

## From Isolation to Collaboration: A Continuum of Student Support

### Focused Inquiry

The University College is the home for VCU's core curriculum. The central component of the curriculum is a two-semester sequence of courses, Focused Inquiry I and II, in which all first-year students are enrolled. The Focused Inquiry courses, which replace English 101, target a small number of specific skill areas, including communication (both written and oral), critical thinking and problem solving, the development of quantitative abilities, information retrieval and evaluation and collaborative work.

### Language Resource Center (LRC): English language support for students in Focused Inquiry

The LRC provides specialized support to English language learners in Focused Inquiry. The LRC encourages success by helping students develop their vocabulary and reading comprehension, fluency in composition, oral communication, and understanding of American academic rhetorical expectations. The LRC is also a resource for FI faculty in the theory and practice of teaching English language learners.

**Wendy Nugent** teaches FI and coordinates the FI Language Resource Center. [whnugent@vcu.edu](mailto:whnugent@vcu.edu)

### English Language Program (ELP) of Office of International Education (OIE)

The ELP provides English language support to students who are academically admissible to VCU undergraduate and graduate programs but who need greater English language proficiency for success in an academic environment. The ELP additionally serves individuals who want to improve their language skills for educational, career and/or personal reasons and who may later apply to VCU academic programs. Core courses are offered at 10 levels of instruction – beginning through advanced– in five seven-week sessions per year. Core courses include: writing and grammar, reading and vocabulary, listening, speaking and pronunciation. Additional electives as well as extracurricular learning opportunities, such as conversation partners and cultural / educational activities, are available to students.

**Keith Boswell** is the Acting Director for ELP and an instructor as well. [ikboswell@vcu.edu](mailto:ikboswell@vcu.edu) **Martha Young** is the Assistant Director, Teacher Mentor Coordinator and an instructor for ELP. [mwyoung@vcu.edu](mailto:mwyoung@vcu.edu)

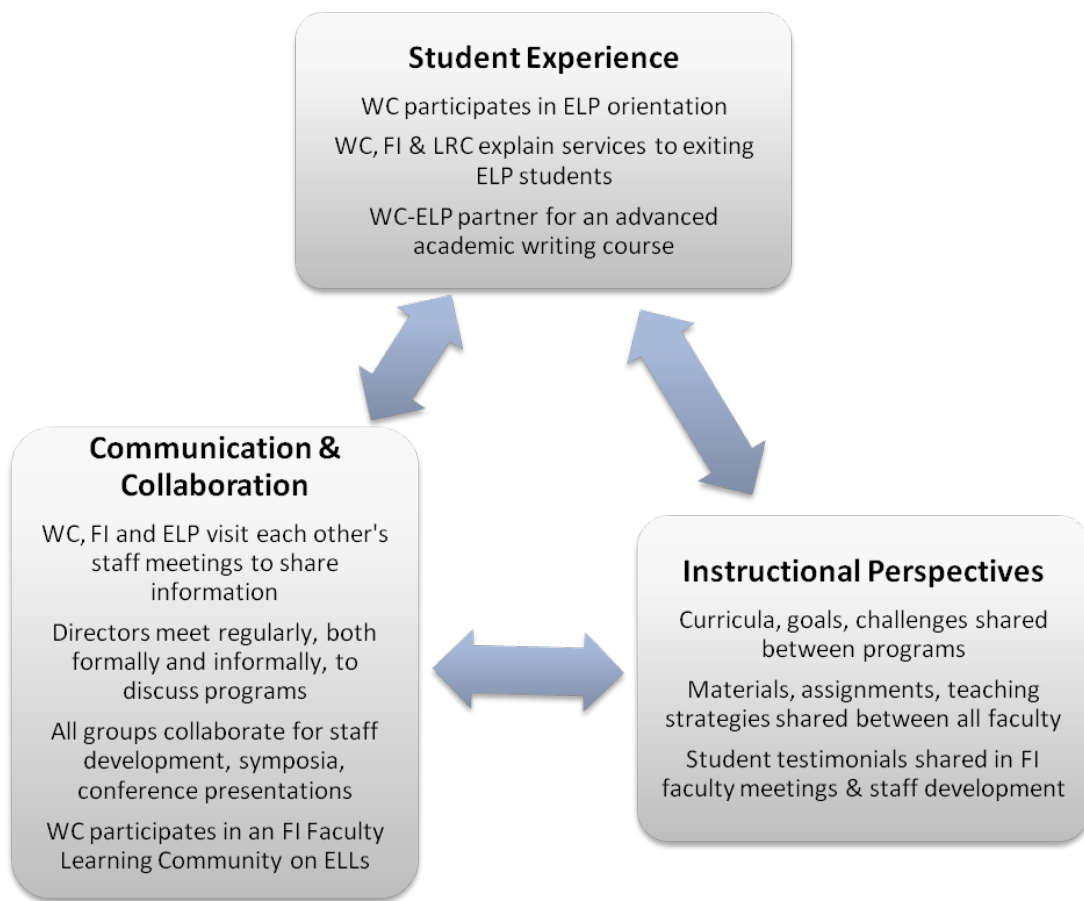
### The Writing Center (WC): Learning Support for the Entire VCU Community

Writing Center services are available to all writers at VCU – from freshmen to faculty members, English language learners to native speakers – for writing projects across disciplines. Services for students include one-on-one consultations at any point in the writing process and workshops on a wide variety of topics associated with academic writing, reading, and critical thinking. Services for faculty include individual consultations on writing projects, assignment design, and curriculum development. Out of over 7000 consultations last academic year, approximately 30% of the students we saw self-identified as having a country of origin other than the US. (This is not an entirely reliable indicator of the ELL population we serve, but it provides a general sense of our scope).

**Patty Strong** is the Director of the Writing Center. [prstrong@vcu.edu](mailto:prstrong@vcu.edu) **Katie Elliott** is the Coordinator of the Writing Center. Both share responsibility for researching current ELL scholarship, as well as creating staff development materials and training consultants for their work with international students. [elliottkl@vcu.edu](mailto:elliottkl@vcu.edu)

## Building bridges between programs for broader student support

Our programs came together with the goal of creating a more coherent, integrated, and sequenced learning experience for our international students. We found that programmatic isolation had led to a fragmented experience for our students, requiring them to reintroduce themselves to new academic landscapes and new language and learning environments with each step forward. We believe this to be particularly problematic for international students who frequently resist self-identifying and have difficulty moving beyond their own cultural and academic comfort zones. We have realized, however, that cross-programmatic communication and collaboration would help bridge the gaps and smooth the bumps along the way, creating informed and integrated learning communities for students. To create these more knowledgeable communities, we found that we must reach both inside and outside the classroom, involving students, faculty, and administrators in conversations that address not only students' academic needs, but their social and emotional needs as well. Below, we have organized our efforts over the past year into three general categories that represent the most productive aspects of our work together: Student Experience, Instructional Perspectives, and Communication and Collaboration.



### Ongoing questions for consideration:

- How can we overcome student resistance to additional language work or learning support? How can we work on students' perception of the relationship between the three units?
- How do we find the balance in ELP between language acquisition skills and direct preparation for FI?
- How can we bring our program skill goals and assessment into alignment?
- How might we extend the circle of cooperation to other departments or academic units? To other collaborative projects and initiatives?

- How might we assess our collaboration? Have we seen specific students benefit from this relationship thus far? How might we assess it overall in terms of student success and/or retention?
- What might make this relationship impossible?
- What training opportunities present themselves within this relationship?