

Articulation Agreements Between Intensive ESL Programs and Postsecondary Institutions

Articulation between intensive English programs (IEPs) and other institutions has taken the form of articulation agreements which can be of considerable benefit to intensive English programs, postsecondary institutions, and international students. Many university-level intensive ESL programs operate outside the formal structure of another institution, and it is advantageous for these programs to establish cooperative agreements with postsecondary institutions, and so make it easier for their students to gain admission upon completion of their English language studies. Many postsecondary institutions, especially private ones, are eager to increase and diversify their enrollments, and IEPs can provide an important resource for student recruitment. This article describes some of the practical issues relating to articulation agreements between intensive ESL programs and mainstream postsecondary institutions. In particular, the article addresses (a) background issues and terminology relating to articulation agreements between IEPs and postsecondary institutions, (b) advantages of such agreements, (c) challenges associated with these agreements, and (d) procedures for establishing articulation.

Background Issues and Terminology

Intensive English Programs

IEPs are English as a second language programs in which students enroll from approximately 18 to 25 hours per week. The students are usually of university age (18 to 25) but they also may be older. Although IEPs vary in many respects, I refer here to programs designed primarily for international students who have come to the U.S. for the purpose of studying English and who then plan to continue their studies or training in a post-

secondary program. IEPs generally test their students upon arrival into the program and place them into levels of instruction based on their English language proficiency. Instruction is characterized as English for academic purposes and includes all language skills and academic preparation such as study skills, TOEFL and other types of test preparation, and practical computer applications.

Types of IEPs

The IEPs which are most relevant to this discussion are those whose students are not automatically enrolled in a postsecondary program by virtue of their enrollment in the IEP. It is worth noting that some postsecondary institutions admit international students directly into the institution; however, the students may be required to complete an intensive English program before they are mainstreamed or allowed to take regular postsecondary courses. Such IEPs are not the focus of this discussion.

Attention here is on proprietary IEPs (see, for example, Burns & Scofield, this volume) and on those which are operated by a parent postsecondary institution—for example, in an extension or auxiliary unit. In neither case are the students in these IEPs enrolled directly in a postsecondary program while they are enrolled in the intensive English program. Interestingly, both types of IEPs share much in common. Most of these IEPs are self-supporting; that is, they must cover all their expenses with the tuition they charge their students and most operate as small businesses, even if they belong within the organizational structure of a postsecondary institution.

Today, most IEPs are highly competitive, regardless of whether they are proprietary or somehow related to a postsecondary institution.

Some IEPs have increased their competitiveness based on the number and variety of postsecondary articulation agreements they have established. This is especially true of many proprietary IEPs which have made contracts with cooperating institutions, enabling their students to enjoy a campus location as well as make a smooth transition into the cooperating institution. An increasing number of IEPs which are operated through a postsecondary extension or auxiliary unit and which are not privately owned are also becoming more proactive in establishing articulation agreements, not only with their parent postsecondary institution but also with other institutions.

Articulation Agreements

For purposes of this discussion, an articulation agreement is an established, cooperative plan which facilitates the transfer of students from an IEP into a postsecondary program. Usually, some conditions or requirements are associated with this plan, and the IEP and the postsecondary institution monitor and negotiate these conditions in the course of their cooperation. In most cases, articulation agreements involve written policies and procedures, but they also may consist of verbal agreements between administrators in the two organizations. Although it is advisable to have written policies and procedures, successful articulation agreements usually involve ongoing communication between the parties involved in the process.

Despite the fact that articulation agreements can take a variety of forms and cover a wide range of issues, I will consider three different types of agreements: (a) those which involve conditional admission, (b) special application and transfer agreements, and (c) agreements regarding the level of English language proficiency required for admission. These different types are not mutually exclusive and, in many cases, they overlap.

Conditional admission

In order to assist prospective students in gaining admission to postsecondary institutions, a number of IEPs have established relationships and agreements with postsecondary institutions enabling them to become involved in the student placement process through conditional admission, also referred to as provisional admission, conditional acceptance, and provisional acceptance. On the basis of a prior agreement between the IEP and the postsecondary institution, the IEP assists the prospective student in applying to a postsecondary program. Such arrangements are often facilitated by an overseas, third-party agent or sponsor who is familiar with the conditional admission process.

Although there are many variations in conditional acceptance procedures, the process usually begins at the time students apply to the IEP, that is, before the students leave their home countries. In addition to submitting an application for admission to the IEP, students also send an application, application fee, and a complete set of materials for the designated postsecondary institution. These materials are sent to the IEP, and usually an IEP staff member checks the materials to see that all is in order and then sends the materials on to the postsecondary admissions office. This process is often easier when the admissions office is located on the same campus, but since many IEPs work with multiple postsecondary institutions, the application may be sent to a different campus, city, or state.

The postsecondary admissions office then reviews the admissions packet to see that all materials are in order and that the overseas applicant is qualified for admission. If anything is missing or if there are questions, the admissions officer contacts the IEP staff person in charge of conditional acceptance, who in turn contacts the student if additional information or materials are needed. Basically, the admissions officer verifies that grade point requirements and all other prerequisites have been met; however, at the time the application is reviewed, it is usually assumed that the student will not have sufficient proficiency in English to be admitted, and this is the most common condition to be met before the student can gain admission to the postsecondary program. To meet the condition for admission, the student will have to achieve a specific TOEFL score or another established level of English language proficiency. Additional conditions may involve other test scores, for example, the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), or specific courses that must be taken before the prospective applicant can be admitted to the postsecondary institution.

Once the postsecondary institution grants the conditional admission, a letter of conditional admission is usually sent to an IEP staff member, who then sends this letter along with an IEP acceptance letter, appropriate visa materials, and other orientation materials to the student or third-party agency. In cases in which the IEP is located on the parent postsecondary campus, it may be possible to send visa application materials (e.g., an I-20) indicating that the student has been admitted to the postsecondary institution pending completion of a designated period of intensive English language study.

Such conditional acceptance arrangements can be extremely helpful to students in countries where it is difficult to leave the country or to get a visa unless one has been admitted to a postsecondary institution. Although not a guarantee that students will be granted permission to leave their country or be given a visa to enter the U.S., written statements of conditional admission can improve their chances of being allowed to emigrate to pursue English and postsecondary studies. Conditional acceptance agreements can be especially helpful if the timing for English language study has been coordinated with the estimated date of admission to the postsecondary program. With careful planning, the students may be able to complete their language training just in time to gain admission.

Other transfer and applications agreements

Many IEPs also have articulation agreements applicable to students who are currently enrolled in intensive language study but who have not yet applied to a postsecondary program. In such cases, the IEP may have

arrangements with certain postsecondary institutions which facilitate priority application processing and placement for qualified students. As with conditional acceptance, it is crucial to time applications to allow for adequate English language training and to meet appropriate entrance dates.

The role of English language proficiency in articulation agreements

Some IEPs can demonstrate convincingly that students who have satisfactorily completed a specific level of instruction in the IEP have a level of proficiency generally equivalent to an average TOEFL or other test score. This can be done relatively easily over time by correlating levels of instruction with end-of-level test scores; for example, many IEPs have access to student TOEFL scores, and many give the institutional TOEFL at the end of each term. In such cases, the articulation involves coming to agreement about which IEP level of instruction or other proficiency criterion is acceptable for admission to the cooperating institution in lieu of the TOEFL or some other test. In addition to requiring the completion of a specific level of instruction, some agreements call for recommendations by an IEP administrator or several of the student's instructors.

Advantages of Articulation Agreements

Advantages for Postsecondary Programs

The most obvious advantages for the postsecondary institution lie in the area of student recruitment, particularly for those with limited budgets and means of contacting international students. In such instances, the IEP assumes most of the marketing costs and can serve as a marketing and recruiting representative. Given that many postsecondary institutions charge out-of-state tuition, they can benefit from the increase in international student enrollments.

Articulation agreements with IEPs also result in diversification and internationalization of the student body and the educational program, objectives which often are mandated by law and by institutional policy.

Advantages for IEPs

IEPs have much to gain from articulation agreements with postsecondary programs. Through the establishment of linkages with one or more postsecondary institutions, the IEP enhances its student services as well as its ability to function in the highly competitive business of intensive English language training. The more options for continued study and training that the IEP can provide to its students, the more likely it will be able to attract them. This applies both to students who wish to apply to postsec-

ondary programs before entering an IEP and to those who want to wait to decide on a course of postsecondary study until they are enrolled in a language program.

Aside from enhancing its competitive standing, the IEP can benefit in other ways from articulation agreements with postsecondary programs. Especially in cases in which a relatively large number of IEP students intend to pursue a specific academic program or a special training program, the IEP can tailor its curriculum to meet specific purposes—for example, English for business or engineering—thereby making the ESL program more relevant to student needs and, in turn, increasing the likelihood for enhanced student motivation.

Finally, many international students prefer IEPs which provide so-called “no TOEFL” options described above, that is, which allow them to transfer to a postsecondary institution on the basis of an IEP recommendation or the completion of a given level of instruction in the IEP. Thus, such language proficiency articulation agreements can be perceived both as a competitive advantage for IEPs as well as an advantage for students with high test anxiety.

Advantages for Students

From the previous discussion, the advantages of articulation agreements to students are fairly obvious: they facilitate the transition from one institution to another, and, in reference to conditional acceptance, they can make it easier for students to emigrate.

Challenges Associated with Articulation Agreements

Although there are distinct advantages to having articulation agreements between IEPs and postsecondary programs, there are also some difficulties and obstacles that can challenge and complicate the establishment and maintenance of such agreements.

The biggest obstacle for both the IEP and the postsecondary program is the time and cost of additional administrative work which is involved in the process. The IEP faces a considerable up-front investment of time and energy in establishing articulation agreements. Usually, this is an ongoing process since some relationships change and new agreements may be needed. Once a relationship has been established, it needs to be promoted in order to attract students who will be candidates both for the IEP and for the cooperating postsecondary program.

It is worth noting also that marketing and explaining articulation agreements is no easy task. Many students and third-party organizations overseas do not understand the U.S. educational system, and explaining the

system and how one transfers from one program to another can be difficult considering language and cultural differences. This is further complicated by the fact that many international students do not understand the U.S. community or junior college system and the articulation agreements that these two-year colleges often have with four-year institutions.

Postsecondary programs also have to spend more time processing applications and communicating with IEP staff. Problems for both institutions are complicated by the fact that international applications are often incomplete and require additional correspondence to ensure the successful initiation of the process. Cost-cutting efforts in many postsecondary institutions can present a serious obstacle to the implementation and maintenance of articulation agreements. In this regard, many IEPs can demonstrate how their conditional admissions staff can facilitate the work of the cooperating institution by ensuring that no application packets are forwarded for review until all materials are present, by ordering materials in the manner prescribed by the admissions office, and by computing GPAs according to admissions office standards.

Students can also create problems, the most common of which involves conditional admission and student no shows. Although students may have completed all aspects of the application process and may have been admitted to a postsecondary program, they may change their minds and abandon the prescribed conditional admission option. Given the amount of work that goes into applications for conditional admission, a significant number of no-shows can challenge the viability of the articulation agreement. In some instances, a processing fee can help discourage such changes in or abandonment of plans.

Another obstacle to articulation agreements lies in the fact that institutions, because of their prestige, exclusivity, or large number of applicants and limited number of spaces, see no advantage to establishing articulation agreements with IEPs. Others prefer to have direct contact with their applicants, thereby eschewing the third-party involvement of an IEP. This can be a problem for students as well as IEPs because students who want to take advantage of conditional admission may feel that their choices of postsecondary programs are limited. There are often more options for community colleges and lesser known private schools than for well-known and highly competitive institutions.

Some IEPs make a case for themselves vis-à-vis postsecondary institutions by asserting that student performance in the IEP provides a good indication of day-to-day work and study habits. IEP course loads, homework assignments, and grading policies often approximate those of other institutions, and performance over an extended period of time in an IEP can serve as a predictor of academic success.

Although articulation agreements are generally advantageous to students, they can be expensive, especially in cases in which both the IEP and a third-party overseas agency may charge for the services.

Establishing Articulation Agreements

Selecting a Partner Institution

The first step in establishing an articulation agreement involves selecting an IEP or a postsecondary institution with which to cooperate. In some cases, the selection process may be straight forward because the IEP may be located on the premises of the postsecondary institution. However, even when they share the same location, the two organizations may have to engage in considerable negotiation to arrive at a viable agreement.

In other cases, the decision may involve some research and analysis. For example, if a postsecondary institution wants to increase its number of international students and there is no IEP on the premises, it may have to search for a reputable IEP with which to cooperate. By the same token, if an IEP wants to establish linkage(s) with other postsecondary programs, it may be necessary to survey current IEP students to determine what types of postsecondary programs the majority of students wish to enter. It also may be necessary and advisable to confer with overseas agents, representatives, and sponsors, in order to get ideas about the types of postsecondary programs which are most in demand.

From the standpoint of the IEP, there may be several obvious factors which influence the selection of the partner postsecondary institution, for example, the major field or type of program IEP students or applicants wish to pursue, the length of the program, student GPAs and degree or prior experience in the field, and the location of the program. For example, if the IEP has a relatively large number of students wishing to pursue degree programs in engineering, the IEP should select candidate postsecondary institutions which have well-established engineering programs. However, if the majority of these engineering students have low GPAs, it may be necessary to identify a postsecondary program with a flexible admissions policy.

Contacting the Institution

Once a candidate partner has been selected, the next step is to contact an administrator in the cooperating institution. In deciding whom to contact, a general rule of thumb is to aim high—contact the director of the IEP or the director of admissions or director of international admissions at the postsecondary institution. If one has access to higher ranking officials,

so much the better. Another bit of advice is be patient. One rarely connects with the key party on the first call, and it will usually take persistence and several telephone calls before the appropriate contact is made. The reason for contacting the highest, relevant administrator is that subordinate employees may be less than enthusiastic and view the proposed articulation agreement only in terms of an increased workload.

It is wise to be well prepared before communicating with the appropriate administrative person—develop a list of reasons which will help sell your proposal for cooperation and be ready to point out the advantages to the prospective partner. For example, if you are an IEP administrator contacting a private school with strong programs in business and engineering, you may wish to emphasize that your program has been selected by several sponsoring agencies to provide preacademic training for government scholarship recipients and that your program has a strong reputation for monitoring student performance and progress. In addition, it may be relevant to cite other postsecondary institutions with which you have established cooperative agreements.

One of the first questions to ask is, Would you like to increase the number of international students on your campus? Given economic conditions in many postsecondary programs coupled with various mandates for social and cultural diversity, it may be difficult for the admissions person to decline the offer.

Although the postsecondary administrator who wishes to establish a cooperative agreement with an IEP generally will find the task to be an easy one, it is advisable to stress that contact with the IEP has been initiated with the goal of increasing the number of international students in the institution and that the institution is willing to be flexible in evaluating candidates for admission.

Following Up

Assuming that appropriate contacts have been made and that both parties express interest in exploring the possibility of cooperation, the next step is to exchange materials which provide background information about the programs in question, for example, descriptions of programs and courses, admission policies and requirements, and, if applicable, descriptions of existing cooperative agreements with other institutions. For example, the fact that an IEP has had a successful articulation agreement in place for a number of years with another well-known postsecondary institution can be persuasive in establishing a new relationship.

In cases in which the postsecondary institution or the IEP frequently pursues cooperative agreements with other institutions, it is valuable to

have a follow-up letter along with a set of materials ready for mailing immediately after the initial discussion. The follow-up letter should restate the benefits of cooperation both for the prospective partner and for the student. It pays to refer to special services that your organization will provide which will serve to expedite the processing of applications. In the case of IEPs, it is also advisable to establish credibility by reporting correlations of student TOEFL scores with their level of instruction in the program as well as any other data and procedures which demonstrate the academic standards of the program.

Here again, considerable patience may be in order as it often takes several weeks before contact can be reestablished. For this reason, it is advisable, once it is clear that there is mutual interest and that program materials will be exchanged, to set a date for a follow-up discussion.

It should be noted that a number of potential agreements break down at this point for a variety of reasons: People are busy and do not follow up; parties decide that they are not interested; the cooperation does not seem feasible based on existing policies and standards, or staffing levels preclude cooperation.

Making the Agreement

Assuming that both parties are interested in pursuing an agreement, it is wise to establish basic policies and procedures and to identify staff members who will be involved in the articulation process. It is best if the administrators and staff can have a face-to-face meeting to set the tone for the cooperation and to spell out procedures in the event that problems or special circumstances arise. Although the day-to-day work of handling and processing applications will no doubt be done by support staff, administrators should monitor the cooperation and be consulted when difficulties arise. As with all human relationships and cooperation, the manner in which difficulties are resolved is as important as the initial agreement to cooperate.

The most common difficulty arises from what is perceived to be slow processing. Administrators should agree on a time frame for application processing and for ways to follow up when applications are not processed within that time. In the context of maintaining good relations between IEPs and postsecondary institutions, there is much to be said in favor of diplomacy and interpersonal skills in all areas and types of communication, especially telephone conversations.

Conclusion

Despite all the factors involved in articulation agreements between IEPs and postsecondary institutions, for those willing to make the commitment of time and energy, the rewards to the cooperating institutions and their students are great. Indeed, it is hard to fault any cooperative agreement between educational institutions which benefits all parties concerned. As the cooperating partners become better acquainted with each others' programs, the potential for greater understanding and appreciation of their respective roles increases. Those affiliated with mainstream institutions gain greater insight into the challenges of language learning and academic preparation, and they can exert influence on the kinds of training that are provided. Similarly, those associated with IEPs are afforded an opportunity to follow up on their students, monitor their successes and failures, and, with this informed perspective, adapt the IEP training to meet student needs more effectively. It is with such cooperation that we come to appreciate the bridges that result from articulation between IEPs and postsecondary institutions. ■