Responding to a shifting landscape in English as a Second Language instruction, UCR Extension recently retooled its Intensive English Program (IEP) using a cutting-edge, modular format to offer students maximum flexibility and innovation. With several notable institutions across the nation facing decreased enrollments and program closures, this bold move has given credence to bestselling author Brené Brown’s assertion that “vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change.”

The groundbreaking paradigm shift comes at such a crucial time for ESL instruction that NAFSA: Association of International Educators invited the program’s architects, Summer Cremo, associate director, International Education Programs, and Sarah Moyer, IEP’s academic director, to present at NAFSA’s 2019 conference, “Global Leadership, Learning, and Change.”

“Students want more than English-language study, so in order to be sustainable, traditional universities need to innovate and become creative in terms of their program models,” said Cremo, who noted that UCR Extension’s new modularized format is the first of its kind for U.S. public academic institutions.

Once feedback from students and university partners revealed that the UC quarter system did not offer sufficient flexibility, they examined various alternatives, finally settling on two-week modules that provide 24 start dates per year. Students can jump into the program at the beginning of any of the two-week modules, which are offered across seven levels.

As they settled on the new format, Cremo and Moyer, alongside Crystal Dhar, IEP’s curriculum designer, set about designing a curriculum that would not only fit the modular program, but also offer more of what students are looking for in an intensive English program.

“We needed to make the program more flexible and the curriculum more student-focused,” Cremo said. “We want a more integrated-skills curriculum, so students are doing more than a listening class, a reading class, a writing class; we want the curriculum to be content-based, and we want to focus on the essential soft skills that are popular right now.”

Students now take a three-hour, integrated-skills core class in the morning and two elective classes in the afternoon. The core classes employ National Geographic Learning programs based around TED Talks that provide current, real-world content. The idea is to introduce TED’s “ideas worth sharing” into the classroom and empower students to use their unique voices to discuss them.

“This generation of students knows TED Talks,” noted Cremo. “It’s a multimedia curriculum that allows students to complete exercises in English within the context of the TED Talks material, and that makes the lessons more interactive and engaging.”

All students can then choose from a wide variety of electives, including those focusing on traditional English skills in isolation; academic preparatory courses like SAT or GRE prep; academic skills courses like reading, writing, and rhetoric; and content-
based courses like those teaching intercultural communication, journalism, and film studies.

“Before, electives were only offered to upper-level students, so we’ve had to create elective classes for both lower-level and upper-level students,” said Moyer. “The courses are targeted to students at specific skill levels with specific interests, which provides them with the supplemental skills that are of interest to them, whether academic, content-based, or test prep.”

Reviews have been favorable, which has been particularly gratifying, according to Cremo, because many of the initial students under the new programming transitioned from last year’s fall quarter, when the traditional academic program was still running.

“Students love the project-based nature of the classroom, and they enjoy the increased student engagement and group activities that now happen,” Cremo said. “The intercultural communication class has been popular with students, which is fun because you bring students from different demographics together to explore their own identity, each other’s identity, to work together and function as a community.”

Long-time IEP instructor Arlene Yalcin enjoys the improved classroom dynamics. “A two-week module moves quickly, which requires that students be consistently engaged and active, both inside and outside of class,” Yalcin said. “Students have not only an enjoyable experience, but also a memorable one, while increasing their English skills.”

Instructor Matthew Kutter has noticed increased diversity in his classes as a welcome by-product of the model’s flexibility. “I have seen a larger percentage of students from different countries and regions, including Africa, South America, Europe, and North America,” he said. “One benefit that our international students gain from attending our intensive English program is the intercultural learning and friendships that form from spending so much time with classmates hailing from far-off countries.”

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“It was fun to talk with ESL program leaders from around the country about doing things differently to ensure ESL program sustainability. Innovation is what the market and this new, technical generation of students want and are demanding. UCR IEP is proud to be providing 21st-century students with ESL programming that meets their needs.”

Do you have an international friend or family member who would like to study in California? Let us help you get them started on their educational journey! Visit our website at www.iep.ucr.edu, or call an IEP Academic Advisor at 951.787.4346 to receive answers to all of your questions.