

ESL DISCIPLINE COUNCIL

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ESL Position Paper on Changes to the Reading Test and Exit from Reading Classes

The ESL Discipline Council takes positions on issues based on the consideration of what is best for ESL students. On testing and assessment issues, the Council wants assurance that tests are culturally and linguistically fair. On all issues, the Council stands firm on demanding what is best for students.

CUNY has announced its intent to stop using the ACT Compass reading exam as an exit test. It is working to develop a uniform exit test that will not have a required minimum score as a necessary condition for exit. Exit from reading will be based in part on the teacher's final grade. The score on the exit exam will only count a yet-to-be-determined percentage toward the computation of the final grade.

The ESL Discipline Council has serious reservations about the new exit exam and the exit standards that are being contemplated for the following reasons:

- Designing a uniform reading test to be used throughout CUNY requires high levels of expertise that reading faculty in CUNY generally do not possess, especially when one of the main groups to be tested is English language learners. Test development should be done by testing experts, who understand second language acquisition and learning.
- Reading tests must be piloted (and revised and re-piloted if necessary) to ensure reliability and validity for ESL students, not to mention the general population. CUNY has not conveyed that it is willing and able to support such an undertaking with financial and personnel resources.
- Reading is the single most important skill/ability for college success. Standards for assuring that a student is ready to tackle college level work need to be rigorous to ensure success. The standard should not be left to the classroom instructor for reasons of bias. A minimum passing score should be required for exit from reading remediation.
- ESL students want reliable and valid tests that inform them if they have the necessary skills to succeed in college. A required minimum passing score on the exit test adds objectivity and reinforces a sense of accomplishment.
- A fair standardized reading test with a required minimum passing score for exit from reading remediation is important for moving into upper level courses and for transfer where texts and discourse are at a college level.
- Without a standard, freshmen composition faculty and others will be faced with a range of abilities and find it difficult to provide instruction that meets the needs of all.
- In CUNY, minimum passing scores exist in writing and mathematics as a necessary condition for exit from remediation. The reading exit exam should continue to follow this pattern.

Second, the University needs to be more forthcoming in how it is carrying out its reading exit test policy.

- English faculty and chairs of other programs that require reading certification have not been apprised of the change in standards in reading.
- Without a required minimum passing score on the exit test, the danger exists that students will be passed undeservedly, setting them up for failure at a future date. Ultimately, this can have a detrimental effect on retention and graduation.
- Finally, chairs of departments where reading programs are housed have not been told or consulted about the policy, which has serious implications for standards, programs, enrollment, workload, and ultimately, faculty.

The ESL Discipline Council recommends hiring experts in test development to develop a standardized, CUNY-wide, preferably computer-adaptive test, piloted on the diverse minority groups in CUNY, to use as a final assessment of whether a student is ready to be a successful college reader. A minimum passing score should be established below which a student would not be exit from developmental reading courses.