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**When Placement is Irrelevant: A Counselor's Dilemma**

Counselors help explain AEC policy to students. One of the most important policies at the AEC is the placement policy. Placement depends on different factors such as proficiency test scores, previous course work, grades, and teacher recommendations. The AEC considers these factors to move students up to the next level or pass them out of the program. In general, students are ecstatic when they pass, happy when they move up and less happy when they don't. On rare occasions, counselors come across a situation where this general rule does not apply. Placement is irrelevant.

As a counselor in spring 2012, I met with a Chinese student who made good progress. She advanced to ESLP 110 (plus grammar lab) from three 4<sup>th</sup> level classes. She had scores over 140 in Speaking/Listening, Grammar for Communication, and Reading/Writing. This is a classic fifth level, ESLP 110 student.

The student was significantly agitated. She couldn't stop crying even though she would only need to take one AEC class and a grammar lab. She continued to cry but said she had no problem with her placement. She was so upset because her proficiency test score for S/L dropped a few points. Her other scores improved.

She wanted to retest in Listening based on the small drop in her score and the A- she received in the class. It is AEC policy to consider a retest for those who get good grades but whose proficiency score drops for that skill. For this student, however, a retest in Listening wouldn't affect her placement.

I explained that even if she passed out of Listening from a retest, she still had to take ESLP 110 plus grammar lab because she still needed Reading/Writing and Grammar for Communication.<sup>1</sup> That didn't seem to matter to her because she accepted her placement. Her placement was not the issue.

Something was going on. Usually when a student progresses to the next level, understands his/her placement, and is happy with that placement, the counselor's work is done. From the perspective of the AEC, there is no problem. In this case, however, there was most definitely a problem.

The problem was that the student's parents saw a slight drop in their daughter's S/L score and told her they were going to bring her home because of her lower score. Her parents threatened to bring her back home based on a good solid score that had no negative effect on her placement at the AEC. I imagine her parents didn't see it that way, although that is exactly what it looks like from the AEC point of view.

The student tried to explain to her parents how the AEC works. She was in 5<sup>th</sup> level, the highest level. She could get an A or A- and not even have to take the proficiency test. She has a record of A's and A-'s at the AEC, so it was certainly possible for her to finish her English language requirements next semester. None of this mattered to her parents.

I sat and listened.

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<sup>1</sup> This policy has changed since the writing of this essay. The change in policy is not because of this student's case.

The student eventually explained to me that Chinese parents typically focus on test scores. Her parents saw a drop in one test score and nothing else mattered. The parents were not primarily concerned with the level their daughter was placed in. Their primary concern was the score, a number. In contrast, the AEC's primary concerns are placement into levels and moving students quickly through the program. Test scores help us place the students but we also consider previous AEC course work, grades, and teacher recommendations. In this particular case, the slight drop in the Listening test score was not affecting placement, so it had little meaning in this context.

I needed to consult with Sandra Issa, so I asked the student to wait a couple of minutes in the counseling cubicle while I talked over her situation with a colleague. Counselors often consult on cases because we get unusual or unique cases every semester.

### The Dilemma

So, what does the responsible AEC counselor do? On the one hand the decision is easy to make. We do not retest the student based on complaints or threats from parents. We also don't retest if the student can't benefit from the new result.

To add to an easy "no retest" decision, we could evoke the Floodgate argument, which is; 'if you make an exception for one person, then everyone in that same situation will also want the exception. The Floodgates would open and there would be a mad rush to retest.' No one wants a "mad rush."

We had to consider a retest, however, because it is AEC policy to retest a student who did well in a skill but lost points on the proficiency test in that skill. In addition, the Floodgate argument was weak in this case because the situation was rare. In thirty-seven years of collective experience in counseling at the AEC, we can't recall any counseling cases where all four apply: (a) the student presents with extreme fear and anxiety; (b) the student is content with his/her placement; (c) the student is eligible to retest in one skill but the retest would be irrelevant to placement; (d) the student wants to retest for reasons other than placement.

The decision to retest hinged on whether a retest would benefit the student or not. To make our call, we had to re-examine what we mean by a student "benefitting" from a retest.

From the perspective of the AEC, a student can benefit if the test score can possibly place the student in a higher level or out of the program. There is, however, at least one other way a student can benefit from a retest. For this particular student, a retest would be a chance to improve her Listening score, which would greatly reduce undue fear and anxiety, undue from the perspective of the AEC. We had to weigh the immense meaning this particular test score had to the student against its relative insignificance to the student's placement.

After additional deliberation, we finally made the call to retest this student because the student met the conditions and would "benefit" from the retest. To this particular student, the benefit would be just as significant as moving up a level or exiting the program. The student's severe anxiety over an "irrelevant" test score would be an unnecessary aggravating factor in her continuing work at the AEC. We could temporarily alleviate the student's severe anxiety quickly and simply.

We did what we thought was in the best interest of this particular student at this particular time. Another lower score might begin the cycle again, but at that point we would have to offer advice or some other kind of assistance because there is no policy of retesting a retest.

As we continue to operate according to our placement and retest policies, once in a while, special situations arise. These special situations are most interesting about counseling at the AEC. These situations can also make for dilemmas that require policy, collaborative judgment calls, and a willingness to consider the student's point of view even when it does not appear to affect the student's placement or progress through our program.

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