing a Bridge****References**

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Kelly has been teaching English for academic purposes for 16 years at the Washburn University Intensive English Program with the five most recent years as the coordinator of the program. She usually teaches writing and grammar at the high intermediate and advanced levels. Before WU, she taught ESL in adult education in Oklahoma and Kansas and EFL and high school science in China. One of her interests lies in preparing international students, both graduate and undergraduate, for success in the U.S. college classroom.

**Sarah Springsteen**, M.A. TESOL, Lecturer, Intensive English, Washburn University

Sarah is a lecturer in the Intensive English Program at Washburn University where she has worked for the past year and a half. She has taught reading and writing, but most recently has focused extensively on teaching grammar and advanced writing courses. Before WU, she taught ESL to kindergarten in South Korea, a high school in the Republic of Georgia, and for two years at a University in Saudi Arabia. She has also worked with visually impaired ESL learners in Phoenix, Arizona. A few of her interests lie in L2 motivation, writing, spelling, and vocabulary.