

Western University of Central Asia

Climate Survey Project

Paul E. Drosnes

The Western University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan harbors an environment that is ripe for the development of improved college and career preparation programming. Since the early 1990s, the university has initiated a number of programs to improve secondary and postsecondary education to prepare local and regional students to participate in the domestic and international workforce. In the past 25 years, the university has proven itself as the best integrated and internationally reputable institution in the Central Asian region. Kyrgyzstan as a nation and Central Asia as a region have struggled to develop economically since the collapse of the Soviet Union. To this day, few countries in the region have developed economies capable of providing prosperity of a significant portion of their populations.

For the purposes of this climate survey, a number of stakeholders were interviewed about the current state of college and career preparation programming at the university. Those respondents include the director of the college preparatory program, two teachers from the college preparatory program, the director student advising services, and the director of the career services office. In their respective capacities, these respondents reflected upon the current strengths and areas in need of improvement at the university.

College Preparation Programming

The College Preparation program is an intensive one-year program, specifically developed to prepare young people for a successful career in college and their future job. The program seeks to fill the gaps in the public school system to help high school graduates enter a university of their choice. Participants complete a rigorous program in the English language and mathematics, as well as Kyrgyz and Russian languages. The preparatory program is the largest in its student population, and boasts a tremendous diversity of students, coming from not only the various regions of Kyrgyzstan, but also different countries and socio-economic backgrounds. The preparatory curriculum has been streamlined to produce successful graduates.

Some obstacles particular to the preparatory program's mission include the lack of finances, strains on class size limitations. Most students come from severely disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and lack basic academic and social skills to deal with the demands of postsecondary education. Highly individualized learning has been employed throughout the one-year curriculum to target these areas of need. In an effort to calibrate

curriculum, teachers meet several times a semester to discuss student performance and develop and refine methods and materials.

The College Preparatory program essential takes the place of the 12th grade in Kyrgyzstan, focusing on reading and writing skills. The specialized curriculum has been designed by teachers who regularly assess student achievement through tests, projects, and discussions with students. TOEFL-style testing developed by university faculty is used as a benchmark and stored in an online database. Teachers have access to shared tests for the students in their classes. Common textbooks are used by all of the English-teaching faculty for TOEFL preparation and English for academic purposes. There are normally enough books for all of the students, and if not, additional resources can be ordered depending on financial feasibility and local availability.

Teachers accountability is gauged by means of mid-term and final reporting of student satisfaction and progress. The main determiner of teacher success is the amount of students that pass the admissions exam during the spring semester. The preparatory curriculum is not subject to state assessment mechanisms. With respect to career-technical education, the preparatory program only offers computer and online literacy workshops, and students are expected to use technology in the completion of their coursework. CTE programs, as such, are non-existent.

Professional Development in the College Preparatory Program

The university as a whole holds two or three teacher-training workshops per academic year. Budget limitations restrict the preparatory program from settling a plan for professional development. A one-time teacher-training workshop is held in the beginning of the academic year, with the purpose of training and refreshing faculty's teaching methods and strategies, and to arm them with new technical ideas for the upcoming semester. Most of the faculty do not go through long-term professional development courses, but do participate in intermittent in-house workshops.

Teachers engage in site-based collaboration, frequently meeting and discussing strategies and classroom problems. For some courses, teachers collaborate to teach a single group in a single subject. Teachers are highly encouraged to seek out and apply for external professional development workshops and conferences, however the budget for limits their participation to a certain extent. As the budget allows, the department is prepared to share costs, but may not sponsor faculty participation completely. Teaching standards are mostly established and maintained in-house, with teachers meeting several times a year to align methods and materials.

Since all students in the preparatory program are learners of English as at least a second language, all English teachers are expected to have a background in teaching English as a

Second Language, with certifications in TESL, CELTA, TEFL, or TESOL. Workshops at the beginning of the academic year include topics such as “Various Ways of Teaching Vocabulary,” “Constructive Methods of Teaching iBT,” and “Using Media, Videos, and Images in Teaching English.”

Additionally, a series of guest lectures are hosted by the preparatory program, with representatives of the different university departments. The preparatory program also collaborates with the Career Services Center to present academic opportunities at the university and job market demands for the respective courses of study.

College Preparatory Program Safety Nets and Interventions

Program	Number of Students	Length of Program	Short Description of How students are Identified
<i>Extra classes for struggling students</i>	Individual tutoring during office hours	Ongoing - throughout the academic year	The students are reported by their subject teachers.
<i>Mentoring</i>	Peer Mentorship Program – all students in groups according to the subjects	Ongoing	Students make their own choice to participate in the mentoring provided by their peers (graduates of NGA)
<i>Tutoring</i>	Individual tutoring is provided by some instructors	Ongoing	Depends on the quantity of struggling students
<i>Peer-tutoring</i>	Peer Mentorship Program (described earlier)		
<i>Extended class/study periods for struggling students</i>	Individually set up by professors for struggling students: 2-3 per class	Ongoing	Students are identified through testing, mid-term results, achievement tests.

Additional Support Mechanisms

Preparatory program advisors report on student progress in order to intervene in time to keep students from failing one or more classes. Faculty advisors report to the academic director of the preparatory program three to four times per semester. Most of the time, advisors report two weeks before mid-terms and finals, and then again after the exams. If necessary, the academic director intervenes by holding personal meetings with struggling students.

Preparatory program advisors are English-teaching faculty and are each responsible for a group of 14-17 students. Advisors monitor student progress closely and intervene with advisory meetings before and after mid-term and final exams.

After completing one year of the preparatory program, a two-week orientation program precedes the beginning of the freshman year. Once enrolled as university students, and no longer part of the preparatory program, students are entitled to the services of the university tutoring center for help with writing, mathematics, economics, and accounting. Additionally, students are the availed psychological support through the advising office, which will be discussed in detail later in the report.

College Preparation Teachers' Perspective

The percentage of hardworking students varies from group to group, but it's usually above 50%. "Sliders" usually manifest their lack of effort in the amount of input/feedback they provide individual work and group work (although some students also feel intimidated by peers with better skill). Strategies may include sharing energy cells or holding student-teacher conferences with benevolent concern.

Most students are very motivated because they have chosen their field and place of study themselves and are financially responsible for their study in the program. The university's tuition is quite high considering the economic context of the Central Asian region, which also makes for a good incentive for students to make efforts and not slide down. According to assessment results, most students are apparently doing their best, however, one or two from each group consistently pass by the minimum. Often, extra motivation is used in the form of bonus presentations, essays, and in-class activities.

Since most students who come to the preparatory program are from a very disadvantaged academic background, they are challenged by most of the courses they take and try very hard because they want to succeed. Most students are challenged by the types of assignments and the pace at the beginning, but while some teachers agree that students could do more if they were asked to, others see the additional workload as unnecessary.

90% of preparatory program completers go on to gain admission to the university, and judging by the information provided by program graduates, those who put enough effort into their studies in the preparatory program find it much easier to perform well as university undergraduates, while those who manage to get admitted by sheer luck find it quite challenging. Apart from bridging the language gap, teaching style and the opportunity to communicate with the active undergraduate students helps them adjust better to the undergraduate environment and requirements.

Advisors (similar to homeroom teachers) of each group of students provide all of the necessary support to struggling students. In addition, students can also participate in peer mentorship tutorial sessions with graduates of the preparatory program from previous years. The preparatory program also employs a psychologist on staff to support students' psychological stability. Nearly no students drop out of the preparatory program for academic reasons, however psychological and visa issues are often reasons students are forced to return to their country of origin before the program's completion.

Such expectations are listed in course syllabi, and minor expectations related to specific assignments are communicated on the syllabi, in class, and often, on learning management system websites. Students are grouped according to skill proficiency for each subject, and all within a group are held to the same grading expectations. That said, some students do evidently have a lower level of preparation than the rest in the group, and need to be encouraged beyond common grading.

University Advising Services

For students enrolled in four-year degree programs at the university, i.e. students who are not a part of the preparatory program, the university provides support services through the advising office. The primary responsibilities of the advising office include working with freshman students and helping them to transition smoothly and adapt to a new learning format. In high school, students have a completely different educational experience, especially with regards to reading and writing. Students must cope with an increased independence in learning. To support this transition, the advising office offers workshops for learning skills, reading, focusing on specific topics, and reading long texts.

The director expresses a desire to increase the reliability and implementation of skill assessment tools to know more about students before they arrive, and hopes to increase individualized instruction and interventions. Other high priorities include advising on courses for career pathways and helping students focus on useful courses and topics depending on their areas of interest.

Currently, the freshman class of about 300 students is split about 50% among advisors from the advising office and 50% other departments, with the director alone being

responsible for 60-70 students. Some departments take more students than others, depending on the number of faculty compared to the number of students in the department. During freshman year, Beyond the freshman year, each department takes over advising responsibilities for all students in that department.

Students are assigned to advisors from different departments depending on their major. The advising office covers students of International Comparative Politics, Environmental Science, Business Administration, Economics, and International Business Law. General Education students go to other departments, and Anthropology and Software Engineering students go to their respective departments. For freshman students with weaker English or Russian language skills, advisors may help by translating assignments and materials to Russian or Kyrgyz, and often recommend advisees to utilize the university's psychological services to build confidence in using their second or third language or education. Additionally, some qualifying students may be enrolled in an Intensive Academic English program to supplement their skills.

Some suggested changes from the director of academic advising include increasing the focus on student career paths by improving career assessment tools and providing more options for exploration. Each academic department offers a highly prescriptive curriculum and additionally has to operate within the requirements of the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education, which mostly include minimum credit hours spent in Kyrgyz language and history courses. The university does hope to increase flexibility in the coming years, and in pursuit of this end, the director of academic advising has recently joined an American professional organization, the National Career Development Association, which will increase access to career assessments and international publications on the topic of career advising.

Preventing Dropouts

The advising office maintains statistics about freshman performance and retention, delegating responsibility for upperclassmen to their respective departments. The advising office collects information about struggling students after midterm exams and applies academic interventions. These interventions include increased advisor attention, referrals to the university tutoring center for individualized instruction, and psychological assistance. These interventions, however, are currently in their first semester of implementation, due to recent organizational and technological changes within the university.

On an ongoing basis, the advising office collects information about students on academic probation. At-risk freshmen are more likely to continue if they receive the right attention in their freshman year. Many students struggle with concentration and time management throughout their university career, but especially in the freshman year. To combat this, the

advising office is developing student workshops. An estimated 10% of students in the freshman class are considered to be “struggling,” with about 10 individuals leaving the university per year for a variety of reasons, however rarely due to academic issues alone.

Safety Net and Support Interventions

Program	Number of Students	Length of Program	Short Description of How students are Identified
<i>Tutoring</i>	1,000 + (to date)	Year round	Students arrange tutoring sessions on an hourly basis with peer tutors employed at the university’s tutoring center
<i>Peer-advising</i>	26	Year long	Trained advisors work with individual students from a particular dept

University Career Services

While Career and Technical Education proper is non-existent at the university, the career services office is making efforts to support career planning and pathways for students. The director of the career services department has joined the National Career Development Association which offers professional development opportunities and increases access to international resources. Another local association called EdNet offers training only to career centers in Bishkek and the surrounding regions of Kyrgyzstan. Online classes are available, but currently no local conferences have been organized. Those that do exist currently only cover very broad topics and are organized by donors such as the European Union and the Soros Foundation.

Career and Technical Education Pathways

The university offers the only American-accredited postsecondary degrees available in Kyrgyzstan, and attracts students from all over the world for this reason. Few industry recognized credentials are available aside from Four-year degrees that are valid throughout the world.

CTE Pathway	Industry-Recognized Credentialing or Other Recognitions	Post-secondary/College-level Credit Opportunities
Agricultural and Natural Sciences		Environmental Studies course
Arts, Media, and	AUCA TV	

Entertainment		
Education, Child Development, and Family Services	Psychology internships	Four-year Psychology Degree
Engineering and Design		Four-year Software Engineering Degree
Finance and Business		Four-year Mathematics, International Business Law, and Economics Degrees
Health Science and Medical Technology		Four-year Psychology Degree
Information Technology		Four-year Software Engineering Degree
Marketing, Sales, and Service		Four-year Business Administration Degree, Master's of Business Administration
Public Services		Four-year International Comparative Politics Degree

Conclusions

As a result of interviewing several stakeholders from different departments and representing differing levels of responsibility for career and technical training development and implementation, it can be seen that the Western University of Central Asia is conscious of its need to improve student support in these regards. The primary focus of the university remains on ensuring that preparatory students and undergraduates successfully complete four-year degrees in one of the university's departments. The college preparatory program currently focuses on a relatively narrow set of language and mathematical skills to support students' college and career readiness, and offers no opportunities for career exploration, cooperation with potential employers, or development of technical skills. For undergraduates, the opportunities are broader, however unspecialized. By enrolling in four-year degree programs at the university, students are exposed to a much wider variety to experiences and opportunities. The career services and academic advising offices both intend to increase support for student career exploration and individualized courses of study.

Potential obstacles to the continued improvement of the career and technical education opportunities for students include funding and educational precedent in the region. Much

of the former Soviet Union still subscribes to the soviet mentality regarding education, and allows little exploratory opportunities for students. In addition, the university's main focus is on providing opportunities for liberal arts education, which may conflict with efforts to increase CTE options from the same limited funding. An additional obstacle remaining is the fact that university students, faculty, and administration all subscribe to the notion that obtaining a four-year degree is the best option for all of the students in the system.

A surprising revelation of the climate survey was that the university's career and technical training is so underdeveloped. Despite being such a large, reputable, and expensive university, there are no programs for technical training beyond some intermittent computer skills workshops. In fact, workshops appear to be the default medium for any technical or soft skills training, which may also serve as an impediment to CTE program development. Also surprising was the lack of cooperation between the university and local business, as students seeking internships are responsible for locating their cooperating institutions and establishing the internship.

If the university is to provide true career and technical training beyond the college preparation program and career/academic advising, administration and faculty will need to increase provisions for ongoing technical training programs rather than workshops. Technical skills are rarely imparted within 80 minute workshops, and ongoing training that results in participants receiving some sort of university or industry recognized credential will be necessary for the university to truly diversify the opportunities it offers students.

In order to serve a wider swathe of the local population, the university should consider the following: 1) increase the scope of the college preparation program to include more ongoing technical and soft skills training for the high school, preparatory program students; 2) offer such training as courses of study independent from the rest of the high school or preparatory curriculum; 3) establish ongoing technical and soft skills training for undergraduate students; 4) increase the amount of career assessment testing and other exploratory opportunities for high school, preparatory, and undergraduate students; 5) increase cooperation with local businesses and government organizations; 6) conduct research to determine the career and technical training needs of local and regional economies; and 7) conduct assessments to determine areas of career and technical interest among the local and regional high school student populations to align with the aforementioned research. While some of these recommendations may be costly and time consuming, they will serve as steps in the right direction to establish a true career and technical training program in a region in great need of economic self-sufficiency.