

## Position Statement on the Acquisition of Academic Proficiency in English at the Postsecondary Level

### *Executive Summary*

Because of the importance of securing an adequate foundation in academic English before commencing postsecondary coursework and the inherent variability in the rate of language development, it is essential that students, their financial sponsors, and the institutions they attend understand the need to be flexible with respect to the amount of time and financial support allotted for language study. Setting strict time and/or financial limits on the length of English studies, or pressure to exit students from such studies prematurely, are counterproductive and will undermine opportunities for academic success.

### *Statement*

As a result of the global spread of English as a language of commerce and scientific communication, more and more individuals worldwide are choosing to pursue postsecondary educations in English. For students whose previous schooling has been in languages other than English, this often means that they will need to take courses in academic English prior to starting their formal postsecondary studies. While it is natural for students, their financial sponsors, and the institutions they attend to want students to begin studies towards their degree as soon as possible, it is important for all parties to understand the benefits that can be gained from foundation courses in academic English and to have realistic expectations about the length of time necessary to develop the language proficiency needed for academic success.

Language acquisition occurs over time, with learners moving through developmental stages and gradually growing in proficiency. As proficiency develops, students find themselves capable of mediating increasingly complex as well as specialized oral and written literacy tasks. The difference between secondary and postsecondary academic work is great, however. Successful participation in academic and professional discourse communities such as business, science, engineering, and medicine requires a strong foundation of very advanced language and common core academic skills. To participate successfully at the postsecondary level, learners require additional knowledge and expertise in content, specialized vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure, and pragmatics. Incoming students must also negotiate a new range of sociocultural situations such as faculty office hours, team work, public presentations, and frequently, independent living. If students have not yet developed advanced proficiency in the language and

culture of general academic and discipline-specific postsecondary settings, then it is critical for them to build this foundation before starting their studies towards their degree. For this reason many institutions require an assessment of language proficiency prior to allowing students to begin coursework.

However, individual learners develop language proficiency at variable rates that are influenced by factors such as educational background, first language, learning style, cognitive style, motivation, and personality, as well as sociocultural factors. In some instances, learners acquire social conversational skills more quickly than they acquire academic language skills. Conversely, they may have knowledge of grammatical rules and definitions of vocabulary, but encounter difficulty comprehending while reading or face great difficulty understanding fluent speakers of the language.

Because of the importance of securing an adequate foundation in academic English before commencing postsecondary coursework and the inherent variability in the rate of language development, it is essential that students, their financial sponsors, and the institutions they attend understand the need to be flexible with respect to the amount of time and financial support allotted for language study. While it is useful to set goals for length of study, it is counterproductive to set limits that put excessive pressure on students to finish English studies before they are ready to be successful in their academic studies. It is also counterproductive for the sponsors to place pressure on the language instructional programs to exit students who will then struggle academically because of language issues. If scholarship programs send students for English language training with strict time limitations, it is important that the sponsors either send students already at a high enough proficiency level to progress sufficiently within the sponsor's time limit or that the sponsors recognize that additional time may be necessary for English language study.

When postsecondary institutions admit students who have yet to demonstrate the level of language proficiency necessary for successful study, it is imperative that the institution communicate with students in a timely manner the opportunities available for increasing their proficiency and the impact this may have on the time required to complete a degree. Likewise, institutions must ensure that students receiving financial aid will not be negatively impacted by a need for additional English language study. Often this will entail recognizing that English language study is not a developmental subject, but is an academic subject on par with other academic classes in an institution in order to avoid the strict time restrictions often placed on developmental classes by financial aid policies.

*Approved by the Board of Directors  
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