Periodic Unit Review, University Skill Immersion Program (USIP) at York College External Reviewers' Report

External reviewers: Donna Smith, Director, Learning Commons, Academic Support Center, Queens College, and Kathy Walker, Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Research, Randolph-Macon College

Review process: In consultation with an Internal Review Committee, Les Raphael and Nawrin Fariha, the Director and Coordinator of the University Skill Immersion Program (USIP) prepared a Periodic Unit Review report. An initial Periodic review meeting took place on May 11 between Les Raphael, Nawrin Fariha, Donna Smith, and Kathy Walker; this meeting allowed Smith and Walker to ask clarifying and follow-up questions about the initial report. Virtual site visits were then scheduled from mid-May through June with Dr. Derrick Brazill, Provost; Dr. Kennybel Peña, Interim Director of Student Support & Advisement; Mr. Abdelhamid Kherief, Director of the CUNY Language Immersion Program; Mr. Matthew Corcoran, Lecturer, Department of English; Dr. Lidia Gonzalez, Professor of Mathematics; and Mr. Tony Davis, Director of Admissions. The following report is based on a review of the PUR report and virtual site visit interviews.

Unit history and mission

Findings: USIP Immersion is a 35-year-old program that gained its current mission in 2000 when York eliminated remedial classes. USIP has adapted to meet internal demands, such as the changing needs of students, and external mandates, such as new regulations from the state and the university system (e.g. the introduction of proficiency index and changes in algorithms sending students to the program). The unit mission (*USIP Immersion at York College is committed to providing a diverse population of students with the skills, proficiency levels and support needed to be (1) admitted to York College, (2) placed in required math and English classes, and (3) better prepared to do well in first-year courses and major Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) classes*) is well-aligned with the university's mission. According to interviewees, USIP functions as an arm of academic support for gateway courses, the other arm being direct tutoring. It provides support that is vital to meet the school's strategic goals. The USIP program provides a "bucket" of students that help meet admissions goals and helps retain the students as they take gateway courses.

Recommendation and Suggestions:

- Respondents see the program as valuable and essential to the mission. Suggestions in this area involved building up the program further, expanding offerings, serving more students, and offering more programs at different times in students' careers.

Structure, Processes, and Staffing

Findings: The unit provides English and Math Proficiency workshops, which are required for students who are not yet proficient enough in these areas to matriculate. For matriculated students, the program offers pre-Calculus Workshops, a variety of pre-workshops for gateway and major-required courses, and booster workshops taken concurrently with courses. Workshops are led by faculty members (but not the instructors of the associated courses) and tend to be small.

In addition to the director and coordinator, USIP is staffed with one PT office assistant and 12 PT Continuing Education Teachers. Pre-pandemic, there were 6 student tutors. Staffing appears adequate in all instructional areas. More staffing may be needed in communication and marketing. Instructors are paid as continuing education teachers. All remarks about the quality of the faculty and courses were strongly positive. Some of the suggestions from interviewees about staffing and structure—for example, paying course instructors to work with workshop instructors a few hours a week to better align content, exercises, and information about student progress-- are already being implemented.

Recommendation and Suggestions:

- Ensure booster content is aligned with course content.
- Explore methods (higher pay, etc.) to retain workshop faculty.
- Pay faculty to attend professional development.

Benchmarking, Assessment, and Outcomes

Findings: Proficiency workshop outcomes are measured using course pass rates. Preparation and booster workshops outcomes are measured by looking at student success in the related course. Targets are set based on previous years' results. Detailed outcome data is included in the PUR report. Outcomes generally meet or exceed goals. The interviewees said the program is "effective," "flexible," "does amazing things," and is "successful because of people who run it." Dropout rates are higher than desired. High attrition rates are not uncommon across CUNY for non-tuition, non-credit immersion programs.

Multiple stakeholders, including faculty and staff involved in the program, have indicated that more data about the program's effectiveness is needed—primarily data-based evidence about the long-term success of students who participate in USIP. Currently, anecdotal data can point at great successes—a valedictorian came from immersion program—but also suggests dynamics that some of the retention problems could be solved if broad patterns of student behavior were identified. Data is also lacking on whether students would benefit from even longer-term support.

Recommendation and Suggestions:

- York's offices of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning should help the unit gather and disseminate more data about the long-term success of students who have participated in the program, including comparisons of students who have participated in USIP interventions with those who have not, and students who complete the programs versus students who drop out. Data should control for relevant demographic variables.
- Find a way to improve attendance—for example, offering financial incentives for completion, or conversely, charging small fees for the workshops.

Internal Communication

Findings: The Program Director is in regular contact with CUNY's administration and is embedded in relevant university committees. Communication between USIP and admissions about students' scores and admissions eligibility was seen as strong. USIP is not yet integrated with some potentially helpful technological platforms. Some interviewees suggested improvements that are already being implemented, which indicates a need for more regular updates from university administration to stakeholders.

Recommendation and Suggestions:

- Increase communication between content instructors and booster instructors. (This is in progress). Possibly some course/workshop materials can be designed collaboratively by the 2 sets of instructors.
- Institutionalize USIP through adding on Platforms: To improve outreach to both students and internal stakeholders, embed and integrate USIP into all relevant university and local platforms such as Schedule Builder, Degree Works, Navigate, Degree Maps, and CUNYFirst.

Communication: Outreach and Student Recruitment

Findings: Some interviewees stated that the program is known about and understood on campus, while others believed that it is siloed and that efforts should be made to increase faculty and student understanding of the program (e.g. the program is an "underutilized hidden gem.") All interviewees commented on the perceived effectiveness of the program and wanted to "cast a wider net" and broaden the base of participants. Outreach to students comes from USIP and also from Admissions.

Outreach to students, faculty, and departments occurs through email, robocalls, texts, and flyers. Information is provided about the availability of workshops. Improvements in outreach are underway, for example, getting workshops listed on CUNYFirst and in schedule builder.

Recommendation and Suggestions:

- Communication methods: Increase outreach in formats attractive to students: Tik Tok, QR codes on flyers, etc.
- Update website with more detailed information about the workshops, scheduling, content.
- Involve gateway courses in recruitment. Students could be given diagnostic quizzes in gateway courses and results could be used to steer students who need the program into suitable workshops.
- One respondent suggested that improvements in the recruitment process should come from admissions, not USIP –improvements identifying more students who need workshops, finding and getting them involved earlier.
- Branding: Communications could be more strongly branded; get information out that York CUNY is responsible for these programs. Use YORK and CUNY Logo on all.

Summary

The USIP Program successfully serves a student population very much in need of additional support. Providing needed interventions to students before and after matriculation, the program supports CUNY York's recruitment and retention goals. Our interviews revealed widespread enthusiasm for the program and its effectiveness. The suggestions offered by interviewees were generally targeted ideas focused on helping the program expand its success and further institutionalize its processes.