

**English as a Second Language/Linguistics**  
**Comparison of Placement by ESL COMPASS and College COMPASS**

**Spring 2008**

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## Introduction

As part of its program review process, the English as a Second Language/ Linguistics Department of Harper College was interested in evaluating the two methods students can use to place into ESL courses. Students can place into ESL courses either by going to the ESL office and taking the ESL COMPASS test and a writing sample, or by being referred to the ESL office after taking the regular college COMPASS test in the Assessment and Testing Center. The ESL department was interested in evaluating how successful students were in their ESL courses based on the placement method used.

The student population for this study was defined as ESL students who were new to college or new transfers to Harper between FY05 and FY07. Harper College E1 files (fall tenth-day enrollment files submitted to ICCB) were used to identify these students. A total of 738 ESL students were new to Harper between FY05 and FY07 (either new to college or new transfer students). Harper's Regent system was then used to obtain assessment score data and transcript information on these students. Restricting our focus to students who had both assessment and transcript records for selected ESL courses yielded a sample of 468 students.

This report is organized into an Introduction, a Results and Discussion section that presents the results in tabular form, and a Summary section that highlights key findings.

## Results and Discussion

As noted above, 468 ESL students were new to Harper between FY05 and FY07 and took an assessment test and at least one ESL course.<sup>1</sup> Very few of these students were placed into ESL courses using the regular college COMPASS test and the ESL writing sample. Only 40 students had only college COMPASS and writing sample scores on file. Most of the remainder (428 students) were placed using ESL COMPASS scores and the writing sample (a small proportion of students had both ESL COMPASS and college COMPASS scores on file; students with both sets of scores were excluded from analysis).

Table 1, below, shows the average assessment scores for these two groups of students as well as the ESL course placement recommended by the average score.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Table 1, those students who were placed using the college COMPASS test tended to earn higher scores on the writing sample (5.38 vs. 3.90); this difference was statistically significant ( $t=5.44$   $df=466$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The students who were placed using

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<sup>1</sup> ESL courses were restricted to those listed in the Spring 2008 Placement Guidelines. Some students had taken other ESL courses not listed in the guidelines.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the Spring 2008 Placement Guidelines provided by the ESL department. Placement guidelines can vary over time, but the most recent guidelines were used simply to provide a common frame of reference.

college COMPASS also appear to have been placed into a higher level of ESL (level IV vs. level I / II).

**Table 1: Average Assessment Scores**

Placement Method	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range	Course Placement
<i>ESL COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=428)</i>				
ESL Reading	67.25	19.13	25-99	Writing I / II (ESL043, ESL044)
ESL Grammar	59.98	17.51	25-99	
ESL Listening	64.95	19.59	24-99	
Writing Sample	3.90	1.67	0-9	
<i>College COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=40)</i>				
COMPASS Reading	59.44	19.21	19-93	Reading IV
Writing Sample	5.38	1.15	3-7	(ESL057)

We next examined the number of ESL courses taken by each group in their first semester of ESL coursework. We specifically focused on the 24 courses noted in the Spring 2008 Placement Guidelines. These courses are listed below in Table 2.

**Table 2: ESL Courses in Spring 2008 Placement Guidelines**

ESL Courses with Placement Recommendations		
ESL026 Grammar I	ESL043 Writing I	ESP071 Business Comm. Skills
ESL024 Reading & Writing I	ESL044 Writing II	ESL057 Reading IV
ESL028 Conversation II	ESL056 Grammar III	ESL067 Writing IV
ESL020 Core II	ESL053 Reading III	ESP061 English for Health Careers
ESL030 Core III	ESL063 Writing III	ESL085 Pronunciation
ESL046 Grammar II	ESL060 Core VI	ESL073 Reading V
ESL034 Reading II	ESL076 Grammar IV	ESL074 Writing V
ESL040 Core IV	ESL079 TOEFL Prep	ESL096 Grammar V

Table 3 shows the average number of ESL courses (restricted to the courses listed in Table 2) for students with each placement method (i.e., ESL COMPASS with writing sample or college COMPASS with writing sample). The difference in number of courses taken was not statistically significant.

**Table 3: Average Number of ESL Courses in First Semester of Enrollment**

Placement Method	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
ESL COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=608)	1.79	0.94	1-6
College COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=43)	1.68	0.83	1-4

Because of the small number of students who were placed into ESL courses using the college COMPASS test, it was impossible to rigorously evaluate the accuracy of

placement for the two placement methods.<sup>3</sup> However, we did examine some overall measures of student success based on placement method. First, we examined student success in their first ESL course. For students who had taken more than one ESL course in their first semester, the first course was defined as the course that was listed first on the Spring 2008 Placement Guidelines. A comparison of student success in their first course is shown in Table 4. The difference in student success was not statistically significant.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 4: Student Success in First ESL Course Based on Placement Method**

Placement Method	Success in First ESL Course <sup>a</sup>	
	Successful	Not successful
ESL COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=428)	79.9%	20.1%
College COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=40)	77.5%	22.5%
<i>Total</i>	<i>79.7%</i>	<i>20.3%</i>

<sup>a</sup> Success is defined as earning a grade of C or better. Grades of D, F, and W are defined as not successful.

Finally, we examined success in all ESL courses taken during a student's first semester of coursework (restricted to the 24 courses listed in Table 2). The success rate of each student can be expressed as a number from 0 to 1, representing the percentage of their courses that they completed successfully. A comparison of success rates is shown in Table 5. Again, the difference in success rates was not statistically significant. Regardless of placement method, students were successful in 78 to 79 percent of the ESL courses they attempted.

**Table 5: Student Success Rates in First Semester of ESL Courses**

Placement Method	Mean	Std. Dev.
ESL COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=428)	0.79	0.39
College COMPASS + Writing Sample (N=40)	0.78	0.39

## Summary

From FY05 to FY07, a total of 468 ESL students (a) were new to Harper, (b) completed a placement test, and (c) enrolled in at least one ESL course listed in the placement guidelines. The great majority (91%) were placed into their courses using the ESL COMPASS and writing sample. The remainder, 40 students, were placed using the college COMPASS and writing sample.

The students who were placed using college COMPASS tended to score higher on their writing samples and appear to have been placed into higher level ESL coursework: on average, those taking ESL COMPASS were placed into level I / II courses, while those taking college COMPASS were placed into level IV courses. However, there were

<sup>3</sup> In order to evaluate accuracy of placement for COMPASS tests, ACT recommends no less than 40 students *per class*. Given the large number of classes (24), the sample size is insufficient to evaluate placement accuracy systematically.

<sup>4</sup> There were also no statistically significant differences when comparing actual grades earned.

no other notable differences between students based on method of placement. Both groups of students took an equivalent number of ESL courses in their first semester (1.7 to 1.8 courses, on average). Both groups of students were successful in their first semester ESL coursework nearly 80 percent of the time.

Because of the small number of students who were placed using college COMPASS, it was not possible to undertake more sophisticated and rigorous analyses. However, based on the analyses conducted, the two placement methods appear to yield very similar results in terms of number of ESL courses taken and student success in their ESL courses. It is interesting to note that the students tested with college COMPASS tended to score higher on their writing sample and were placed into higher level courses. Their proficiency with English does appear to have been somewhat higher than students placed using ESL COMPASS. These students may not have self-identified as ESL students because of their relative proficiency with English.