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## STUDENT PLACEMENT AND COLLEGE VIEWS ON ARTICULATION

FOREIGN language departments of colleges and universities admit many new students every year who have had previous experience in the language they intend to study. The proficiency demonstrated by these students shows individual differences, depending on such factors as the quality and amount of instruction they have received, their motivation and interest, and how long ago they studied the language. Since most college language courses are well defined and articulated, incoming students should be able to enroll in a class that suits their level of competence. Institutions have adopted various methods for assigning students to their courses. According to one survey, conducted in the late 1960s, more than half (55%) of the 143 responding departments and colleges with a student population of at least 2,500 were using a placement test. Of the remainder, 58.2% depended on a formula equating one year of high school study with one semester of college, 23.8% conducted individual interviews, 9.2% used both the formula and the grades in the previous language courses, 4.6% checked only the grades, and 4.6% used other methods. (Duker 14-19; for a recent survey conducted in California, see Schwartz).

Not only are these statistics outdated, they also do not relate the size of the language departments to their placement policy and method or provide sufficient information about departments' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their method and their general views on articulation of high school and college language programs. To obtain a more recent profile and answer requests received from other institutions regarding ways of placing students, we conducted a survey from the late spring of 1982 to the fall of 1984. The two-page questionnaire consisted of six preliminary questions concerning background information (name of the institution, department, enrollments, FL requirement, etc.); five questions on the placement test in use, overall placement policies, and trends in placement patterns; and three questions for opinions on curricular articulation.

*Institutions.* The questionnaire was sent to 250 departments. We deliberately did not entirely randomize the selection of the departments. Since one objective of the survey was to find out what placement methods large departments were using, those that taught common European languages were selected. The assumption was that such departments would have larger enrollments than others would have, that they would be able to offer "off-semester" courses for better placement of incoming students, and that there were more commercially available tests for them to choose from. It was also assumed that

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large universities would have correspondingly large language departments. As a result, by consulting the *College Blue Book* (18th ed., 1981), 190 institutions were selected at random but according to their student population on an arbitrary classification of *very large* (XL, more than 20,000 students), *large* (L, 12,000-20,000), *medium* (M, 5,000-12,000), and *small* (S, under 5,000). The total number selected were 80 XL, 50 L, 40 M, and 20 S. Responses were obtained from 68 XL, 41 L, 33 M, and 11 S, a total of 153 colleges and universities representing 80.5% of the 190 institutions to which the questionnaire was sent.<sup>1</sup> In addition, seven telephone contacts were made, bringing the total to 160 colleges and universities (68 XL, 41 L, 34 M, 17 S) from 46 states and Washington, DC. Altogether 218 language departments responded to our survey.

*Foreign language requirement.* The presence or absence of a language requirement may affect not only the enrollment but also the placement method. Of the 160 institutions surveyed, 109 (68.1%) had some kind of requirement (57 XL, 27 L, 19 M, 6 S). Some also reported that a requirement was to be put into effect in a year or two, although such responses were not included in our computation. The breakdown of the size of the institutions and the enrollments in their language departments are not included here, but it was clear that the student enrollment in language courses at comparable institutions depended on whether there was a language requirement.<sup>2</sup>

Language requirements vary not only from one institution to another but also from one division to another. Some also offer options (typically, computer language, mathematics, linguistics, area study). The general pattern, excluding responses such as "it depends on the department/college/school" that give no figures, shows that a four-semester requirement is most prevalent, with no discernible pattern emerging for the quarter system: two semesters (8), three semesters (23), four semesters (49); three quarters (6), four quarters (8), five quarters (4), six quarters (5).

*Size of the department.* The larger the student enrollment of the department, the more likely the department

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is to have a systematic placement policy. Therefore, the questionnaire asked for the approximate number of students in the first- and second-year language courses. On the basis of the answers, the 218 responding language departments were arbitrarily grouped into four sizes according to enrollments: 31 XL (more than 1,500), 69 L (1,000-1,500), 76 M (500-1,000), 42 S (under 500).<sup>3</sup>

### Placement Methods

The first question after the preliminary ones for background information concerned the placement method and contained a subset of seven items. Of the 218 respondents, 144 (26 XL, 38 L, 48 M, 32 S), constituting 66.1%, reported that they did give a placement test. The first item asked whether the placement test was required of (a) all incoming students with any high school language study or (b) those with a certain number of years of study; whether it was mandatory only if incoming students wished to (c) bypass the first-semester course, (d) bypass the first two semesters of courses, or (e) fulfill the language requirement through testing; and (f) whether the test was used for any other purposes. Table 1 shows the results of the tabulation.

While 64 departments (44.4%) required all incoming students to take the tests, the number increases to slightly over one-half (54.2%) if we include group (b), all of which indicates that students with one year of study were exempted, especially if we assume that such students' usual placement would be into the beginning course anyway. At other departments (45.8%), the test was optional or was used only under certain conditions. Most responses in (f) mentioned that students took the test only if they wished to receive college credits for the courses bypassed.

The second item sought information concerning the test used: the College Entrance Examination Board Test (CEEB); College Level Examination Program (CLEP); the MLA Cooperative Test, Level L (MLA-L), Level M (MLA-M), or both (MLA-L, M); or other tests.<sup>4</sup> The results are tabulated in table 2, omitting three blank answers in the L group. Almost one-third of the departments were using the MLA tests (32.6%), nearly another one-third the CEEB (29.1%), while more than one-third (36.9%) were using locally produced tests, reported under "Other" on the table.

Since most of the standardized tests measure at least two language skills, the third item asked whether the test in use measured competence in listening (L), speaking (S), reading (R), or writing (W). Table 3 indicates the results, excluding categories that are possible but not reported (e.g., LR for CLEP). Of these four basic language skills, speaking is the most time-consuming to evaluate; thus it is not surprising that only 13 departments (9.2%) tested it. On the other hand, a little over three-fifths (61.0%) did include a listening component in their tests.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that nearly

one-third (31.9%) reported that their tests involved only reading, or reading and writing. The most typical patterns seemed to be either a combination of L and R (43.3%) or that of LRW (15.6%) or R only (19.9%).<sup>6</sup>

In the fourth item users were asked if they were satisfied with their tests, and to explain the reasons if they were dissatisfied. Among those who responded to this query, 74 indicated their satisfaction and 32 their dissatisfaction. There were thirteen complaints against the CEEB, the main ones with regard to its inability to discriminate at the first-year college level—hence a high number of placement adjustments in some departments after testing—and its discouragingly difficult items. Complaints concerning the MLA tests (10) focused on the lack of discrimination power of the Form L above the first one or two semesters and the "gap" between the two forms, L being too simple and M too difficult. The complaints regarding the locally produced test (9) were that it was too old, it lacked an aural component, or it lacked sufficient comprehensiveness to measure proficiency at the high and low ends.

The fifth item concerned the adjustments of placement, upward or downward. Of a total of 159 responses, 36 (22.6%) stated that the result was binding. Among the departments that permitted placement changes, 21 (17.0%) interviewed students, 31 (25.5%) used instructors' recommendations, 61 (49.6%) used both, and 10 (8.1%) not only used both but also considered the number of years of high school language study, or they had policies such as retesting or allowing students to change placement on their own if they felt that they were placed too high.

The sixth item addressed the departments that did not administer a test, asking them whether the placement was done by (a) individual interviews, (b) high school language grades, (c) GPA, (d) the number of years of language study, or (e) other means. Table 4 shows the results. Of the 74 respondents, the most prevalent were the groups that considered only the number of years of study (31.1%) or, for more accuracy, combined it with interviews (24.3%) or with other factors (36.5%). Category (e) consisted of a policy allowing students to place themselves in any course they deemed appropriate.

The seventh item asked what kind of formula had been adopted by those who counted the number of years of study as a factor. Because of the diversity of academic calendars as well as that of the numbering and sequencing of courses, the results yielded a complicated profile, which is reported in a simplified version in table 5. It is clear that the majority used the traditional formula equating one year of high school study with one semester (68.4%) or one quarter (66.7%) of college work.

### Placement Policies and Patterns

The second question of the survey concerned the problem, common at many institutions, of an increasing

number of students who enroll in the beginning course as start-overs, or *faux débutants*. In our experience, these students constitute as much as two-thirds of the enrollment, and they often receive higher grades at the expense of the genuine beginners, thus creating pedagogically unsound classroom situations (Hagiwara, "Student" 27-29).<sup>7</sup> The item asked, therefore, whether the department placed such students into the beginning course. Of the 218 responses, 196 (92.5%) replied affirmatively. A subset of three items asked respondents to estimate the percentage of *faux débutants* in their classes, to indicate if such students received full credits for the course, and, if not, what the lowest placement level was for them to obtain full credits.

In response to the first item, a total of 122 respondents gave estimates, with a range of 5% to 90% and a median of 57.5%. Two reported that such students enrolled in special sections. All but three indicated that students with prior study of the language received the same number of credits as the genuine beginners did. Of those three, two said that students with two or more years of language study did not receive any credit, and the third, that they were given a reduced amount. Two others, included in the majority group, mentioned that a policy was being formulated to restrict the number of students placed into the beginning course. (For arguments for or against loss of credits, see Dufau 110-11; Gummere 107; Orwen 574.) There were 13 respondents whose departments did not place students into the beginning class; for them the lowest placement for all students was a second-semester or second-quarter course (9), a first-year review course (3), and a second-year, first-semester course (1).

Credit by examination was a popular idea in the 1970s in certain disciplines. While some argued against the resultant reduction of the "university experience," others insisted that it would improve the quality of instruction in secondary schools and give students the additional incentive to enter college (see Born 129-30). Question 3 asked if the respondents' colleges or universities gave credit for language courses bypassed as a result of the placement test. Of the 164 institutions, 29 (17.7%) replied affirmatively.

The fourth question inquired whether the respondents could discern a general pattern of student placement into their courses. The tallying of responses presented some problems because of the diversity of the academic calendar and courses. In table 6, only departments on a semester system are reported, and additional departments that use an equivalency formula for placement are shown in parentheses with a + sign. The Roman numeral I stands for the first course, II for the second semester as well as the first-year review course, III and IV respectively for the first and second semesters of the second year, and V for a third-year course. The table makes it clear that the traditional formula equating one year of high school study with one semester of college is un-

tenable and that the overall pattern shows an equivalency of approximately 1.6 years to one semester.<sup>8</sup>

The fifth question asked if the respondents surveyed the language backgrounds of incoming students after classes began in the fall. Of the 209 respondents, 52 (24.9%) reported that they surveyed them every year, 73 (34.9%) occasionally, and 84 (40.2%) never. The sixth question inquired whether, in the respondents' estimates, students had been placed into increasingly higher or lower courses during the past ten years—that is, whether instructors thought that incoming students' language proficiency had shown any changes. Of the 215 respondents, 16 (7.4%) felt that the general proficiency level had been increasing, 56 (26.0%) thought it had stayed about the same, 102 (47.7%) indicated it had been decreasing, and 41 (19.1%) did not know.

### College Views on Articulation

The three remaining questions concerned the respondents' views and attitudes on high school-college curricular articulation. Question 7 asked how they and their colleagues involved in language instruction viewed that articulation. Of the 212 responses obtained, 144 (67.9%) considered it very important, 53 (25.0%) somewhat important, and 15 (7.1%) unimportant. Question 8 asked whether, in the past three years, the respondents or any of their colleagues had attended a local, regional, or national professional meeting in which articulation problems were specifically discussed. Of the 209 responses obtained, 132 (65.1%) were affirmative and 77 (36.8%) were negative.<sup>9</sup>

Question 9 elicited opinions from the respondents regarding the current status of curricular articulation and their suggestions for high school teachers. Altogether 135 individual comments were received. Categories having a frequency of five or above are listed below, with the specific frequency indicated in parentheses.

#### Views on Articulation

1. Lack of articulation is a serious problem (34); it is worse now than in the past (6); it is better now (5); special conferences and committees have been organized to establish communication between high schools and colleges (21); state-level conferences on articulation have generated little interest; the quality of language instruction varies too much in high schools—there should be state-wide proficiency requirements or articulation standards (18) and core curriculum guides (6).

2. College instructors must understand that high school teachers are under budgetary and enrollment pressure—they are forced to combine levels in a single class, "entertain" or water down the program in order to keep up the enrollments, and so on (16).

3. Language skills among incoming students have steadily eroded (8); most of the poorly prepared students admit that they had not worked hard in high school (5).

### Suggestions for High School Teachers

1. They should organize in-service workshops and invite college instructors to discuss various means of articulation (28).

2. They need to emphasize standards of work, demand proficiency for college-bound students, and reduce "fun and games" (21).

3. In terms of language skills, teachers should place more emphasis on oral-aural work (23), on grammar (17).

4. They should visit colleges—and colleges should encourage such visits—to learn more about placement policies, requirements, proficiency goals, and instructional materials (16); the teachers ought to let the colleges know their needs and concerns (6).<sup>10</sup>

5. Teacher preparation should stress language competence (9), and the teachers should do refresher work by travel abroad and summer seminars (7) (for a discussion of a successful seminar program, see Rose).

6. Students should be encouraged to plan their language study so as to end it during their senior year, thereby eliminating the intervening years of no study (7) (for the adverse effect of intervening years, see Spencer and Flaughter; Hagiwara, "Student" 27).

### Conclusion

Two-thirds of the 218 departments of modern European languages, representing 160 colleges and universities, administer a test to measure the proficiency levels of incoming students and to place them into appropriate courses. The most frequently used tests are either locally made examinations, the CEEB, or the MLA tests. While most departments measure at least listening and reading comprehension skills, a surprising number (one-fifth) check only reading. General complaints regarding the tests are that they are not comprehensive enough to discriminate performance at both the lowest and the highest levels. It would appear impossible, however, to construct such a powerful test, which would be too long, given the usual time constraints for administering it. Moreover, no proficiency test is an infallible oracle. Adjustments in placement are made at most institutions by individual interviews with students and by recommendations of instructors. In departments that do not use tests, students are placed according to several criteria, most frequently including a formula that equates one year of high school study with one semester of college.

The decreasing proficiency of incoming students poses problems in many departments. Our survey reveals that a more realistic equivalency of high school and college work seems to be 1.6 years to one semester. As a result, most students with a "standard" two-year study of language are placed in the beginning course as *faux débutants*, to such an extent that the genuine beginners now constitute a minority (42.5%) of the students enrolled in the course. Moreover, these places receive full

credits at an overwhelming majority of institutions (92.5%), as if they had never studied the language before. Such a situation not only makes instruction difficult but also gives undue pressure and a feeling of being disadvantaged to the real beginners. There appears to be a need to tighten the placement procedure and create a minimum level of placement for those with two or more years of study with or without a policy of reducing the number of credits for those placed below the limit. The policy of granting partial or full college credits by examination, which might motivate students and improve instruction in secondary schools, is not in widespread practice (17.7%). Despite the problems outlined above, only one-quarter of the responding departments check the language backgrounds of incoming students regularly; two-fifths have never undertaken such surveys.

Finally, most respondents view as important the articulation of the curriculum and the establishment of communication between secondary schools and colleges. Many have participated in professional conferences at local, regional, and national levels in which such issues were discussed. They also advocate the creation of statewide competency requirements, implying the standardization of proficiency tests and curriculum guidelines for secondary schools. We must note that these are the very problems that have been debated for several decades in our profession. Perhaps it is time for national organizations such as the ADFL and the ACTFL to take up the issues and propose general as well as language-specific guidelines.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The relatively high rate of response is probably due to the brevity of the questionnaire, a cover letter addressed to the department chair, and the enclosure of a prepaid return envelope.

<sup>2</sup> For example, all the departments categorized as very large belonged to XL or L institutions having a requirement; as for large departments, 61 out of 69 belonged to XL, L, or M institutions with a requirement, and only 8 to XL institutions without a requirement.

<sup>3</sup> Of the total of 218 departments, 17 returned two copies, representing two large language groups (such as French and Spanish in a department of Romance languages). Since these separate responses often gave nearly identical information regarding placement method and policies, they were combined into a single response.

<sup>4</sup> The CEEB tests are recently used versions released by Educational Testing Service to postsecondary schools and enjoy relative security. The CLEP was designed for use in departments that offer credit by examination. The MLA-L was originally designed as a proficiency test for those with two years of high school or one year of college language study, and the MLA-M for up to four years of high school or two years of college study. For a brief discussion of the relative merits of these tests, see Hagiwara, "Student" 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> Speaking scores do correlate much more highly with L scores than with those of R, W, or a multiple-choice grammar

test. A study at the University of Michigan revealed that the S-L correlations of incoming students in the third- and fourth-semester courses were 0.63 and 0.66 respectively ( $<.01$ ,  $N = 103$  and 111). See Hagiwara, *Triple-Track Program*.

<sup>6</sup> According to a University of Michigan study conducted in 1978, the correlation between reading and listening scores on the CEEB Test was 0.57 in the third-semester course and 0.58 in the fourth-semester course ( $N = 307$  and 217, respectively). Scores on reading correlated higher (0.70 and 0.66) with course grades than did listening (0.54, 0.51). Similar findings were reported by Richard Spencer.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Half and David Frisbie report that the attrition rate is much higher among the genuine beginners than among the placees (405).

<sup>8</sup> The traditional formula has been denounced by many language specialists; for a brief bibliography, see Hagiwara, "Student" 31.

<sup>9</sup> The wording of this item was ambiguous; thus a negative response may mean either that the problem was discussed at a conference not attended by the respondent or that at meetings attended by the respondent the problem was never brought up.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief bibliography of works pointing out the near-total failure of four-year colleges and universities to communicate effectively with secondary schools, see Hagiwara, "Student" 32; for various reports on articulation in Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, etc., see *FL Articulation*. For a survey of college and secondary school teachers in New York regarding articulation, see Webbs. For both pessimistic and optimistic views on articulation, see Geno 73-76.

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Table 1. Purposes of the Placement Test

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(c, d, e)	(f)	(g)
XL	10	2	1	2	2	2	3	4
L	15	4	3	3	4	3	1	5
M	24	5	1	3	3	2	1	9
S	13	3		2	4	1	1	8

Table 2. Tests Used

	CEEB	CLEP	MLA-L	MLA-M	MLA-L,M	Other
XL	9		3	4	2	8
L	5		3	3	7	16
M	16		8	6	5	13
S	11	1	2	2	1	15

Table 3. Language Skills Tested

	CEEB		CLEP R	MLA				Other Tests							
	LR	R		LR	LRW	LSRW	RW	R	LR	LRW	SW	SRW	LSRW	RW	R
XL	6	3		4			2	3	2	1			1		4
L	3	2		9	2			2	2	6	1				4
M	11	5		10	6		2	1	3	2		6			2
S	8	3	1	2	1	1		1	1	4	1	2	1		4

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Table 4. Placement without a Test

	(a)	(a, d)	(a, b, d)	(d)	(b, d)	(a, b, c, d)	(d, e)	(e)
XL			1	2	1		1	
L		6	3	10		4	5	3
M		9	3	7		6	2	1
S	1	3		4			1	1

Table 5. Equivalency of High School and College Study

	1 year	1.5 years	2 years	3 years
1 semester	39	5	10	
2 or 3 semesters				3
1 quarter	10		2	
2 quarters		1	2	

Table 6. Trends in Placement

	1 year HS	2 years HS	3 years HS	4 years HS
Into I	38 (+16)	15 (+1)		
Into I or II	9 (+2)	14 (+3)	1	
Into II	2 (+7)	9 (+10)	15 (+1)	1
Into II or III		1 (+2)	18 (+14)	2
Into III		2 (+8)	7 (+1)	12
Into III or IV			3 (+1)	16 (+2)
Into IV			(+7)	4 (+8)
Into IV or V				7 (+11)
Into V				4 (+2)

APPENDIX

Survey of Student Placement Procedures

Name of Institution \_\_\_\_\_  
 Department \_\_\_\_\_  
 Language(s) to which the questionnaire applies \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate total enrollment in Fall, 1981  
 First-year courses \_\_\_\_\_; Second-year courses \_\_\_\_\_  
 What is your academic calendar? ( ) quarter; ( ) trimester; ( ) semester; ( ) other  
 Do you have a FL graduate requirement? ( ) yes; ( ) no  
 If "yes," please describe it in terms of the number of courses and credit hours (e.g., 4 courses, 12 credits)

- Do you use a placement test? ( ) yes; ( ) no  
 If "yes," please answer (a) through (e); if "no," please answer (f) and (g).  
 (a) What is your general placement test policy?  
 ( ) Mandatory for all incoming students with HS FL study  
 ( ) Mandatory for students with \_\_\_\_\_ year(s) or more of HS FL study  
 ( ) Mandatory only if the incoming students wish to:

