

TAKING STOCK OF CUNY ESL: WHAT A SURVEY OF ESL FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS SAYS ABOUT THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

A Collaborative Report

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This report provides a summary of a survey of CUNY ESL faculty and administrators in an attempt to assess CUNY ESL programs' achievements and to offer an insight into current challenges. In the new millennium, with educational, financial, political, and linguistic concerns on the rise, taking stock of where we are in English as a second language instruction in higher education and planning for the future are at once prudent and pressing.

Keywords: ESL in higher education, multilingual education, public university admissions policies, public university language instruction

The City University of New York (CUNY) is the largest urban educational institution in the United States, serving close to a quarter million New Yorkers (according to the CUNY website, www.cuny.edu; wiki), many of whom are recent immigrants. The University's mission (CUNY website, current) is both complex and politically driven, as most institutions funded through the state and the city recognize. The meeting of the educational, linguistic, financial, and political needs of the University may appear to be—at times—an almost unrealistic task. With close to 70 percent of students being drawn from the New York City public school system (City University of New York Master Plan 2012–2016, p. 61), the educational challenges are only growing, in terms of both reading and writing in English and in general college readiness. Furthermore, almost half of New York City public school students report speaking a language other than English at home (New York City Independent Budget Office, 2013, p. 7). The public school ethnic makeup in 2013 was reported to be Asian 15.7% and Hispanic 40.2% (the rest is shared by Black, mixed race, and white students) (p. 6). If one takes into consideration the fact that “students in New York City public schools overwhelmingly come from lower-income households, and more than 79% qualify for free or reduced cost school meals . . .” (p. 7), the picture of students coming into CUNY as entry-level freshmen becomes much more complex and challenging.

Clearly, with this type of social inequality in the city on the one hand, and with 193 languages spoken on CUNY Campuses and close to 25% of immigrant students being cited as English language learners on the other (CUNY Master Plan, 2012-2016), a more relevant question may be: Can *any* institution find the way to serve the needs of this type of diversity? And yet, CUNY tried. In 1945, Queens College was the first in the city and the second in the nation to institute ESL instruction by establishing the English Language Institute there (Queens English Language Institute, current website). Over the years, some governors prioritized equal educational opportunities more than did others. For example, Governor Nelson Rockefeller showed his full commitment to the idea of the University having “vital importance as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged in the City of New York (New York State Legislature, 1961, Article 125, Section 6201; see City University of New York website).

The University has tried to help diverse interests converge in the betterment of the future of New Yorkers by instituting various programs for its most financially and educationally disadvantaged students (e.g., open admissions, 1970, and the pioneering efforts of SEEK and College Discovery are among some such program initiatives). ESL college programs and the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP)¹ are the two language initiatives the University created to aid second language students. These initiatives produced varied success rates, in part due to complex educational factors, and have been as costly to the University as have been remedial and other developmental programs.

However, in recent years, ESL practitioners across CUNY have been discussing the decrease in the number of services provided to their nonnative and/or English as a second language speakers (ESL).² Many of these discussions occurred during the CUNY ESL Discipline Council meetings (ESL Discipline Council Minutes, 2012-2015). In an attempt to bring some clarity to the ESL admissions situation, the NYS TESOL *Journal* Editorial Office created a collaborative opportunity to conduct a survey of current ESL CUNY faculty and some present and past administrators.

What follows is a report on the survey, conducted in the fall 2015.

Project Rationale

New York City, with its history as a port of entry for immigrants from all over the world, has, for more than forty years, been addressing its City University's educational and linguistic needs in order to meet the challenges faced by its immigrant populations. However, CUNY students include not only the most recent immigrant arrivals, but also those who are second (or even third) generation, born in the United States but raised in multilingual environments and who are called "Generation 1.5" students. The level of success in attending to these immigrant students' educational needs has depended on many factors, including the impact of changing political climates and the availability of state and city funding.

The University has had both its strong and challenging days financially. ESL instruction was initially offered by all CUNY colleges, and this continued during the advent of open admissions (CUNY policy set in 1970 to admit all students who apply to college, including those who failed the CUNY entrance tests). However, as funds became scarcer (during the late seventies/early eighties) and the local politicians' support weaker (in the nineties), the needs of ESL students became less important in comparison to other pressing issues in the state. In addition, each University chancellor has had a different vision for the future of CUNY, so the strategies to address ESL needs differed as well. Some colleges endorsed "sheltered instruction," where ESL students were grouped together to study English. Other colleges began placing ESL students together with native speakers (known in the literature as mainstreaming). However, academic development was not as fast as the University perhaps needed it to be. Thus, the initiative to move toward mainstreaming ESL students grew stronger. Among CUNY ESL language specialists there were those who believed that teaching content and language at the same time made better pedagogical sense.

On the University level, there seemed to have been a move toward more mainstreaming (Cochran, 2002). An illustrative publication funded by CUNY is the CUNY ESL handbook *Into the Academic Mainstream: Guidelines for Teaching Language Minority Students* (Cochran, 1992). Originally intended to assist faculty in the college mainstream instruction to understand the needs of its English language learners (ELLs) and work with them appropriately, it was distributed to all counselors, administrators, and mainstream faculty at all CUNY colleges. It was a thorough guide to "bridge courses" and content-based instruction "because language learning and content learning are simultaneous processes in the human mind" (p. 3). The handbook's introduction concluded by stating that

These are challenging times for CUNY. The diversity of our students presents us with a golden opportunity to integrate their rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds into our classes. Multiculturalism is an asset, not a liability, a fact to which most urban educators bear ready witness. Because of the presence of ESL students, classes are richer and more complex, albeit more demanding. . . . A challenge to be sure, but most assuredly not a negative one. (p. 3)

A lot has happened at CUNY since 1992. Certainly, many developments resulted in educational successes. However, it seems that the support network and resources for ESL student population (be it in

sheltered or mainstreamed classrooms) has been gradually diminishing in size and importance. Even with this knowledge in mind, it is still surprising to find only one short paragraph related to ESL in the 145-page CUNY Master Plan for 2012–2016, simply titled “English as a Second Language” (City University of New York, 2012, p. 68). With so many thousands of students self-identifying as speakers of one or more different languages at home (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment reports fluctuate between 50 to 64 per cent), at least some acknowledgement of the multilingual challenges for such students in English-only environments would seem reasonable at the very least and required at the very best. Clearly, though, the focus has shifted elsewhere.

Getting complete and accurate data related to the number of those students who are foreign-born, second or third generation, i.e., “Generation 1.5,” and of multilingual speakers is not an easy task. In the invited article in this issue, an attempt was made to sort out some of the admissions data in a more objective way (using statistics made available by the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, among other sources). In contrast, this report attempts to provide more ESL faculty- and staff-perceived reasons for ESL instructional and programmatic changes because they (the faculty and staff) are the people who are most frequently in close contact with ESL/multilingual students and would have a first-hand sense of enrollment and student needs. By reporting the survey results, it is our hope to create new opportunities for discussing the ESL-related issues across CUNY colleges, from educational and administrative programs to the Chancellor’s office.

Survey Instrument: The Questionnaire

At the onset of this project, we planned to personally interview a few long-standing CUNY colleagues about their view of ESL at CUNY. We soon realized, however, that an oral interview might not be sufficient so we created a structured tool, i.e., a questionnaire, and sent it to those colleagues who agreed to participate in the survey. The most pertinent selection criteria for identifying the respondents were the following: length of service at CUNY (20 or more years), teaching experience (in both two- and four-year colleges), administrative roles held, and involvement in curriculum and policy creation and implementation.

We developed the questionnaire collaboratively, crafting the items and obtaining peer feedback. The final version of the questionnaire used for this project reflects feedback from a few colleagues (peers) who helped us fine-tune the document (see appendix for the final version of the questionnaire and the accompanying letter of invitation). This was a two-step process. First, we contacted potential respondents via email. Once they agreed to participate, we sent them (again via email) the questionnaire. The identities of the respondents have been kept anonymous. The relatively modest number of completed questionnaires (12) was dictated by the narrow specifications set for respondents’ profiles and years of service.

While analyzing the questionnaires, common threads emerged for each of the four questions. We share those threads in the section below.

Summary of Findings

In order to best present the respondents’ views, we chose to provide summaries of the thrust of the responses. The summaries are listed by question number.

Summary of Responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the respondents was what they believed were the key guiding principles of the early CUNY ESL mission³ (i.e., CUNY’s commitment to ESL, bilingual, and multilingual students and the teaching of the same at its colleges). Before we share the responses, a note of explanation is needed here. Currently, the CUNY mission makes no mention of language and linguistic minorities or ESL students beyond the said one paragraph ([CUNY Master Plan, 2012-2016](#), p. 68). However, the tab on the CUNY Portal “Mission and History” does quote the 1961 legislature when Governor Rockefeller signed CUNY into law, stressing its mission to serve the city’s *diverse* populations (emphasis ours). That is presently the only actual guiding principle readily available online.

There was an overwhelming consensus among the respondents that in its early days (here understood to mean in the seventies and the eighties), CUNY as an institution was sincerely committed to providing cutting-edge pedagogy to its increasingly linguistically diverse student population. But, on departmental and faculty levels, the division between those who taught English and those who taught ESL was beginning to grow. For example, one respondent recalls a literature instructor asking: “How can you teach these [ESL] students?” Still, despite some reports of mixed perceptions held by some mainstream faculty regarding ESL teaching, all respondents were in agreement about the CUNY administrators’ commitment to meeting the needs of English language learners. An obvious example of CUNY’s early commitment was the establishment in 1973 of the CUNY ESL Council, which evolved into the present-day CUNY ESL Discipline Council.

Summary of Responses to Question 2

In response to whether and how that initial commitment to teaching ESL changed and/or evolved, again there was consensus on the perception that support for teaching ESL has diminished sharply. A number of critical developments were cited as contributing to this decrease. These included:

- Restriction of remediation⁴ courses at four-year colleges (ESL was unjustly swept under this category⁵);
- Ending of developmental⁶ course policy at four-year colleges;
- The establishment of CLIP, which reduced the number of ESL students enrolled in academic courses across CUNY;
- The removal of credit from ESL courses—which, in addition to the expense, created the unjust view of ESOL students as “second-class students”; and
- With the 1993 election of Rudolph Giuliani as the mayor of New York City, CUNY ESL instruction was scaled back, leading to the creation of new educational services.

Summary of Responses to Question 3

This question posed: How have the various changes (CUNY leadership, political, and other changes) in the past twenty or so years affected CUNY’s ability to provide the needed services for what appears to be almost two thirds of student population who typically self-identify as ESL (bilingual or multilingual)? Changes in CUNY leadership, political evolution, funding of programs, and budgetary cutbacks were all collectively identified as contributing factors in the reduction in support of and emphasis on ESL programs in the late 1990s.

But in addition to political influences, some respondents cited the changes in University tenure and promotion requirements as adding to the decreasing value placed on being an ESL instructor. In general terms, “the measure of success for full-time faculty is now, more than ever, based on the promotion of one’s individual career through graduate center teaching and grants, publications, and some nonteaching activities. ESL teaching in this equation is invisible,” claimed one veteran professor (four-year college faculty member).

As is to be expected, an additional factor noted is the shift in the ESL population (based on places of immigration origin) and the ever-increasing diversity of English language learners’ needs. An example of this challenge is Generation 1.5, students born and educated by public K–12 schools in the United States to immigrant parents with whom they speak their native language at home. These students are lacking in Standard English skills, their writing evidences ESL-type errors, and they may have other educational and literacy needs. Meeting so many different language demands within any existing university structure or any college classroom is a tremendous challenge.

Summary of Responses to Question 4

The final question was in two parts and asked respondents to share both (a) their personal vision for the future of this population at CUNY (ESL/bilingual and multilingual) and (b) their understanding of the institutional vision (CUNY’s ESL vision for its ESL programs).

As could be expected, the instructors’ personal visions varied, and their hopes ranged as well. Some expressed a yearning for the restoration of the ESL field back to the level it enjoyed in its earlier days,

where ESL students' academic needs were attended to and the faculty teaching ESL were recognized for their professional work. Others acknowledged that ESL instruction is inextricably linked to content instruction as two sides of the same coin—i.e., language learning and content learning are simultaneous processes of the human mind. In other words, one acquires language on the way to learning something else. Therefore, they claimed, language instruction is not a skill to be taught separately before students are mainstreamed. Others expressed the desire for more ESL-designated courses, also addressing "Generation 1.5" and offering them more learning communities programs.

In responding to the question about one's view of the CUNY's ESL institutional vision, the consensus was that CUNY's vision became narrower over time. The overwhelming wish of the respondents seems to be for CUNY to acknowledge in a more constructive way the existence of ESL students, see them in the context of their language educational needs, and provide them with the support they truly need to be able to compete with their native speaker counterparts in the real world of work.

Conclusion

The three quotations we cite in the conclusion seem to communicate a sense of disappointment in the current state of education of our nonnative speakers of English—the future professionals of our city. The first respondent states, "After decades of teaching, I believe CUNY has [compromised its original core values]" (a community college tenured faculty member). The second takes the view that "The increased funding for new programs such as CUNY Start demonstrates that there is no institutional will to make language teaching the responsibility of faculty across the curriculum" (a TESOL professor at a four-year college). And the third notes: ". . . the emphasis now is helping students with high academic credentials. While this is a worthy objective, I am concerned that it is at the expense of needed resources for the benefit of those less prepared . . . [through] no fault of their own" (a former CUNY trustee).

In short, the feelings expressed in these three quotations illustrate the range we found in the survey related to CUNY's size, diversity, and instructional priorities. For some, the despair is muted; for others it is almost too much to bear. There is also a notable sense of urgency to remedy this situation.

In closing, these responses make one think back to the words of Townsend Harris, CUNY's founding father, now memorialized on the City College's website under College Mission: "Open the doors to all. Let children of the rich and the poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct and intellect". Once wide open, the doors seem increasingly less so today.

Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our gratitude to all our respondents for their time and willingness to assist in this project as well as for their thoughtful responses. We also acknowledge the following limitations to the survey: the size of survey sample and complexities of admission policies, which have not been discussed here in detail.

Appendix



September 21, 2015

Dear Colleagues,

As Managing Editor of [NYS TESOL Journal](#), I have been working on the upcoming issue that would provide a few articles engaging both a retrospective and a perspective on the current state of ESOL at CUNY. In this capacity, I have invited Effie Papatzikou Cochran to author a feature on the aforementioned topic. We both decided to make it an interview-based contribution. Thus, the questions in the survey below (see page 2) have been composed to facilitate the information-gathering process.

In broad strokes here is our interest: in the past twenty some years, there have been many changes at CUNY, most notably constant tuition increases and the slow but steady decrease of ESL students at most if not all CUNY colleges. We feel it is a good time to take stock of things: where are we now, where have we been and what is a way forward? I hope, together with Effie, that your contribution can help us gain a better understanding of current ESOL trends at CUNY and also provide some insights into where the future may take us along with our students.

Please answer the following four questions as generously as possible. We would like to be able to form a larger picture of ESOL at CUNY.

Thank you so much in advance for your time and valuable input.

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CUNY Survey

Please read all questions first to gain an idea where the survey is heading.

1. In retrospect, what do you believe were the key guiding principles of the early CUNY ESOL mission (i.e., CUNY's commitment to ESL, bilingual and multilingual students and the teaching of the same at its colleges)?

Please list those guiding principles and /or explain them in as much detail as you can. Feel free to use as much space as you need. (We would appreciate any materials you could share with us or bring to our attention.)

2. Has that initial commitment to teaching ESOL changed and/or evolved? If so, how?

3. How have the various changes (CUNY leadership, political and other changes) in the past twenty or so years affected CUNY's ability to provide the needed services for the claimed almost 2/3 of student population who typically self-identify as ESL, bilingual or multilingual?

4. Please tell us:

a) What is your personal vision for the future of this population at CUNY (ESL, bilingual and multilingual)?

b) What is your understanding of the institutional vision (CUNY's ESOL vision)?

Please feel free to present your specific views, and in doing so please explain, give examples, or quote others.

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Notes

¹CLIP, or the CUNY Language Immersion Program, established in 2000, is a special language institute that provides full-time language instruction for a total of 25 hours per week. Students who leave CLIP and pass the CUNY admissions test can then begin their college coursework.

²English as a second language speakers (ESL) is a term widely used in the United States. However, many institutions also use English to speakers of other languages. In this article, ESL is used as a term utilized at CUNY.

³As a point of clarification, the questionnaire that was sent out did cite any specific CUNY mission statements. Instead, it implicitly asked the respondents to work with what they have known/perceived/understood the CUNY mission to be regarding its ESL students over time.

⁴“Remediation” is a term used for placement purposes at CUNY. It refers to students who need to bring their education to college-readiness levels.

⁵ESL is considered part of the language-learning process, different from a remedial educational effort to bring students to college-readiness levels.

⁶“Developmental” is here used to mean students who need to develop their reading, writing, and math skills to reach college readiness.



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