TO: WSU Faculty Senate

FROM: Undergraduate Academic Policies Committee

RE: Report and Recommendations Regarding Language Proficiency for Undergraduate International Student Admissions

Date: 13 March 2015

Charges to the committee:

1. To review the minimum standards and test score requirements of international student admission with reference to minimum English proficiency test scores at peer Ohio and comparator institutions and to recommend modifications to the Faculty Senate if appropriate.

Report

The committee reviewed WSU’s proficiency test requirements in comparison to Ohio public comparator institutions. WSU’s undergraduate English language proficiency score requirements are among the lowest in the state. However, arguments can and have been made that WSU’s commitment to access militates against simply raising the proficiency requirement higher in relation to our otherwise generous admission requirements for native speakers. On the other hand, the institution’s avowed commitment to student success and the comparatively harsher outcomes for international students who cannot maintain passing GPAs as compared to the outcomes for their native speaking peers who cannot maintain passing GPAs indicate that attention must be given to balancing access with the possibility of success for this population.

To learn more about the comparative predictive strength of the two most common proficiency tests the committee requested comparative undergraduate retention and graduation rate data on international students admitted with IELTS scores vs. TOEFL scores during the period F2009-F2014 from Institutional Research (Table 1). It appeared that the number of students entering with TOEFL scores was negligible and that TOEFL student success could be reasonably expected with the minimum admissions score. By comparison, it appeared that retention of students entering with minimum IELTS scores of 5.5 was less certain, and that in all but one year, students entering with IELTS scores of above 6 fared better in being retained into the second year than students with IELTS scores of 6 and below. Retention figures into the third and fourth year are more variable, although the data did not show whether students not retained left the university due to failure or simply transferred elsewhere. However, retention figures for IELTS 6 and below never rise above 67% range in the 3rd year and dropped again into the fourth year, whereas retention for all TOEFL scores in the period studied never fell below 86%. Graduation rates for students in the 6 and below category never rise above 30%, compared to an 86% graduation rate for TOEFL students. Even while acknowledging the limited number of TOEFL-admitted students in the sample, this suggested to the committee that the IELTS score was not as reliable predictor of success as the TOEFL score.

The committee then looked more closely at enrollment numbers and retention rates for specific IELTS scores during the period F2010-F2014 (Table 2). In each year studied, the majority of international
students admitted with IELTS scores had the minimum score of 5.5; while only a few had scores above 5.5. As a result, any loss of a single student, for whatever reason, from the 6.0 and above cohort would register as a significant percentage drop in retention. Thus, of students admitted F2011, nine students out of sixty-three with IELTS of 5.5 were not retained into the second year, while only one student out of four with IELTS of above 5.5 was not retained into the second year. Of the F2013 cohort, eleven students out of the seventy-five admitted with IELTS of 5.5 and below were not retained into the second year, while only one student out of fourteen admitted with IELTS of 6.0 or above was not retained. Not surprisingly, a larger number of students with higher English language proficiency scores are retained during the early years when students are engaged in General Education as well as major-related studies.

Aware that there is much anecdotal observation among faculty that students with less language proficiency may resort to academic dishonesty in order to compensate for limited English language reading and writing skill, the committee requested data from the Office of Student Conduct on international undergraduates flagged for academic integrity violations in 2013-14 (Table 3). Of the 49 students referred to OCS for integrity violations during the year studied, 40 (82%) entered WSU on IELTS scores, 7 (14%) with TOEFL scores, and 2 with Other (e.g. transferred no score or LEAP substitution). Of the 40 students admitted with IELTS scores, 36 (90% of IELTS students flagged for violations and 73% of the total number of international students flagged) were admitted with IELTS scores of 5.5 or lower; while only four (10% of IELTS admitted students flagged and 8% of the total number of international students flagged) had scores of 6.0 or higher. This does seem to suggest that either the desperation borne of lack of comprehension of English language instruction and materials OR a language-related lack of understanding of American academic culture is a significant factor in an international student’s likelihood to engage in activity which violates academic standards.

Raising the minimum IELTS score for international student admission seemed to the committee to be the best response to addressing the retention and integrity issues presented above. However, the committee was cognizant that doing so would be contrary to a widely established view of TOEFL and IELTS equivalency that links the TOEFL 61 to the IELTS 5.5. Additionally, the committee was concerned that raising the IELTS score to 6.0 would have a significant negative impact on programs that recruit heavily among international students. Accordingly the committee requested additional data from Institutional Research to ascertain what the impact on international student enrollments would have been for F2014 had an IELTS minimum score of 6.0 been in effect. Of the cohort of eighty-nine international undergraduates admitted in F2014 through Gateway, new first time direct from high school, other first time out of high school more than a year, and transfer, twenty-two (25% of the total) students had IELTS scores of 5.5 and so would not have been admitted. The vast majority of the students affected (17) would have come from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The impact of this drop in admissions would have been felt almost entirely in one college (CECS).

The committee then studied IELTS scoring and learned that the band score is an average of subscores in four equally weighted areas of proficiency: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Subscores range from 1.0 to 9.0. Per the IELTS website, the difference in, for example writing proficiency between scores of 4.0, 5.0, and 6.0 is dramatic (Table 4). While a student with a 5.0 subscore in reading or writing may arguably be successful at academic study in an English language environment, a student with a subscore of 4.0, a “Limited User,” is highly unlikely to be successful at tasks requiring complex language an unfamiliar situations. Yet it is
quite possible, and in fact is frequently the case, for a student to scrape together a 5.5 IELTS band score with writing and/or reading scores of 4.0 or 4.5 if they have compensating high subscores in the arguably less success-predictive areas of speaking and listening. After thoroughly reviewing IELTS’ own characterization of its subscores’ meaning, the committee concluded that the current minimum IELTS score of 5.5 would be a sufficient and effective predictor of student success if controlled for wide variability among subscores.

Recommendations

Thus the committee recommends that the IELTS score requirement be modified to allow admission based on band score of 5.5 with no subscore lower than 5.0. A revised admission policy to that effect has been submitted to the Senate as new business.

It is further recommended that UCIE provide complete score breakdowns for all international students admitted with IELTS for the student’s record and that the subscore requirement be made clear to recruiters and to partner institutions and would-be partner institutions.