

Technical Guidance Memorandum OAA-19-01

To: Chief Academic Officers

From: José Luis Cruz, Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost
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Date: September 4, 2019

Subject: Use of the CUNY Proficiency Index for Developmental Education Assignment

Policy Context

Starting in fall 2019 for applicants entering in the spring of 2020, The City University of New York (CUNY) will use a proficiency index to assign students to developmental education; the use of placement tests for this purpose will be discontinued. This change in placement policy was first announced by the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs (OAA) in December 2018, following several years of research and development by OAA staff and consultation with stakeholders across the University and its partner organizations.

As is current policy, applicants who meet certain scores on the SAT, ACT, or New York State Regents exams will be considered proficient and eligible to take credit-bearing courses in the associated subject. Historically, students who had not met those proficiency standards were required to take placement tests at a CUNY college to determine whether they were required to complete developmental education interventions before enrolling in credit-bearing math and English courses. Starting in fall 2019, applicants will no longer take placement tests. Instead, they will be evaluated by a proficiency index that combines overall high school grade point average and subject-specific SAT and Regents scores to determine whether they have a reasonably high probability of passing a credit-bearing course in the subject without any additional support.¹ Students who meet this criterion will be considered proficient. Those who do not will be required to participate in developmental supports before enrolling in or while enrolled in credit-bearing courses.

Additional technical guidance needed to implement this new policy is presented herein.

Mathematics Proficiency

In addition to defining basic proficiency, OAA has historically set a dividing line between top-level and lower-level interventions in math (traditionally elementary algebra and pre-algebra/arithmetic courses). For the spring 2020 term, an index score of 60 or higher will establish proficiency, while a

¹ Note that while ACT benchmark scores may be used to demonstrate proficiency, ACT scores are not yet used in the proficiency index because CUNY has insufficient data on their relationship to performance in CUNY gateway math and English courses. Historically, very few CUNY applicants have submitted ACT scores rather than SAT scores.

score of 40 will be the dividing line between light and deep developmental math need. The corresponding placement guidance is presented in the table below.

Math Proficiency Index	Math Proficiency Status	Placement Guidance
60 or higher	Proficient	Colleges must allow students to enroll in at least one course that satisfies the Pathways Mathematical and Quantitative Reasoning requirement.
Between 40 and 59	Light Developmental Need	Colleges should guide students to targeted USIP interventions and/or corequisite courses. ² Students who score 40 or higher on the math proficiency index shall not be assigned to a pre-algebra course.
Below 40, but proficient in reading/writing	Deep Developmental Need	Colleges should encourage students to enroll in Math Start , which is delivered in varying timeframes from eight weeks to full-semester offerings.

English Proficiency³

For the spring 2020 term, students whose English index is 65 or higher will be deemed English proficient. OAA has not historically defined levels of developmental need in English, instead allowing colleges to determine different levels of need if they found it necessary. This has not changed. However, the table below presents OAA’s placement recommendations for students who fall below an index score of 65.

English Proficiency Index	English Proficiency Status	Placement Guidance
65 or higher	Proficient	Colleges must allow students to enroll in at least one course that satisfies the Pathways English Composition requirement.
Below 65	Developmental Need	Colleges should consider guiding students to USIP or a CUNY Start Part-time Reading/Writing intervention if they are able to participate in a pre-matriculation intervention, or enroll in an English composition corequisite course.

² For guidelines on targeting USIP interventions, see the [April 26, 2018 memorandum](#). OAA will issue additional guidance on using the proficiency index to target USIP interventions.

³ Students who are proficient in English will receive proficiency milestones for both reading and writing in CUNYfirst.

Students Not Proficient in Math and English

The table below presents OAA’s placement recommendations for students assigned to developmental education in **both** math and English. Options are presented in order of strongest positive potential student outcomes.

Recommendation	Intervention	Placement Guidance
Strongly Recommended	CUNY Start or Math Start	<p>Until corequisite courses are more widely available and we have a better understanding of which students are best served in such courses, CUNY Start and Math Start should be the first choice for students who have the greatest level of developmental need. Both programs have well-documented success rates helping the least-prepared students become skills proficient faster and achieve higher pass rates in gateway math and English courses than similarly-skilled students who start in traditional remedial courses.</p>
Strongly Recommended	Corequisite courses in math and English	<p>If students with deep developmental needs cannot enroll in CUNY Start or Math Start, OAA recommends that colleges offer them access to corequisite courses in English and math, rather than enroll them in traditional prerequisite remedial courses.</p> <p>Although CUNY has historically assigned students to two different levels of developmental math courses, evidence gathered at CUNY and in other systems demonstrates consistently that even students with the deepest developmental math needs have a better chance of eventually earning math credit when they enroll in corequisite courses than when they start in prerequisite remedial courses, especially multi-course remedial sequences.</p> <p>Furthermore, in fall 2019, a new semester-long Math Start offering will be piloted at two colleges (Bronx and Kingsborough). This model will allow students who have deep math needs to participate in Math Start over the course of the semester while also taking some credit courses as non-degree students with support from ASAP. We expect that in the near future there will be opportunities for other associate-granting colleges to adopt this model.</p>
Not Recommended	Traditional prerequisite remedial courses	CUNY intends to phase out traditional stand-alone non-credit remedial courses and replace them with corequisite math or English courses, or high-quality,

Recommendation	Intervention	Placement Guidance
Not Recommended	Multi-course remedial sequences	targeted interventions prior to matriculation (i.e., CUNY Start, Math Start, USIP). Indeed, a recent randomized controlled trial with CUNY students ⁴ finds significant differences in outcomes between traditional remedial courses and college-level math courses with corequisite support. Corequisite courses are found to increase momentum toward a degree; reduce the number of courses needed to pass college math, thus preserving financial aid eligibility for a longer time; increase the number of students that take and pass advanced math courses; and result in almost 50% more students obtaining an associate degree in three years, while also decreasing racial/ethnic graduation rate gaps.

English as a Second Language (ESL) Placement

Per the recommendation of the ESL Discipline Council, for spring 2020, colleges will administer the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) to determine proficiency for students flagged via the admissions process as potential ESL students who cannot be assessed through the English proficiency index.⁵ In addition, colleges may also administer the CATW to students identified via admissions as potential ESL students who have an English proficiency index value below the cut score of 65 in order to determine their placement into the ESL sequence. Passing the CATW will signify that the student is proficient in both reading and writing — there will be no separate reading proficiency test. There are no changes to scoring practices or ESL placement recommendations: Scoring of the CATW exams for ESL purposes will continue to be done by the four borough grading sites. Placement into the ESL sequence, including the [CUNY Language Immersion Program \(CLIP\)](#), will continue to be determined by each college, following their current practices.

The ESL Discipline Council will continue working with OAA to develop better ESL placement tools. More guidance on placing applicants in future academic terms will be released once it is finalized.

⁴ Logue, A. W., Douglas, D., & Watanabe-Rose, M. (2019). Corequisite mathematics remediation: Results over time and in different contexts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. First published online May 20, 2019, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0162373719848777>

⁵ Freshman applicants who have spent at least six months or more in an institution where English is not the primary language of instruction are flagged as potential ESL via the CUNY admissions process, but not all these applicants will be required to take the CATW for placement. Some ESL applicants will be proficient based on CUNY’s exemption criteria on the English SAT and Regents exams. Applicants who do not meet exemption benchmarks, but have valid English Regents exam scores, will receive an English proficiency index value. Those whose English proficiency index value is 65 or higher will be deemed proficient. Applicants who have been flagged as potential ESL by admissions and have not demonstrated English proficiency through either the benchmark scores or the proficiency index will be identified as needing to take the CATW for ESL placement via the same CATSNeed report that provided this information for fall 2019.

Identification of Students Recommended for Math Start, CUNY Start, or ESL Testing

Students who fit the profile for either Math Start or CUNY Start will be identified in CUNYfirst so that staff who are involved in the onboarding of new students can refer them appropriately. Students who require ESL testing to determine proficiency will also be identified in CUNYfirst. More details about where the program identifications can be found in CUNYfirst will come in early fall.

Please consult Frequently Asked Questions OAA-19-01: CUNY Developmental Education Policy Changes for more information about the proficiency index. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact CUNY Director of Policy Research Sarah Truelsch at sarah.truelsch@cuny.edu.