



GENERAL STUDIES STUDENT COUNCIL

Columbia University in the City of New York

School of General Studies

2010-2011 Session

16 November, 2010

RESOLUTION

Subject: American Language Program

Problem: This council believes that international students should have a completely fair and equal opportunity for participation in the educational environment within the School of General Studies at Columbia University. Incoming students who are accepted at GS but are not native English speakers are required to take the American Language Program (ALP) exam, resulting in mandatory participation in the ALP's English course for a significant proportion of international students. These remedial courses place a heavy financial and educational burden on international students, particularly because students are not granted any course credit for taking them, all of which can have a detrimental effect on students' studies and academic progress. Students are charged for 6 credits for a 0 credit course, whereas a normal non-Columbia student would pay \$3500 for the same class with the same teachers, and the expense for students is currently increasing.

Because the test is administered only by the program, and the required course is taught by the same program within the School of Continuing Education, there also exists the appearance of a conflict of interest, since the program could be perceived as a way to profit off of international students who have no recourse after committing to Columbia. We therefore propose that the ALP, as currently structured, contains avoidable elements that have the effect of marginalizing part of the international student population.

Resolution: We are resolved that the American Language Program should be reviewed and revised to provide a fairer and more equitable process for prospective international General Studies students. The council recognizes that a minimum degree of capability in the English language is a necessary component of studying and excelling at Columbia University, but also strongly suggests that methods of testing, administration, and financial cost can be found that will reduce perceived inequalities and unfairness. Potential policy revisions that could alleviate, if not entirely rectify, the issue include:

1. Although international students are conditionally admitted pending the results of the ALP exam, consideration should be given to potentially implementing a policy that would delay official acceptance until after the results are known. This would provide full disclosure to students who are making substantial life changes in moving from another country, allowing them to know whether they will be required to participate in the expensive and remedial ALP course prior to making this critical decision.
2. Significant effort should be made to ensure that international students fully and clearly comprehend the exam process and the details of the remedial classes. Some of the language, such as the use of the word "credits", and a lack of effective explanation in ALP informational materials have led to confusion about cost, requirements, applicability of ALP classes toward graduation, and other basic elements of the program.
3. The test should be administered by an independent 3rd party, reducing the appearance of a conflict of interest within the ALP organization. Additionally, expanded test-taking options could potentially allow the student to take the exam abroad at approved testing centers, instead of waiting until arriving at Columbia and taking the exam at the beginning of the semester.

4. The test-taking structure should be changed to allow a student to retake the ALP exam in 3 or 4 months, instead of the current 6. This could allow international students to fully participate in regular coursework in their second semester, instead of being forced to wait an entire year. Additionally, practice materials and sample tests, which currently are not offered to students, should be made available to allow students to gain familiarity with the test format.
5. Other testing options should be considered in exploring an alternative to the ALP exam. Although TOEFL is only accepted as a first step in determinations of English proficiency, other widely accepted tests such as the International English Language Testing System should be examined, not as replacements for the existing exam, but as a potential substitute.
6. Once it is determined that a student needs supplementary English training, he or she should be permitted to take the course not just from the School of Continuing Education, but also from two or more additional schools in the New York City region to ensure fair price competition. It is understood that the quality and rigorous requirements of such additional program options would need to be at the same high level deemed essential by the ALP.
7. Consideration should be given to reducing the credit allotment for ALP courses from 6 down to 3, without changing the depth or the rigorous nature of the classes. Since international students must take at least 12 credits to maintain a student visa, this would have a two-pronged advantage. It would require students to pay less for the empty credits that do not accrue toward graduation, and it would allow them to take an additional Columbia course which *would* apply, changing the balance from 6 ALP/6 GS credit to 3 ALP/9 GS credit. Since these students are already allowed to take courses for credit concurrently with their ALP classes, permitting an additional course for credit would not entail a departure from current registration policy.

The council also fully and enthusiastically supports any and all efforts made by the Dean of Students and the administration of the School of General Studies to further the above policy changes or other initiatives designed to reduce the disadvantage experienced by international applicants in connection with the ALP process.

Reviewed and approved this date by the Student Council of the School of General Studies.

Signed:

Jacqueline Thong
President, General Studies Student Council

Elliot Shackelford
Vice-President of Policy, General Studies Student Council