
Higher Education Student Support Program Expansion: A Decade of Progress and Success for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and International Students

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Abstract:

One method to support English as an additional language (EAL) students in higher education is through the development of an extracurricular support program catered to the specific academic and psychosocial needs of post-secondary EAL students within an individual faculty. In 2009, the Mount Royal University (MRU) EAL Nursing Student Support Program (NSSP) was created to support the EAL student population within MRU's Bachelor of Nursing (BN) faculty. Following over a decade of support program success documented in a series of scholarly publications, this study aims to capture the longitudinal impact of EAL NSSP on the continued success of its alumni within the academic, professional, and personal domains. A hermeneutic approach to phenomenology was used to measure the perceived impact of the student support measures on their professional and personal development. Participant interviews revealed six themes: (a) skills and knowledge obtained from membership in the support program, (b) continued engagement in professional development and leadership opportunities following support program involvement, (c) accomplishments attained following support program membership, (d) future goals, (e) eagerness to help future generations of EAL students, and (f) the need for continued EAL student support. The findings from this study demonstrate the importance of EAL student support in higher education, showcasing the profound, long-term impact that an effective and intentional EAL student support program design can have.

Keywords: ESL, EAL, mentor, mentee, student leaders, student, nursing, alumni, support program, continued success, longitudinal impact, international student



1. Introduction

English as an additional language (EAL) students (i.e., students who report a first language other than English; Dudas, 2018) represent an important portion of the student population in culturally and linguistically diverse countries. In Canada, where greater than 20 percent of the population is foreign-born and “an increasing share of immigrants report a language other than English or French as their mother tongue or language spoken most often at home” (Statistics Canada, 2019, p. 5), retaining culturally and linguistically diverse students in professions such as nursing is critical in order to effectively serve a diverse patient population and deliver culturally competent care. As EAL students are more likely to face additional challenges compared to their traditional English-speaking counterparts due to linguistic challenges, cultural differences, psychosocial stressors, and discrimination (Choi, 2005, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020; Choi & Brochu, 2022, 2024; Dudas, 2018; Havery et al., 2019; Henry, 2023; Onovo, 2019), higher educational institutions must recognize the importance of creating effective systems to support post-secondary EAL student success.

One method to support post-secondary EAL nursing student success is through the creation of an EAL student support program catered to nursing students completing higher education in an additional language. In 2009, the Mount Royal University (MRU) EAL Nursing Student Support Program (NSSP) was developed on an extracurricular, voluntary basis to address academic and psychosocial needs reported by the EAL nursing student population. Although traditional, centralized forms of student support were and remain available for all students at the institution, these centralized resources are not well suited to the unique array of challenges faced by the EAL student.

The MRU EAL NSSP is based on a model by Choi (2016), which effectively integrates academic and non-academic strategies cognizant of the multifaceted and wide-ranging challenges experienced by post-secondary EAL nursing students (see Appendix A). Academic support provisions are made through workshops on pronunciation, academic writing, citation, referencing, and discipline-specific interventions embedded in the student curriculum, along with student engagement and leadership opportunities available through peer mentoring, workshop conduction, committee involvement, and public speaking opportunities. Non-academic or psychosocial support in the form of social networking, large group gatherings, peer mentorship, and celebrations of culture also constitutes an important and intentional aspect of the program design.

2. Literature Review

Since its inception in 2009, the EAL NSSP has helped over 350 students, documenting their challenges, progress, and success of these students in a variety of publications. The themes discussed in these studies can be found across the literature demonstrating the compounding effect that EAL, cultural differences, social isolation, and discrimination can have on the post-secondary EAL student experience (Dudas, 2018; Henry, 2023; Onovo, 2019), with calls for educators to recognize the value of the EAL student community and advocate for targeted interventions to address the challenges faced by EAL students (Dudas, 2018; Henry, 2023). A recent literature review on EAL nursing student education (Henry, 2023) provides several recommendations to nursing educators which reference the model put forth by Choi (2016) and previous



research on the MRU EAL Nursing Student Support Program (Choi 2018, 2019; Choi & Brochu, 2022). The recommendations provide support for the core principles upon which the model was developed, again emphasizing the need for both academic and psychosocial support provisions in acknowledgement of the multifaceted and wide-ranging challenges faced by the EAL student; the need for diverse faculty members and mentors; and the importance of faculty education and training to support culturally competent faculty. Dudas (2018) also recommends that “nursing education programs with larger numbers of EAL students ... offer support groups specific to this population” (p. 91), including “a role model as a facilitator” (p. 91) and “a peer support group [that] could provide academic as well as emotional support to promote retention of EAL students” (p. 91).

Although the literature has documented the lived experiences of EAL students in higher education and has provided ample support for the need to provide targeted interventions to support post-secondary EAL students within nursing and beyond, the longitudinal impact of effective, comprehensive, and intentionally designed post-secondary EAL student support provisions on long-term student success and outcomes has not yet been explored. In order to fully demonstrate the profound effect that early, targeted interventions can have on EAL student success, it is important to appreciate both the short-term and long-term impact of such interventions. Beyond psychosocial support during studies or immediate assistance with assignments, coursework, and program completion, understanding the long-standing impact of these interventions will provide further evidence for the need to allocate post-secondary resources and funding to allow EAL students to succeed and demonstrate their full potential as future professionals and role models in their communities.

3. Purpose

Given the 10-year tenure of the MRU EAL NSSP and a dearth of literature examining the longitudinal impacts of EAL student support in higher education, this study is well-positioned to examine the long-term impact of EAL NSSP on the continued success of program members. This study aimed to determine whether the foundational support and learning opportunity provided to program members during a critical period of personal, academic, and professional growth and development as post-secondary BN students were perceived to be an essential element in the overall success and continued achievement of these individuals as present-day alumni and professionals. Did NSSP have far-reaching implications on student success beyond the initial benefits? What is the lasting impact, if any, of student involvement in various elements of the support program design?

4. Methodology

4.1 Theoretical framework

This study was informed by a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, which broadly involves “uncover[ing] the constitutive teleology [or purpose of being] ... through interrogating lived experiences” (Lipscomb, 2023, p. 169). Hermeneutic phenomenology is well suited for qualitative nursing inquiries as it is a person-centered approach to phenomenology that encourages dialogue with participants and the text in order



to develop an “authentic understanding of the experience of clients ... as well as of [our] own selves” (Lipscomb, 2023, p. 169). This study was also influenced by a Gadamerian school of thought (Gadamer, 1977) due to its utility in striking a balance between “episteme” (or knowledge) from the natural sciences and “phronesis” (or wisdom) from the human sciences “ultimately ... [fostering] an attitude of openness not only to growing professionally but also of relating to each [subject] as a unique individual” (Rentmeester & Liebrecht, 2023, p. 6).

4.2 Research design

A total of 15 participants were selected for this interview. Of the approximately 350 students involved in the support program since 2009, 75 members had consented to be contacted for future research purposes, and 25 were contacted to participate in the study via email. Of these 25 students, six alumni who continued to support program efforts and nine who were no longer involved in program efforts reported interest in participating in this study. All 15 alumni who expressed interest in the study met the inclusion criteria (see Table 1 in Appendix B) and were selected for the study.

A sample size of 15 participants and the use of convenient sampling reflects the unique nature of the support program and the broad timeframe of interest affected by factors such as student graduation, geographical relocation, change in contact information, etc., inherent to longitudinal inquiries and particularly those of smaller scale. However, those who participated in this study represented a range of students enrolled in the support program at various periods throughout the program’s 10-year history (see Table 2 in Appendix B).

Individual participant interviews were conducted using a series of open-ended questions conducted by the principal investigator and a research assistant, which lasted approximately one hour (see Table 3 in Appendix B). Data from participant interviews was discussed among the research team, analyzed for validity, and constructed along identified themes uncovered in the raw data. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to support data collection and analysis. The principal investigator is also the support program founder with unique insight into the program.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were welcome to end the interview at any time. Mental health resources on campus were also shared with the participants after each interview. This study received ethics approval from The MRU University Research Ethics Board.



5. Results

5.1 Themes

Table 1. Six Main Themes from Participant Interviews (see Appendix C)

1. Skills and knowledge obtained from membership in the support program
2. Continued engagement in professional development and leadership opportunities following support program membership
3. Accomplishments attained following support program membership
4. Future goals
5. Eagerness to help future generations of EAL students
6. The need for continued EAL student support

5.2 Skills and knowledge

Participants reported that membership in the EAL support program provided them with the foundational skills and knowledge necessary to succeed academically and professionally. Through various learning opportunities available through the EAL program, the alumni shared that they gained the confidence and knowledge necessary to solve problems, learn to be resourceful, confront adversity, and take advantage of new opportunities. Other skills discussed include social competence, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and cultural competence.

5.3 Continued professional development and leadership

Participants reported that student engagement and leadership opportunities presented through the EAL NSSP encouraged them to continue to engage in professional development and leadership opportunities later on in their professional lives. At the time of the study, many participants continued to engage in leadership positions within the support program itself as a means of maintaining their relationship with previous faculty members and their former university.



5.4 Accomplishments

The alumni shared a variety of accomplishments attained following initial membership in the EAL NSSP including professional, academic, personal, interpersonal, and leadership achievements. They believed that involvement in the support program helped them complete their initial program of study as Bachelor of Nursing (BN) students and continue to achieve their individual goals.

5.5 Future goals

Participants revealed that membership in the EAL NSSP allowed them to succeed in academic, professional, and personal domains while also encouraging them to orient their focus on the future and develop new goals for future success. Participants believed that the support initially provided to them during a critical period of personal, academic, and professional growth as BN students provided the foundation for their continued success toward their career goals as present-day alumni and professionals.

5.6 Helping future generations

Participants reported an eagerness to help future generations of EAL students and reciprocate the support and guidance that was provided to them. Participants also wanted to serve as an inspiration for other EAL students struggling with the completion of their studies.

5.7 Need for continued EAL student support

Alumni interviews emphasized the importance of creating effective systems to support post-secondary EAL student success. Participants believed that the support provided by the EAL NSSP was integral to both their own success and the success of future generations of EAL students, with far-reaching implications beyond assistance with assignments, coursework, or program completion. Participants urged educators to recognize the value of targeted EAL student support measures and advocate for the proper allocation of resources and funding to support such measures.

6. Discussion

This study confirms the longitudinal impact of effective, comprehensive, and targeted interventions on EAL student success and future career trajectories. Participant interviews reveal that the foundational support and learning opportunities provided to members of the MRU EAL NSSP during a critical period of personal, academic, and professional growth and development as post-secondary BN students were perceived to be an essential element in the overall success and continued achievement of these individuals as present-day alumni and professionals. The results demonstrate that membership of the EAL NSSP allows participants to succeed in academic, professional, and personal domains while also encouraging them to orient their focus on the future and develop new professional goals, higher levels of education or additional training.

The results also demonstrate a strong interest among the participants in helping future generations of EAL students. Participants were eager to reciprocate the support and guidance provided to them and serve as role



models for other EAL students struggling with the completion of their studies. In fact, participants believed that alumni had a critical responsibility in maintaining the legacy of the support program and advancing the program's efforts. This finding is unexpected and unforeseen in this study.

Given the representation of participants from varied periods during the program's inception and history, participant accounts continue to support similar themes over time. Participant accounts provide ongoing support for the wide breadth of academic and psychosocial support provisions included within the program's core design. Participants also emphasized the importance of student engagement and leadership opportunities to support continued EAL student growth and development over time, including opportunities for alumni to maintain a connection with the program and grow in a new capacity as alumni leaders and professionals.

Compared to previous program inquiries, the findings from this study demonstrate the continued success that EAL students can achieve with proper academic and psychosocial support at critical, formative periods during higher education. Through intentionally designed provisions developed to support EAL students, barriers to EAL student success, such as linguistic challenges, cultural discord, social isolation, psychosocial stressors, and systemic discrimination, can be eliminated while individuals are helped to achieve their full potential. The effect of this early and timely support extends far beyond the immediate benefits of individual assignment grades, satisfactory course completion, and degree attainment, with lasting effects on academic, professional, and personal success. In support of these new findings, post-secondary institutions must recognize their indisputable role in supporting EAL student populations and allocating the appropriate funding and resources to help these students achieve success and demonstrate their potential as future professionals and role models in their communities.

7. Future Directions

In 2021, the MRU EAL Nursing Student Support Program received provincial government funding for two years to expand program efforts to new faculties: the departments of Business, Child Studies, Education, Physical Education, Psychology, and Social Work at MRU. Recent studies have examined the support program's ongoing expansion to new departments beyond post-secondary nursing education (Choi & Brochu, 2024). The next iteration of this project will examine the impact of this support program in new curricular and pedagogically dissimilar areas.

Future studies will also continue the longitudinal study of participants previously enrolled in the MRU EAL NSSP during their undergraduate studies.

Declarations and Acknowledgment:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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Appendix A

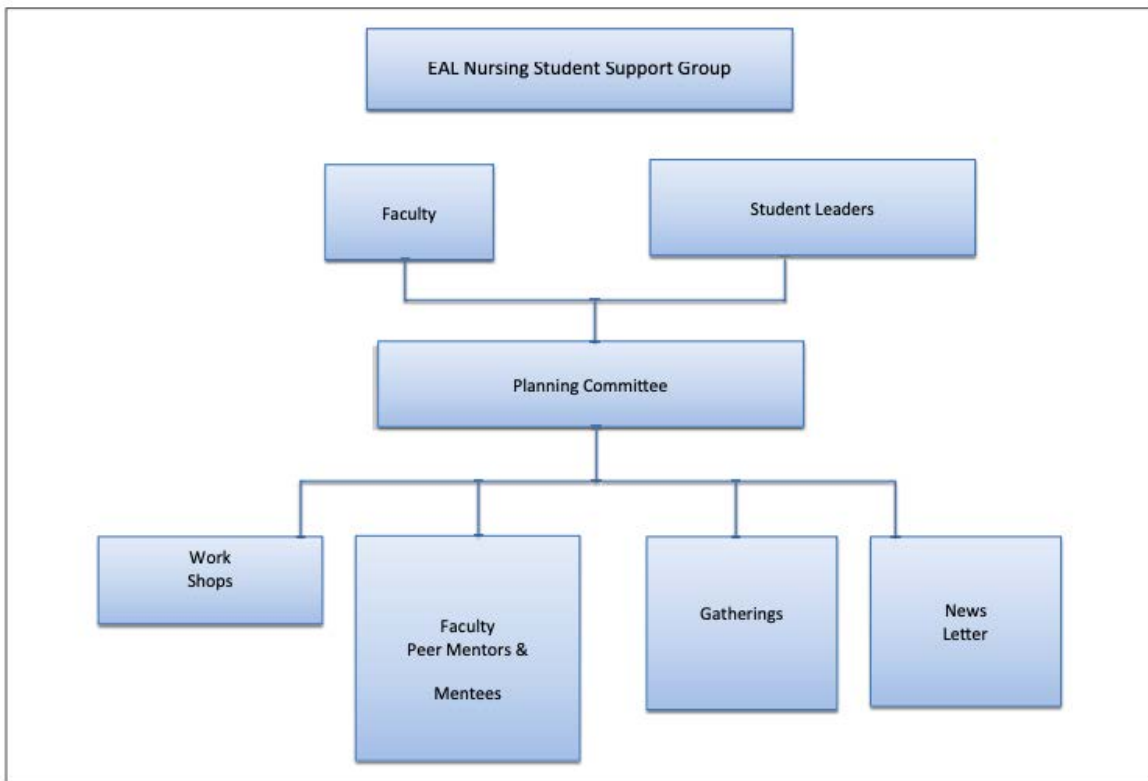


Figure 1. Choi Model for EAL Nursing Student Support (Choi, 2016, p. 83)

Appendix B

Methodology: Supporting Criteria, Participant Demographics, and Sample Questions

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alumni of the MRU EAL Nursing Student Support Program ● Previously involved in the support program as either student members and/or student leaders ● Presently involved in the support program as alumni leaders ● EAL or non-EAL background as some support program members were native English speakers whose role was to assist EAL students through peer mentoring or other leadership positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Current EAL or non-EAL students involved in the support program ● Faculty, staff, or guests of the support program who were not previously student members or student leaders involved in the support program themselves



Table 2. Participant Demographics at the Time of the Interview

Participant #	Age Range	Sex	Role(s) in Support Program	Timeframe of Program Involvement (Years)
1	18 to 24	Female	Mentor	2
2	25 to 34	Female	Mentor	4
3	25 to 34	Female	Mentor	2
4	18 to 24	Female	Mentor	4
5	18 to 24	Male	Mentee	2
6	25 to 34	Female	Mentor	1
7	25 to 34	Female	Mentee	3
8	35 to 44	Female	Mentee	3
9	25 to 34	Female	Mentee	4
10	25 to 34	Female	Mentee	4
11	18 to 24	Female	Mentee	1
12	25 to 34	Female	Mentor	5
13	25 to 34	Female	Mentee	2
14	18 to 24	Female	Mentee	2
15	45 to 54	Male	Mentee	4



Table 3. Sample of Interview Questions

Sample Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What skills and knowledge did you glean from the EAL Nursing Student Support Group? ● How did the EAL Nursing Student Support Group impact your academic and professional success? ● What professional and academic achievements have you accomplished since leaving the EAL Nursing Student Support Group? ● Please describe the professional role(s) and position(s) that you have been involved with since graduating from the Bachelor of Nursing program. ● Are the skills and knowledge that you gleaned from the EAL Nursing Student Support Group transferable to your professional setting? If so, please provide examples. ● Has being a member of the EAL Nursing Student Support Group helped you to assist other patients, colleagues, and students in difficult situations? ● Has the EAL Nursing Student Support Group helped you to appreciate diversity in your professional setting? If so, please explain. ● How does diversity affect you as an individual? ● Do patients, colleagues, or students turn to you as an ethnic role model? If so, please explain. ● What are your future academic or professional goals? ● Where do you see yourself in five years? In 10 years? ● Has being a member of the EAL Nursing Student Support Group influenced your ability to achieve personal goals and continue to succeed professionally? If so, please explain.



Appendix C

Table 4. Results: Sample Quotations and Associated Themes

Participant	Quotation	Theme	Significance
#4	<p>“The biggest leadership opportunity that was presented to me was ... [presenting at a] conference.... Leadership ... [as well as] planning and organization ... really drew to me [to the program]. [The program also] g[a]ve me a lot of different skills for mentoring [others]. Being a mentor ... really teaches you a lot of things like time management or ... people skills and [how to learn about] different cultures around the world.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A description of the skills and knowledge gleaned from support program involvement, including peer mentorship skills, time management, interpersonal skills, and cultural competency
#3	<p>“[Program involvement] gave me opportunities to go out there and do something new. Like the project I did ... [it was] something new that I’ve never done [before] ... [It gave] me opportunities to ... [improve] myself, ... [improve] my computer [and writing] skills while I was doing the newsletter, or ... gain group work skills.... [There was a large] impact, and I gained skills that I ... wouldn’t have learned if I didn’t come into the EAL nursing [support] program.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An account of the unique opportunities afforded through membership in the support program, which allowed the participant to develop proficiency with writing and computer use as well as interpersonal skills through group work
#2	<p>“This program ... [has] carried me forward to today where I more than ever really value community and culture and understanding identity.... Recently ... I’ve</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued professional engagement and leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An explanation of how leadership opportunities as a student mentor in the support program



	embarked on my journey of pursuing that question deeper ... so I did some courses ... and now I'm in a Master of Education program ... dealing with local Indigenous approaches to wellness ... because to me, ... that's Canadian culture ... and as a nurse, I [wondered why] ... our Indigenous people are in the state that they're in ... why statistics are this way?"		allowed this participant to develop an early appreciation for culture and diversity, which inspired the participant to pursue further studies in order to build upon this foundational experience
#2	<p>"My intention was to volunteer, but I'm getting to [understand] more of what keeps me coming back. [I enjoy keeping] in touch ... and ... it's really community building... This definitely builds a very beautiful community, [especially for] students [who] are going to partake in professions [such as nursing where it is] our responsibility to build ... a healthy community."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued professional engagement and leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An account of how support program involvement encouraged continued academic and professional engagement through community building
#7	<p>"My main goal was to finish this nursing degree program in four years.... I did that. I got a 3.7 [GPA].... [Since then] I have worked ... in [the] Emergency Department ... [as well as] a subacute and long-term care facility [as] the charge nurse in my shift.... I feel ... very fortunate."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accomplishments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual account of accomplishments gleaned following involvement in the support program
#3	<p>"Currently, I work at [the] hospital as a surgical float pool nurse. I work on all of the surgical units there."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accomplishments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual account of accomplishments gleaned following involvement in the support program
#9	<p>"A successful nursing career [has allowed me to] better support my</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accomplishments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual account of accomplishments



	... my family and myself.... I feel more confident.... I feel the motivation to do better in the future as well”.		gleaned following involvement in the support program
#9	“My plan is to work in acute care and gain a lot of knowledge and skills ... [Over these] next three or five years, [I plan to] really develop competency, knowledge, and skills in [the] acute care setting ... I would [also] like to ... pursue my master’s degree.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Future goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An account of future goals developed following membership in the EAL Nursing Student Support Program
#15	“If I get [a] chance, I will get into a university again ... take on another program and go volunteer in the university as well. I really appreciate all the support that people [gave] me. I [will] strive hard to ... hopefully [work] in [the] ICU setting and also possibly [take] my master’s and [become a] practitioner or possibly [a] nurse anesthetist.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Future goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An account of future goals developed following membership in the EAL Nursing Student Support Program
#3	“I [hope] that [the support program] will continue on forever ... because it helped me and ... I’ve learned so much through it.... I [hope] that more students can also learn through this and ... spread the knowledge that we have.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Helping future generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eagerness to help future generations of EAL students ● Desire to reciprocate the support and guidance that was provided to this participant during his/her time in the support program
#4	“I think it’s great to be a mentor because ... a lot of people ... need help ... Being ... a mentor is really inspirational and it’s really motivational when you get to see	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Helping future generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eagerness to help future generations of EAL students



	all your mentees ... grow up. You're kind of like [a] ... parent."		
#4	"I think alumni [have] ... a responsibility to come back, ... just encourage and ... support [EAL students] in a different way, that[s] ... like, it's okay, ... this is something positive, you'll get through it, and we'll all become colleagues one day."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Helping future generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eagerness to help future generations of EAL students ● Desire to reciprocate the support and guidance that was provided to this participant during his/her time in the support program
#3	"I think it's very important to keep the support program [running] because ... you have these students who have ... difficulties in their learning ... and there's no one to support them ... In the future, [they] could either quit nursing, ... fai[l] nursing, or just feel very discouraged... With the support group, we are able to support those [students], ... help them continue, ... finis[h] nursing, and have a career that they really ... enjoy. It's something that ... could make a very big impact [in] these lives."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need for continued EAL student support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy for the need to continue to provide effective and targeted EAL student support measures
#4	"Seeing how these students struggle, it's really sad ... These students are all from different countries, and they come to Canada hoping for a better future, a better life, [a] better education ... A lot of people don't realize that nursing students struggle so much ... already with the content and the material. So if you don't know the language, it's like a whole new world for you and ... you're just overwhelmed. I think having support groups like this [is] really	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need for continued EAL student support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy for the need to continue to provide effective and targeted EAL student support measures ● Advocacy for proper funding and resource allocation to support effective and targeted EAL student support measures



	crucial and very important, and I really hope that [funding bodies] can see that.”		
#2	“Look at these testaments, look at these students, look at these stories, look at the impact ... of it all ... You [have] to support the students from the beginning.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need for continued EAL student support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy for the need to continue to provide effective and targeted EAL student support measures
#12	“This EAL support group is pretty invaluable.... Everybody needs support, but when it comes to English [as an additional language], I think sometimes people need a little more support.... It makes a really big difference.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need for continued EAL student support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy for the need to continue to provide effective and targeted EAL student support measures

