Report of the Foundational Writing Skills Course Committee

Fall 2004
Committee:
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In its Terms of Reference, the Committee was directed to consider the following questions:

- What are the defining characteristics of FWS courses? What content and/or approaches will/should distinguish them from: English 12 courses? “developmental and intensive” English courses (e.g., English Bridge Program)? University-level W courses?
- Should more than one type of FWS course be offered (e.g., for ESL and non-ESL students)? for students with poor English abilities vs. borderline English abilities, etc.)? If so, what criteria should be used to “stream” students into the appropriate course?
- Because successful completion of an FWS course is a necessary prerequisite to registration in a required W course, how will students’ competency and progress toward “preparedness” be measured? Should we adopt a common standard and, if so, what should it be?
- Who should offer FWS courses? Who should ensure that enough FWS seats are offered to meet the need? What will it cost to offer these courses? Will new faculty be needed? If so, at what level? Where will such faculty be “housed”? What relationships should exist between the faculty who offer FWS courses, CWIL, and the Language Instruction Program?

The Committee began its meetings May 11, 2004 and met weekly with a hiatus during July and August. The Committee interviewed Dr. Roger Blackman, then Chair of the Writing Support Group, Dr. Tom Grieve Chair of the Department of English (SFU) and Dr. Susan Briggs, Chair of English (Douglas College). It also met with the Implementation Task Force to discuss the direction it was recommending. The Committee surveyed the array of Foundational writing courses at the Langara College, Douglas College and the University of Victoria. Both of these institutions use the LPI score to stream students into appropriate courses. Kevin Stewart was employed at UBC and was able to inform the Committee of the writing program there.

1.0 Purpose of Foundation Writings Skills Course

As of Sept. 2006, SFU’s new curriculum, writing requirements and admissions criteria will require that all applicants demonstrate their competence in English as a part of the admissions process in one of four ways:

1. by obtaining an A (86%) in a course equivalent to (or more advanced than) English 12; or
2. by obtaining a score equivalent to a 6 on the Language Proficiency Index (LPI) on an another accepted English language proficiency test; or
3. by obtaining at least a C (60%) in a course equivalent to (or more advanced than) English 12 and an acceptable score on an accepted language proficiency test; or
4. by obtaining at least a C- grade in a certified writing-intensive (W) course that is transferable to SFU.

All other students admitted to SFU who obtained a minimum score equivalent to a 4 on the Language Proficiency Index (LPI) are required to enroll in the Foundations Writing Skill (FWS) course within the first 30 credits of their programs. Enrollment in the writing course will be capped, initially at 500 students per academic year. Students streamed into the Foundational Writing Skills (FWS) courses may make up to two attempts to achieve a grade of at least C in an FWS course. Students who do not earn at least a C in two attempts of an FWS course will be required to withdraw from SFU and encouraged to reapply when they can demonstrate the requisite competence.

Therefore the purposes of FWS courses are to prepare students for W writing courses, to ensure that students are proficient in fundamentals of university-level-writing, reading, and communication, and are familiarized with various genres of disciplinary academic university writing requirements and the disciplines of their prospective majors. Although FWS courses may provide some remedial assistance, they would not be equivalent to English 12. Rather, they would establish a framework for uses of reading and writing that direct students toward such goals of university
literacy as use of Standard English, accurate representation, critical assessment of sources, and the ability to construct and develop arguments. (SCAR report April 27, 2004)

1 SFU should develop an FWS course that prepares new students for writing intensive courses focussing on reading, writing and communication. The course should be designed so that the mechanics of writing and the fundamentals of grammar are addressed in the context of academic writing tasks.

Considerations in Planning the FWS course

In preparing its recommendations, the FWS committee has made assumptions in the following areas: student characteristics, entry requirements for a FWS course and the curricular context of a FWS course at SFU.

1. Student Characteristics

Students entering an FWS course have achieved minimum entry requirements for SFU admission in terms of their proficiency in writing. Their prior experience with academic literacy and communication will vary widely. At least three distinct groupings are anticipated: international students, immigrant students and domestic students.

International students are identified through visa status, and additionally through providing documentation that indicates they have less than four years of education in the medium of English. They may be identified as ESL/EFL students, and need focused language and orientation to conventions of North American academic discourse. Particular areas that must be addressed are:

1. Writing: Across cultures there are different norms governing what is and is not acceptable to write about, different styles for how ideas are presented and developed and different approaches to external sources and to what constitutes plagiarism;
2. Reading: Students from non-Western traditions may treat text as data to be memorized and are unfamiliar with text as a teaching tool to synthesize ideas;
3. Social Interactions: International students are often unfamiliar with the norms governing class behaviour, the use of office hours and e-mail etiquette.

Immigrant students have been residents in North America for varying lengths of time. They have documentation indicating four years or more of previous English-medium education and may have attended local high schools and/or colleges. They may have passed through previous ESL courses into mainstream courses. They tend not to self-identify as “ESL”. They may need further focused language instruction, but may not need orientation to North American academic culture.

In addition, both the above groups of learners may have had limited exposure to oral/aural English as well as limited exposure to written English.

Learners of English as an additional language may exhibit vocabulary or syntax usage which marks them as non-native speakers. These errors in themselves may cause distress for native speakers of English, because they are unfamiliar. Research suggests that 5-7 years of exposure to academic English is typically required to achieve fluency. English learners with limited prior exposure to academic English will not be able to produce error-free or error-minimal English.

Domestic students have done all or most of their previous education in English and have expert fluency in English. They do not need focused instruction in language or North American academic culture but may need further practice with academic literacy. Specifically, these writers might be expected to have limited experience in the following:

1. exposure to and understanding of complex written content, particularly within a disciplinary context
2. response to learning that requires summary, analysis and synthesis of complex ideas
3. use of a range of discourse styles, terminology, idiom and syntax appropriate to academic communication.

2. Entry Requirements for FWS

A second source of variation among students are the measurements used to stream students into the FWS course. FWS-eligible students can be identified in one of two ways, depending on their status as either domestic or international applicants. International students will submit IELTS scores, or TOEFL scores plus LPI scores. On the basis of their IELTS or LPI scores, students may be required to complete the FWS course. Please see Section 2 for further discussion of IELTS scores. Domestic and immigrant students may be required to submit an LPI score. If so, those who have scored 4 on the LPI will be required to complete the FWS course. The 2 measurements — LPI and IELTS — do not necessarily measure the same aspects of students’ English ability and, as a consequence, the students who are streamed by these measures into the FWS course may be 2 different cohorts.

The LPI itself is a blunt instrument and a score of 4 does not pick out students with particular and identified problems but instead encompasses a wide range of writing abilities. The LPI web site defines writing of this type as exhibiting adequate competency, satisfactory organization and structure, expression errors are evident, particularly occurring in occasional clusters and writing that requires some revision. In addition, the writing is marred by one or another of a fairly wide range of deficiencies: it may be thinly developed, repetitive, or weak in overall structure; it may contain unvaried, loose or faulty sentence structure; its word choice may be inaccurate, inappropriate, or unidiomatic (that is, it may use expressions that are not found in standard English usage).

3. Curricular Context of FWS

The Foundations Writing Skills course is intended to prepare students for “W” courses. It is distinguished from a “W” course where writing is constitutive of the course content; the content of the FWS course introduces students to the fundamentals of academic writing. Further, the committee is recommending that the content of the FWS be interdisciplinary taken from introductory courses from across the SFU campus.

Those developing the curriculum for the FWS course should consult with instructors from departments across campus to gather representative samples of writing and writing tasks that will provide the academic content of the FWS course.

The Committee feels that there are several advantages to this approach. First, it makes the writing tasks salient. Students will exposed to content that they can expect to encounter again in their academic career at SFU. Second, it ensures academic rigor, the reading and writing to which students are exposed will be academic topics. It provides a method of aligning the FWS course with the writing initiative undertaken at SFU. Students in the FWS will be practicing the tasks that will be expected of them in the writing intensive courses. It places the FWS course on a par with other courses that students are taking, so that it will not be perceived as remedial nor as a hurdle to be cleared before a student is fully admitted to the University but as a course that is offering valuable skills.

This feature distinguishes the FWS course from other courses that could be envisioned and are offered at other campuses. Composition courses and remedial courses are not embedded with cross disciplinary content that is informed by curricula from across SFU. Further, the academic content of the FWS courses distinguishes it from programs such as the English Bridge Program whose audience are students whose English skills are not yet developed to that level.

The diverse range of students that will be accepted into the FWS course distinguish it from ENGL 199 Introduction to Academic Writing. ENGL 199 is intended to be a “W” course and explicitly does not address remedial writing problems.

1.1 Course Outcomes

Successful completion of FWS indicates that students are ready to undertake a “W” course. A necessary and important component of an FWS course is attention to the development of reading skills. Students cannot write about that which they do not yet understand. An FWS course will include tasks intended to familiarize students with the structure of English academic writing at SFU.

Readiness includes demonstrated ability in the following:

1. Critical thinking, Reading, and Writing
   - use writing and reading effectively for inquiry, learning and communicating
• in undertaking a writing assignment, be able to find, evaluate, analyze, summarize and synthesize appropriate primary and secondary sources integrate own ideas with those of others

2. **Rhetorical Knowledge**
   • focus on a purpose for writing
   • respond appropriately to different audiences and rhetorical situations
   • use conventions of format, structure, terminology and idiom appropriate to the rhetorical situation
   • adopt appropriate voice, tone and level of formality
   • write effectively in several genres

3. **Writing Process**
   • use effective drafting techniques in preparing papers: generate ideas, revise, self- and peer-edit and proofread
   • demonstrate effective research techniques to identify, locate and evaluate sources
   • show significant improvement in writing tasks over multiple drafts and in ongoing assignments

4. **Knowledge of Conventions**
   • recognize common formats for different kinds of texts
   • know genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
   • demonstrate effective means of documenting work (references, citations, avoidance of plagiarism, etc.)
   • control idiom, syntax, punctuation and spelling (errors may be present, but are infrequent and do not interfere significantly with the ability of the writing to communicate the intended message)

The FWS course at SFU will be a stand alone, one semester course delivered to a diverse student body. The Committee stresses that SFU must be realistic about the outcomes of this course. It should be perceived as the beginning of a student's development as a writer, not as the final solution. The Final report of the Ad Hoc Curriculum Committee (2002), the Discussion paper on the implementation of University-Wide Writing, Quantitative, and Breadth Requirements (Nov. 2003) and the final report of the Undergraduate Curriculum Implementation Taskforce (April, 2004) acknowledge that students will undergo a lengthy apprenticeship. For many students, the FWS course will be the start of their apprenticeship. They will still need to practice the skills they have acquired in the FWS course.

1.2 **Course Materials and Activities**

Achievement of common learning outcomes, and consistent assessment of same, requires a high level of coordination of activities and materials. The first step in such coordination would be selection of appropriate content to reflect different knowledge areas and discourse genres, and the development of activities that aim toward course goals. The FWS committee recommends that a faculty position be assigned to develop course content, in consultation with instructors of selected lower-division course in a variety of departments so that samples of relevant materials and activities can be used as models.

As mentioned, the Committee recommends that the curriculum used in the FWS course is selected from introductory courses in various disciplines and is arranged in interdisciplinary but thematic units. The purpose of this interdisciplinary approach is to acquaint students with a variety of writing tasks and to introduce them to academic culture. This approach also ensures academic rigor and places it on par with the other courses that the students will be taking concurrently. The Committee is concerned that the FWS course not be perceived as remedial nor as a hurdle to be jumped before a student is fully admitted to the university but as a course that is offering valuable skills.

While the focus of the course will be fundamentals in academic reading and writing, attention to grammar, argument structures and the mechanics of writing will be a natural part of working with students' writing.

Course activities should include:
• intensive and extensive reading of texts; practice of reading for understanding
• low-stakes writing activities, e.g. reader-response journal, on-line writing groups
• library orientation, including guided tasks
• weekly writing lab, with peer and instructor consultation time
• discussions, seminars, and presentations
• drafting and revision
• developing a major paper over a sustained period
• writing for examinations
• note-taking
• summary and paraphrase
• academic citation norms

2.0 ESL Students and FWS

The Committee has been asked to consider whether ESL students should be streamed into separate sections or integrated into classes with native speakers. The challenge of integration is the great variety of students’ relative reading and writing abilities. The attention that ESL students will require will not be relevant to native English speakers, while a course designed for native English speakers will not address the needs of ESL learners and may well be initially too advanced.

3 SFU should consider 3 cohorts who are eligible for the FWS course and design sections of the FWS course to meet their separate needs.

4 SFU must use the measurements that are available to stream students into the appropriate sections. International students will be able to supply IELTS scores. Domestic students who are not otherwise exempt will provide LPI scores and self-reports on the admission form.

The Committee recommends a cohort approach in which ESL learners are identified and streamed into appropriate sections. The curriculum of these sections will parallel those of the other sections, but the instructors will be familiar with the needs and strategies of ESL students and more attention to points of English grammar and structure will be necessary.

The ESL cohorts can themselves be partitioned into at least domestic and international. International students often have needs for orienting to North American culture that domestic ESL students do not. Domestic and international ESL students will also be identified in different ways. International students will not be writing the LPI, because it is not widely available internationally, but will, instead, submit an IELTS score. These students can be streamed as in Table 1.

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Table 1

Domestic ESL students will be submitting an LPI score. This score does not identify them as ESL. Instead, the University will have to rely on self-reports. The current admission form asks a students if English is their primary language. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence indicates that students do not always report themselves as ESL, either because they feel that it disadvantages them or because they feel that the appropriate response to the question Is English your primary language? is the affirmative because their academic studies have been in English. The Regis-
3.0 Assessment

Assessment in the FWS course should be consistent with the purpose of the course. The instruments of measurement should be the tasks expected of students in writing intensive courses.

Given that the intended outcome of a FWS course is preparation for W courses, assessment measures should demonstrate that a student’s academic literacy is or is not sufficient for successful performance in writing intensive courses. Two measures are proposed: cumulative and summative.

Cumulative measurements assess students’ ability to revise and rework material. During the semester, students will

- complete weekly assignments designed to highlight aspects of the writing process;
- create a portfolio containing the semester’s written work including drafts demonstrating a writing process that includes revision;
- write a major paper for a different course (to be coordinated in consultation with the other instructor) wherein the student worked on assignment drafts under general supervision of the FWS instructor.

Summative assessment will measure students’ general writing competence. Assessment will be based on:

- submission of work from the portfolio in a final form for evaluation by the instructor;
- an in-class, time-limited written assignment in response to a text; this will be a requirement for passing the course;
- submission of the final version of the major paper for another course, which will be marked on criteria in consultation with the other instructor.

The Committee is explicitly recommending that an LPI score not be used as an exit measure. The intent of the FWS course is to prepare students for writing intensive courses. That sort of preparation is different from improving scores on the LPI.

4.0 Infrastructure, Staffing and Resources

4.1 Support for Students

The University should provide its students with opportunities for face-to-face interaction with advisors, writing mentors and peer tutors.

The FWS Committee has operated to this point under the assumption that SFU plans to offer ongoing writing support for all undergraduate students beyond FWS and W courses. FWS students, W students, and other students seeking to improve their academic writing skills would benefit immensely from additional resources outside the classroom.

We recommend that such support, at least in part, be offered in the form of face-to-face interactions. Having a Student Skills Centre or a Peer Tutoring / Mentoring program would prove invaluable to students—particularly FWS and W students—struggling to meet the raised expectations for writing at SFU.

While on-line and print-based resources (e.g. grammar handbooks, writing guides, etc.) can certainly be useful, cost-effective components of ongoing support, they would be ineffective for most FWS and ESL students if used in the absence of face-to-face interaction with Student Skills Centre advisors, writing mentors, or peer tutors.

We cannot expect FWS students and other SFU students struggling with their writing to be advanced enough to teach themselves. ESL students, in particular, are the least likely to benefit if forced to rely solely on on-line and print resources. We would be expecting the weakest members of our student body to self-diagnose their writing and language problems and to navigate through those problems on their own. An added challenge to ESL students is that they would be asked to decode information on web sites and in grammar and writing books that are written in fairly advanced—often very academic—English.
Grammar handbooks and writing guides are particularly problematic, as they are rather prescriptive by nature. There is no shortage of resources either in print or on-line that outline the many rules of English grammar and language usage. However, the English language is extremely complex. It’s not enough to master the prescriptive rules; students must be able to understand the relationships between ideas in order to express complex ideas at an academic level. When students are struggling to clearly communicate these ideas, having interactive feedback and guidance offers a much more active, much more constructive alternative to reading—on their own—about prepositions, verb tenses, or about how to write a topic sentence or structure an essay.

If SFU were to rely solely on on-line or print-based resources as its ongoing support for students, it would be neglecting the basic pedagogical tenets of the undergraduate curriculum initiative. If we are to meet our goal of creating active learners, we must make every effort possible to create an active learning environment.

Every successful model we have looked at positions its foundational writing courses within a nexus of other courses and resources. On-line support is most often offered in conjunction with a Writing Centre and opportunities for face-to-face mentoring, tutoring, and guidance. Purdue University’s On-line Writing Lab (OWL), for instance, is one of the most comprehensive and well-respected web-based resources created at the post-secondary level, but Purdue’s students also have access to extensive on-campus, face-to-face services, among other writing-related resources. Douglas College has a Developmental Studies Department, an ESL Department and a Department of English where the Foundations courses are housed, all supported by a highly visible Learning Centre. On the campus of our most direct competitor, The UBC Writing Centre combines classes, on-line resources, and tutoring to offer UBC students a range of resources to draw from.

Since January 2002, SFU’s Faculty of Business has recruited and trained undergraduate volunteers to mentor their peers through the FBA Writing Mentorship Program. The core of this program is the one-on-one mentoring that students receive. This student-mentor interaction often involves the collaborative use of on-line and print-based resources. Notably, however, students are not left on their own to make use of such resources.

4.2 Staffing

The FWS committee proposes that enrollment in the FWS course be limited to 20 per section. This class size ensures that students will get individual attention from their instructor. In contrast, enrollment in ENGL 199 Introduction to University Writing is limited to 17 students per section.

The workload for each lecturer is projected to be 6 sections per year or 2 sections per semester. This takes into account the need for curriculum revision in response to students’ needs and feedback from instructors of W courses, and the time needed to consult with other instructors on the content and quality of students’ major papers.

Given these parameters and assuming that approximately 500 students per year will be required to take the FWS course, the University will need to mount approximately 25 sections per year. It will be necessary to determine demand across the 3 campuses.

7 The University should staff the FWS courses with at least a senior lecturer responsible for curriculum development and coordination, and 2 lecturers. At this level of staffing, additional support in the form of sessional instructors will be needed.

The FWS committee proposes that the staff should consist of a senior lecture who is responsible for administration of the course and curriculum coordination and 2 lecturers. Assuming entry level at step 3 and 18% for benefits, salary for permanent teaching staff will exceed $208,000.

Teaching staff will necessarily have to be supplemented with sessional instructors. If the FWS course is capped at 500, then approximately 7 sessional instructors will be required yearly. Under the current Collective Agreement, temporary instruction will cost $25,938 annually. Salaries will total $244,356.68.

These figures assume a cap of approximately 500 students. The University will have to decide if the international intake should be included in the cap. The FWS course could be advertised as an incentive for international students to come to SFU, demonstrating that the University is willing to help international students with their writing. International students pay premium fees and so should be cost neutral. Thus, an argument can be made that they should not be included the cap. The projected intake of international students is approximately 650/year. The majority of these will be students whose first language is not English, who would benefit from an FWS course and who may well be
recommended into the FWS course. If they are included in the cap of 500, they will squeeze out domestic students. If they are outside the cap, the staffing of the FWS courses must be increased accordingly.

Attention should be given to the backgrounds of the teaching staff. The Committee recommends that the staff have diverse backgrounds, so that the interdisciplinarity of the FWS course is reflected and that most, if not all, have TESL experience.

4.3 Home Department

The Committee has considered several options for a home department for the lecturers and sessionals who will be teaching the FWS course. The Committee established the following criteria that should be met by the home department:

- teaching courses like FWS should be congruent with the overall mission of the unit;
- the unit should be properly constituted to offer credit courses; it should have an administrative assistant to handle SIMS, advising, etc, a committee structure, a chair, hiring and evaluation procedures, and a constitution;
- the unit should include provide opportunities for pedagogical and curricular development and consultation

The FWS faculty should be housed in a unit whose mission is congruent with the teaching of FWS courses. If the proposed Learning Centre is not constituted as an academic unit, the Language Training Institute can serve as the home unit.

If the proposed Leaning Centre is constituted as an academic unit, it would meet these criteria. FWS faculty would be part of the core of the unit’s mission and would be in a position to monitor the kinds of problems that students are having. If this is not possible, the Committee recommends that faculty be appointed to the Language Training Institute. The LTI is housed in the Department of Linguistics. It is currently responsible for teaching Chinese, German, Farsi, Greek, Japanese and Spanish. It is also the home of the English Bridge Program.

The LTI has the advantage of being a unit constituted to offer credit courses in languages. It has administrative support from an administrative assistant whose duties are solely in the LTI and the staff of the larger Department. The language specialists of the English Bridge Program are familiar with many of the issues that the FWS instructors will face, particularly dealing with students for whom English is not a native language. The Department of Linguistics provides the Teaching Appointments Review Committee for the lecturers in the LTI and appointments are made by the Chair of the Department.

With the exception of research on computer assisted language instruction, the LTI has not yet developed a research mission. However, the Department of Linguistics has been authorized to search for a Director for the LTI. This person would have a research specialization in language pedagogy. As a consequence, FWS staff in the LTI will have a supervisor and EBP colleagues who are sympathetic to and interested in the FWS mission.

CWIL has been considered as a potential home for the FWS teaching staff. CWIL is an important component of the development of writing intensive courses and consequently an important point of contact for the FWS. It is likely that CWIL will have an extensive role in coordinating the learning outcomes of the FWS course with the expectations of “W” instructors. However, CWIL is not constituted as a department and so does not provide a Teaching Appointments Review Committee nor the full administrative support that is available in the LTI. It is possible that FWS staff

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Table 2

8 The FWS faculty should be housed in a unit whose mission is congruent with the teaching of FWS courses. If the proposed Learning Centre is not constituted as an academic unit, the Language Training Institute can serve as the home unit.
be seconded into CWIL, particularly in the initial phases of development, to ensure coherence between FWS curriculum and “W” courses.

4.4 Resources

The FWS staff must be properly resourced and should be located in an area that facilitates contact with colleagues.

New staff will require office space and instructional resources including computer equipment and library holdings as well as administrative support. Under the assumption that the course will be capped at approximately 500 students, at least 4 offices will be required. The offices should be as close to the LTI as possible. The Committee feels that it will be important that the FWS instructors have close contacts with both the staff in the English Bridge Program and the staff of CWIL. The EBP is located in the LTI hallway and CWIL offices abut the LTI. The office space that will be vacated by the predicted move of First Nations is attractive for these reasons.

Distance education has expressed an interest in developing an on-line version of the FWS course. If the instructors who develop the content for the FWS agree that it amenable on-line delivery, then the cost of developing the course will have to be included.

5.0 Research

There is an absence of data on both the type of learner that will be admitted to SFU with a score of 4 on the LPI and the number of students that SFU can expect will need a Foundational Writing Skills course. The LPI materials are not informative about the nature of deficiencies that an individual scoring 4 will have; anecdotal reports indicate that an LPI score of 4 covers a wide range of writing. As a consequence, those who are developing the curriculum may not immediately hit the target.

With respect to the numbers of students who should take an FWS course, 2 points indicate that it is more than the 500 included in the cap. In the survey conducted by Analytical Studies in Fall 2003 approximately 40% of SFU students reported that the language most often used at home is not English and approximately 28% reported that the language used with friends is not English. The 28% in particular are not living in English and are not likely to be writing well enough to complete a writing intensive course.

Secondly, even for native speakers of English, university and academic writing are not the same as high school writing. While many can model their writing on the texts that they are reading, others will need assistance offered by an FWS course to graduate from the kind of writing that was sufficient in their high school career.

The Committee would like to see an ongoing commitment to researching the learner characteristics of the FWS students so that the FWS curriculum can be adjusted when necessary. While the Committee has recommended that the staff be hired at the level of lecturer, it does not feel that a tenure track position with research specialization in this area would be inappropriate.

In addition, it would be useful to be able to reliably predict the impact of the LPI requirement on the students who typically apply to SFU. The 28% of students who do not appear to be living in English may not be able to score 4 on the LPI. The Committee suggests that requiring an LPI score from an intake before 2006 would provide data that could motivate and direct SFU's preparation for the new curriculum and admission standards.