Foreign Student and Scholar Services
Assessment of the University of Montana Global Partners Program

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ABSTRACT
The UM Global Partners Program pairs existing UM students with new international students to help those new students adjust to life at UM. In April 2011, FSSS conducted a series of focus groups to refine the unit’s assessment procedure and assessment focus. The feedback gained from these focus groups provided recommendations for future changes to the program concerning team building and recruitment among domestic partners. These changes may lead to future assessment opportunities for programmatic enhancement.

BACKGROUND
The Global Partners Program (from 1989-2007 the International Student Peer Assistant Program) was created in order to provide support for new incoming international students by offering advice on all aspects of campus life, helping to navigate the adjustment to a new culture and language, and providing opportunities for friendship building and social activities.

One-to-one matches pair American students or experienced international students with incoming international students, according to gender, age, or common interests, majors, or connection with a country or language. The program coordinator matches students individually based on the above factors. Participation is voluntary and while the intent is for partners to develop a friendship, or a more practical relationship, over the 8-10 week program, there is no formal obligation for the match to continue after the program’s official end.

FSSS presents the program to new international students during Foreign Student Orientation at the start of every semester. Typically, 50 percent of the new international students participate, on average 50-60 matches in the fall and 20-30 in the spring. New domestic partners also attend an orientation prior to meeting their international matches. Partners are introduced the day before University classes begin.

Domestic partners are expected to check in consistently with their students so they can be of “use” during the adjustment period. The responsibility is the domestic students’ to initiate and maintain contact with their partner, though international students are encouraged to be proactive in the relationship. There are two to three FSSS official events scheduled during the length of the program.

At the end of each semester, a questionnaire is sent to participants. Feedback from the responses, however, has historically been minimal – five is the greatest number of responses received within the last five years. As is, the current surveys do not provide distinction between new international students and existing UM students. It has, to date, been difficult for FSSS to assess if the program is meeting the expectations or needs of either group.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE:
In March 2011, FSSS held a meeting with Liz Roosa Millar, chair of the Student Affairs Assessment Council and William Innes, the Council’s representative from the Office of Planning, Budget, & Analysis, to refine the assessment procedure. The meeting resulted in the decision to conduct focus groups as a starting point in gathering more useful and relevant data.

Four focus groups were scheduled for April 2011: two for international students and two for domestic students. The focus groups were scheduled on alternate days during the lunch hour (12-1 pm). Notice of the focus groups was sent to all students who participated in the program within the last two years.

A drawing for $25 UMoney was offered as an incentive for participation. There was a minimum requirement of 4 participants for each group. 20 students responded. This was sufficient to host three groups – two for the domestic students, and one for international students. The two groups of domestic students consisted of five and nine participants, respectively. There was one group of six international students.

The discussion in each group focused on why the students had joined the program and what they had gained from their participation. Groups were asked if the students found the information and orientation sessions helpful, as well as if those
sessions provided enough information. The groups discussed how often they interacted with their respective partners during the semester, what they had done together, and suggestions for improvement.

FINDINGS
The majority of participants (particularly the domestic students) were students who had been very active in the program, often for more than one semester. Many suggestions came from individuals who had voiced a vested interest in the program.

International students noted participation in the program for various reasons that confirmed FSSS’ previous anecdotal assumptions, including the desire to meet Americans, become confident in English, or seek help with general questions. Among domestic students, reasons for participation ranged from recruitment by the coordinator, to an interest in globalization, previous study abroad experience, or a desire to meet international students.

Responses of the international students were simple statements and some observable nonverbal behaviors; conversation was limited. Five of the six international students found the program useful, and one felt neutral. This student remarked he had attempted to do things with his partner, but was always the initiator. He said this became uncomfortable due to the lack of reciprocity.

The international group noted that there should be greater screening to assess whether domestic students had enough time to spend with their partners. This had been discussed previously, but there are many factors that influence this outcome including conflicting class or work schedules, culture shock influences, or the lack of a meaningful connection with a partner. Previously, priority has been given to the new domestic students as they entered the program with the intention of giving as many students as possible the opportunity to participate. However, this also excludes a significant number of students who participated in the past and are experienced in the program.

The domestic focus groups provoked discussion about ways to improve the program and make it more cohesive. For domestic students, Global Partner relationships varied from partnerships with independent students who did not need significant help, students who lost contact, or students who talked with their partners regularly. A few participants responded that they had not “clicked” with their matches. The domestic students noted that the needs of their matches varied, from the desire for friendship, to practical needs such as transportation to doctor’s visits. Overall, the domestic students generally felt that the program was useful to their partners.

Previously, returning partners were not required to participate in the orientation, and would join during the reception following the orientation where they would meet their match. When asked whether orientation was sufficient, all domestic students agreed that it was helpful because it set a baseline for expectation and interaction. However, some participants commented on the need for greater interaction between the domestic and international partners in addition to team building activities for domestic partners, supported by the FSSS. This would allow more opportunities to meet and get to know their fellow Global Partners.

Suggestions for improvement noted during the domestic focus groups included the creation of a Facebook© page, programmatic improvements consisting of a greater number of smaller events, and the addition of opportunities for students to organize events. Every focus group commented on the importance of online social networking.

In past years, participants have requested more events, but the logistics of planning and executing more events is difficult. The time and the finances required to organize, advertise, and execute events has been a significant factor. Furthermore, attendance has been inconsistent at scheduled events, which further inhibits greater scheduling. Therefore, the number of “official” events has, historically, been capped at two for the duration of the program.

Finally, from contact with every focus group, FSSS gained a clearer idea of what can be done to provide a more solid foundation and cohesive group for the Global Partners. In the domestic focus groups, FSSS established what needs to be assessed in the future regarding programmatic possibilities for the domestic students, as well as what can be done to improve the Global Partners program. From the input of the participants, it became clear that the hands-off approach of this program is not serving the Global Partners program effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The recommendations are intended to increase participation and ownership among students in the UM Global Partners Program. It is currently a hands-off program comprised of individuals taking the initiative to develop and cultivate friendship. Through implementation, the Global Partners Program should begin to focus on team building to create a sense of community, and should offer the opportunity for participants to become more involved in the program. If FSSS provides more opportunities for the group, individuals should be better able to nurture their relationships with their partners.

**Program Structure**

The first change should be centered on the selection and matching of partners. Beginning fall 2011, priority in matching should be given to returning domestic partners. By giving priority to previous domestic partners, it will bring a wealth of information and experience to the program as repeat partners participate in subsequent semesters. This change will help lay the foundation for stronger group dynamics.

**Orientation**

Team building should begin during Global Partners orientation, and will be comprised of two parts. First, the orientation will be altered to involve returning Global Partners. Beginning with orientation fall 2011, returning partners should be required to attend the last half hour of orientation. This should encourage the returning partners to be more fully incorporated into the group through their participation in team building exercises. In response to comments from the domestic partner focus groups, there should also be time during orientation to brainstorm more activities. This will allow student partners to be active in the decision making process and allow them to volunteer to lead activities.

**Social Networking**

The UM Global Partners Program, is a fundamentally social program, and should embrace online networking, such as Facebook®, as a necessity. This was agreed upon by all participants. In fall 2011, a Facebook® fan page should be created. An invitation will be sent within the first week of the semester, and events will be updated regularly by the program coordinator and office assistant designated to help with this project.

**Events**

There should be an emphasis placed upon facilitating more events within the group. The desire for more events was noted by all of the focus groups. The coordinator will keep the number of “official” events at two. However, the coordinator should be active in promoting and facilitating events the students wish to organize. This will be addressed during the orientation process, and the two “official” events will be selected at that time. The opportunity should be given to group participants to volunteer to lead smaller events. The coordinator will actively promote these events, and help with logistic support where necessary. These events will be posted on Facebook®, where attendance can be confirmed by group members.

**Recruiting**

The opportunity to help with recruiting should be extended to the participants during orientation. It was suggested during the domestic focus groups that recruiting would be more successful if the Global Partners were included in the process. The coordinator should post all of the recruitment opportunities on the Facebook® page, to allow students to become involved. It was also suggested that there be an event hosted where domestic global partners will be encouraged to bring a friend, in order to allow those friends to see learn about the program.

**Assessment**

The emergent plan is to take the feedback from the students, reconfigure the program, and assess whether the program provides the students enough opportunities to achieve what they are seeking within the program. An example of an appropriate assessment might be geared toward events and programmatic issues, especially regarding domestic students, as they tend to join the program for varied reasons. For example, an assessment could ask whether the orientation, events, and social networking of the program provide the appropriate opportunities to encourage interaction among students. Overall, FSSS should shift the focus to fostering more group building and activities.