1. **Purpose of Presentation**

The purpose of my presentation today is to introduce the Purdue Language and Culture Exchange (PLaCE) to senators who are unfamiliar with the program and to provide an update for those who are already familiar with PLaCE. I also want to thank those who have been supportive of the program’s creation and development. The support that the University Senate has provided in the past has been critical for the progress the program has made so far.

2. **A Brief History**

PLaCE began in 2012 with a handful of voluntary classes offered through Student Success. The program has developed into a two-semester required sequence for eligible international students. The University Senate has passed two Resolutions with large majorities in support of PLaCE, the first focusing on undergrads and the second, in addition to providing support for PLaCE, calling for support for advanced undergrads and international graduate students.

The first PLaCE course, English 110, was approved by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee for use as a humanities core requirement. Students can use the second course (English 111) as an elective, so enrollment does not add time to graduation.

PLaCE has provided impressive evidence of student pre-post English language proficiency gains. In addition, we can provide a strong case for comparably impressive gains in less easily measured variables such as willingness to communicate, engagement, and critical thinking.

3. **Purpose of PLaCE**

PLaCE is an English for Academic Purposes Program for incoming international students. Purdue attracts many international students and consistently ranks in the top three for international enrollment at public universities in the U.S. The students Purdue accepts are academically well qualified, but in terms of English language proficiency, we still have large numbers of students at the low-intermediate to intermediate level as measured by TOEFL scores.

Until 2015, Purdue was the only university in the Big Ten without an established English for Academic Purposes Program. Until about 10 years ago, the international students who came to Purdue were primarily graduate students (47% of the grad student population). In 2010, Purdue began to see a sharp increase in international undergraduate enrollment. Undergrad enrollment began to stabilize in 2015. Last year, international undergrads comprised 17% of the undergraduate population.

This year, Purdue welcomed 890 incoming international students. By using better selection procedures that focus on TOEFL subscale scores, ISS now excludes lower-proficiency students. As a result, this year’s
class is the most diverse and best prepared to date; nevertheless, 50% remain PLaCE eligible (those with TOEFL iBT scores <101 and Speaking and Writing <25). This means that 458 of these students are enrolled in PLaCE based on their language proficiency scores. By comparison, in 2015, 70% were eligible.

PLaCE supports this group of international students who are academically well-qualified but who face language and cultural barriers as they adjust to living and studying in the U.S. Given the benefits that a large international undergraduate population provides the University in terms of revenue, diversity, and the potential for internationalization of the entire student body, we expect the international presence to remain around current levels.

4. Purdue’s need for an English for Academic Purposes Program

Large international enrollments present many opportunities for universities, but they also present challenges for these students and those who work with them (including faculty and domestic peers). Research on study abroad and international students points to the unambiguous conclusion that students need institutional support throughout their international sojourns in order to develop language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Vocabulary size is a case in point: Our students’ receptive vocabulary levels typically range from 6,000 to 10,000-word families. These are very good levels for a second language. However, domestic students enter college with 18,000 to 22,000 words. This is a large gap. Through appropriate support, EAP programs can help international students close this type of language gap.

Language proficiency affects every aspect of international students’ performance. On average, Purdue’s international students are intermediate second language learners; however, they are expected to compete, engage, and integrate with native speakers. In addition to challenges with English proficiency, international students also face difficulties with establishing appropriate expectations for performance in an educational system quite unlike the systems they are accustomed to in their home countries.

International students face the challenges that all incoming students face, and a reasonable response of all student groups is the tendency to embed in like-minded communities (for domestic students, consider, for example, fraternities and sororities). However, when international students embed themselves in their first-language communities, the development of language proficiency falters.

Without support, many international students graduate without improvement in English language proficiency.

5. English for Academic Purposes Programs are not Remedial

It is important to understand that PLaCE does not provide remedial support to students who are unprepared for college. On average, international students’ entry-level SAT scores are 100 points higher in Math, are comparable in writing, and only 40 points lower in Reading than SAT scores for Purdue’s incoming domestic students.

The development of second-language proficiency and cultural competence is an advanced skillset that requires years of work and carries many advantages for our graduates in a competitive global
marketplace and, by extension, for the University brand around the world. Naturally, there is a gap between one language/education system/culture and another. PLaCE helps students to bridge this gap.

PLaCE is best understood as part of a broad set of international activities at the university, with the aim of “upgrading the international perspectives and skills of students, enhancing foreign language programs, and providing cross-cultural understanding” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290)

Current research about best practice for support programs of all kinds indicates that support is less effective when provided only as a “jump start” or “boot camp.” Support is more effective when provided as an ongoing scaffold for learning. PLaCE addresses a specific need for a specific population at a specific point in their academic development. However, PLaCE is part of a much larger set of developments underway at Purdue to enhance the benefits of a Purdue education.

6. The Way Forward

Despite the provision of evidence-based benefits and the support of the University Senate, PLaCE remains without recurring funding. At present, the continuation of the program remains uncertain.

PLaCE provides a foundation for enhanced international student success; however, notions of success must be expanded beyond our most common and important indicators of success: graduation rates and GPA. The development of international students’ English language proficiency, cultural competence, and the broader internationalization that we all desire cannot be expected to occur without the firm foundation that PLaCE has been designed to provide. Having a large body of international students does not ensure the internationalization of the University.

International students present a different profile of skills and experiences from domestic students. This can be an advantage for all students if the university can leverage it through intentional and deliberate pedagogical actions such as those provided by the Purdue Language and Cultural Exchange (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012).


Paige, R. M., & Vande Berg, M. (2012). Why students are and are not learning abroad: A review of recent research. In *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they’re not, and what we can do about it* (pp. 29–58). Stylus Publishing, LLC.