To: Graduate Departments  
From: Peggy Heidish, ICC  
Re: Requiring TOEFL for nonnative English speakers with degrees from US institutions  
Date: January 22, 2014

A number of departments have asked us for advice about whether or not they should require TOEFL for nonnative English speaking applicants (NNES) who have a degree (graduate or undergraduate) from a college or university in the US or other English speaking countries. Based on our 27 years of experience both in training and testing thousands of NNES students, I strongly caution against waiving the TOEFL for this cohort of applicants, whether international, permanent residents or US citizens. It is a mistake to assume that previous academic work in the US can verify "fluency". Consider the following:

- Over the years, we have worked with a number of NNES students who, despite years in US institutions (including having undergraduate or graduate degrees from Carnegie Mellon), have been unable to pass the ITA test or still need significant support for speaking or writing. This may seem surprising to the layperson, but not to language instructors. Many students with weak language skills make little progress with English during the course of their degrees because they report:
  - Systematically avoiding classes requiring written or spoken English
  - Spending most of their time on research or quantitative projects
  - Socializing primarily with speakers of their native language.

- The institutions that applicants are coming from may have had much lower TOEFL cut-scores than Carnegie Mellon; students may have entered those programs with very low fluency and, unless the institution had significant language support, may graduate with the same low fluency.

- Unlike newly arrived international students, NNES students with US degrees will not improve significantly during the first semester of language exposure in your department. Students who have been studying in the US for several years have likely reached the level of fluency possible for them without further language training (in fact, their language weakness may even have “fossilized” if they were not in language support programs).

- Our own undergraduate Admissions Office requires TOEFL for all NNES applicants even if they attended high school in the US (and note that it is not unusual for students from this group to need help with English skills).

- At Carnegie Mellon, most graduate programs require the TOEFL for all NNES applicants. In fact, several departments that used to waive the test for applicants with US degrees reinstated language screening after recognizing that some of these students arrived on campus with serious language gaps.

- Outside of CMU, many other universities routinely require TOEFL for NNES students with US degrees (and that includes degrees from Carnegie Mellon).

Given the serious consequences if a NNES student begins academic work without the needed level of fluency, and the small investment required to take the TOEFL test, it does not seem worth the risk to waive the test requirement.