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Articulation Between a Private Language School and Other Academic Institutions: The Case of ELS Language Centers/San Diego

The San Diego ELS Language Center¹, along with the other centers throughout the ELS system, participates in articulation agreements with over 500 institutions nationwide. Each year, approximately 90 college- and university-bound students from the San Diego center satisfy college/university English requirements for admission by completing Level 109, the highest level of the program. These students do not need to submit TOEFL scores to the institutions to which they wish to transfer, as long as the institutions are included in this articulation agreement. Although some students have transferred to schools in Florida, Oklahoma, Washington, and other states, the majority transfer to schools in San Diego and Los Angeles. This article will describe the experience the San Diego ELS center has had with articulation agreements and how the agreements have been maintained over time.

The ELS Language Centers Program

The ELS Language Centers/San Diego is a proprietary intensive English program (IEP) not affiliated directly with any college or university. The program offers nine levels, with each level having four weeks of instruction, 30 hours per week. Classes include general ESL instruction as well as English for academic purposes and TOEFL preparation. The program also includes college counseling and assistance with the college application process for all interested students.

Articulation Between ELS Language Centers and Other Institutions

One of the main functions of an intensive English program is to prepare students for colleges and universities, both to function linguistically in an American higher education environment and to improve their English skills to the degree necessary to pass an English proficiency exam and be granted acceptance to a college or university. The ELS Cooperative program, an articulation agreement between ELS Language Centers and over 500 colleges, universities, and vocational/technical schools, was created to give students and schools an alternative to using standardized tests like the TOEFL to satisfy the English requirement. There are three major advantages to this kind of agreement:

1. Students who complete an intensive English program have actually used their English ability to succeed in an American classroom environment, not just demonstrated the ability to score well on a standardized test.
2. ELS students learn study skills such as note taking, outlining, and library research techniques, valuable skills for academically bound students.
3. The time spent studying in an intensive English institute can serve as a bridge between the student's home country experience and his/her American higher education experience, easing the transition between the two by giving students time and help in adjusting to cultural differences.

The ELS Cooperative program has proven very beneficial in facilitating student transfer to colleges and universities. The agreement is an ongoing, nonbinding agreement which can be terminated by either party at any time. It promises that both parties will fulfill certain obligations.

ELS will provide its college/university partner with:

- (a) a half-page entry in the *ELS University & Career Guidebook*, an annually updated guidebook distributed to over 1700 counseling centers around the world;
- (b) distribution of the school's catalogue and international student information to 100 select counseling centers in 40 countries and to all 23 international student advisors in the ELS centers in the United States;
- (c) access for the school's admissions representatives to any of the 23 ELS centers for scheduled recruiting visits;

(d) country briefings, marketing orientations, key contact lists, and letters of introduction for the school's overseas recruiting official; and

(e) cooperation between the ELS placement service and the school's admissions office.

The college or university will cooperate with ELS by:

- (a) recommending ELS Language Centers to students who are academically qualified, but lack the English proficiency for admission;
- (b) issuing conditional letters of acceptance, contingent upon successful completion of the ELS program, to students who are otherwise admissible; and
- (c) stating in their catalogs and international student promotional materials that completion of a designated level of the ELS program will meet the English language proficiency requirement for admission.

Thus, assisting each other in the recruitment of international students is the main focus of the articulation agreement between ELS and colleges and universities.

The San Diego Experience

ELS Language Centers have articulation agreements with 92 California schools—18 four-year colleges or universities, 50 two-year community colleges, and 24 career schools.² The establishment of these agreements followed similar procedures.

Recently, the ELS Center in San Diego set up an agreement with Grossmont College in El Cajon, California. Initial contact was made through the biannual college fair at which 15 to 20 schools present their programs to ELS Language Center students. After college admissions and counseling representatives visited the San Diego center, they suggested referral of students to their college.

The desire was to increase the number of international students in the college. After visiting the center, reviewing the program, interviewing students, and meeting with ELS staff, the college representatives were confident that the students could succeed in their community college. They then presented the agreement for approval to their vice president of academic affairs. After review, the articulation agreement was signed.

A number of other schools in the San Diego area have followed similar procedures. Contact has typically been made with the ELS student advisor as students apply to schools, and with ELS staff at various National Association for Foreign Student Affairs: Association of International

Educators (NAFSA:AIE) conferences. Some campuses have also had experience with former ELS students who were admitted after submitting TOEFL scores. The fact that these students have done well recommends the program. Visits to the ELS center, observing classes, meeting with instructional staff, reviewing curriculum and course objectives, and talking with other institutions that already have articulation agreements with ELS have all been methods of learning more about the ELS program.

Depending on the student's intended course of study, applying to colleges and universities with articulation agreements is an attractive option. Students are counseled at ELS regarding colleges in the area and their admission requirements. Students generally already know that some schools will accept completion of Level 109 in lieu of the TOEFL. The student advisor at ELS also guides students through the application process. A critical element of the student's application is an academic report, or transcript, of grades and attendance of all classes taken at ELS. This report serves as the official recommendation of ELS that the student is ready to begin college or university level classes.

Potential Issues and Problems With Maintaining Articulation

Occasionally, problems occur which need to be resolved through improved and ongoing communication between the two institutions involved in an articulation agreement. An evaluation of student progress also allows the ELS center to make changes in its program if needed.

In one experience we had in San Diego, an admissions official at a San Diego area community college reported that a particular student had not been adequately prepared. A review of the student's records showed that the student had completed Level 107, not 109, and had been accepted at the college through the submission of a TOEFL score of over 450 (the minimum score required by the college). It became clear from this experience that when articulation agreements are in place, it is important to distinguish between students admitted through articulation and students admitted through other processes of acceptance.

Another community college, San Diego City College, had for many years accepted students who had completed Level 108 at ELS. During the period that this agreement was in effect, the college admissions officer reviewed applicants' academic reports from ELS carefully and consulted directly with the ELS student advisor and academic director. When the admissions officer moved to another community college, her successor did not maintain such close contact. In addition, the college's programs and the ELS student populations were changing. Many students completing

Level 108 were no longer adequately prepared. Instead, completion of Level 109, with its higher graduation requirements, should have been required for this college, but since communication had not been maintained adequately, the problem was not recognized in a timely way. The situation then was further complicated by the fact that the admissions officer at that college was also accepting students based on nonstandard criteria, thus confusing the issue of which students were accepted through articulation and which by other means. Because of the lack of communication, as well as the miscommunication, the articulation agreement between ELS and this college was terminated.

Another of our articulation agreements was changed when one private San Diego university, National University, raised its standards for all incoming students by placing a greater emphasis on writing skills. As a result of meetings with admissions officers, several changes were made in the San Diego ELS program. The research skills class was increased from 20 to 40 hours of instruction, a greater emphasis was placed on the writing component of the Level 109 exit exam, and completion of Level 109 rather than Level 108 was recommended for undergraduate-level students. In this case, in contrast to the previous instance, we were able to maintain the articulation agreement by adjusting the ELS program to fit the changes at the university.

Conclusion

The above examples show how agreements can be jeopardized, maintained, or even strengthened. From our experience, it has become clear that changes in student populations, admissions personnel, and institutional standards must all be watched carefully to ensure the quality of students referred. Articulation agreements are maintained through ongoing and systematic communication about these changes, involvement of the center directors, student advisors, academic directors, and instructors, as well as consultation with partner institution's admissions officers, counselors, and faculty. This communication can then lead to continuous improvement of the IEP program, and to continued confidence in the articulation agreement. Because these sorts of articulation agreements are so vital to the ongoing success of a private IEP like ELS, they have and continue to receive intense focus and commitment from our staff and administration. ■

Endnotes

1. The official name of this center is "ELS Language Centers/San Diego." For ease of reference and understanding, it is referred to here as "the San Diego ELS center."
2. These 92 schools are part of the cooperative program. Nationwide, 298 four-year institutions, 172 two-year colleges, and 83 career schools have articulation agreements with ELS (Krongold, 1996).

References

- Krongold, H. (Ed.). 1996. *University and career guidebook*. Culver City, CA: ELS Educational Services.