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# PLAYING THE TOEFL GAME AT SCSU

SARAH VINZ

## 1.0 Statement of the problem

The United States (US) has long been ranked as the number one destination country for international students. A record 723,277 international students studied in the US during the academic year 2010-2011 alone, representing approximately 3.5 percent of all enrollments at the country's universities and colleges (IIE, 2011b). The benefits institutions stand to reap from enrolling students from other countries are numerous, including a culturally diverse campus that will foster greater understanding and tolerance (Lee, 2008), increased tuition revenues (particularly seeing as international students are often charged more than domestic students) (Dessoiff, 2010), and a larger pool of research and teaching assistants (Obst & Forster, 2005). These institutions must take care, however, to ensure that in their quest to increase international enrollments, they do not begin to admit international applicants who may not truly be prepared to be successful in the context of an American post-secondary institution. This is particularly true in the case of applicants who are non-native English speakers (NNES). Misjudgments or errors made as to the level of academic English proficiency can be detrimental for both the institution and students in question, as evidenced by a recent scandal at Dickinson State University (DSU) in North Dakota. Five students from China who had been accepted to study at the university and relocated to Dickinson were ultimately dismissed after failing to pass an institutional English proficiency exam (Martin, 2012). After a subsequent report revealed that DSU has awarded several hundred international students diplomas despite insufficient coursework or English proficiency, the university has come under review by several government and accreditation agencies. A staff suicide and at least one firing have also been linked to the scandal (Associated Press, 2012).

Although many institutions allow proficiency in academic English to be proven in a variety of ways, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) appears to be considered the "gold standard" among university administrators. Indeed, the exam is currently accepted by upwards of 5,200 institutions in the US. The organization responsible for developing and administering the TOEFL, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), does not, however, indicate "passing" or "failing" scores or provide institutional recipients with concrete guidelines as to how exam scores should be interpreted (ETS, 2010). Instead, ETS encourages institutions to determine for themselves how scores can best be utilized in making admissions decisions within their local contexts. This has resulted in institutions adopting a variety of minimum cut-off scores for admission to their programs. Internet research reveals that the minimum scores currently being required for undergraduate admissions range from sixty-one (as required by St. Cloud State University, or SCSU; see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/internationaladmissions/apply/englishProficiency.asp>) to 104 (as required by the University of Chicago; see <https://internationalaffairs.uchicago.edu/students/prospective/toefl.shtml>).<sup>1</sup> Does such a substantial difference in score requirements actually indicate a correspondingly large discrepancy

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<sup>1</sup> All scores relate to the internet-based TOEFL, which is currently being used by ninety-six percent of test-takers and will soon be the sole test format available (see [http://www.ets.org/toefl/important\\_update/pbt\\_ending](http://www.ets.org/toefl/important_update/pbt_ending)).

in academic English standards, or could something else be at play? It is posited in this paper that the minimum TOEFL score an institution requires is actually the outcome of a language policy game being played between individuals and groups with a stake in the outcome, ranging from the president of the university to international applicants. This hypothesis will be tested by applying the Predictioneer's Model to the situation regarding undergraduate admissions at SCSU, following methodology proposed by (Koffi, 2012).

## 2.0 Description of the game

This game is being played to determine where SCSU will place the English proficiency bar (in the form of a minimum TOEFL score requirement) for international NNES applicants to undergraduate degree programs.<sup>2</sup> Where this bar is placed stands to affect two things: a) the overall number of international applicants being admitted to the university, and b) the level of *in situ* ESL support the university will be required to offer NNES students. It could be characterized as a cooperative “non-zero-sum game,” as the players are working together to find a solution that will be beneficial to those with common interests instead of competing for a single payoff (Koffi, 2012, p.48).

## 3.0 Players

The players of this game can be divided into two broad categories: those currently affiliated with the university and those not. The former can be broken down into five subgroups: executives, administrators, professors, graduate teaching assistants, and matriculated students. The latter consists largely of applicants to SCSU, with the addition of ETS officials. A full list is contained in Table 3.1 below.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted SCSU currently allows incoming students to demonstrate their English proficiency in eight different ways, *inter alia* a satisfactory TOEFL (see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/internationaladmissions/apply/englishProficiency.asp>). For the purposes of this paper, however, only TOEFL scores will be focused on.

**Table 3.1 Players**

No.	Players
<b>A. SCSU affiliates</b>	
<b>Executives:</b>	
1	President
2	Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs
3	Vice President for Administrative Affairs
4	Vice President for Student Life and Development
5	Associate Vice President for International Studies
<b>Administrators/staff</b>	
6	Center for International Studies
7	Office of Admissions
8	College English as a Second Language (C-ESL) Program
9	Intensive English Center (IEC)
<b>Professors</b>	
10	Technical/quantitative departments
11	Qualitative departments
12	English Department
13	English Department; Director, Teaching ESL (TESL) Program
14	English Department; Director, C-ESL Program
15	English Department; Director, IEC
<b>Graduate assistants, TESL Program</b>	
16	C- ESL Program
17	IEC
<b>Current students</b>	
18	Native English speakers, domestic
19	Native English speakers, international
20	Non-native English speakers, domestic
21	Non-native English speakers, international
<b>B. Non-SCSU affiliates</b>	
22	Applicants (Native English speakers, domestic)
23	Applicants (Native English speakers, international)
24	Applicants (Non-native English speakers, domestic)
25	Applicants (Non-native English speakers, international)
26	ETS officials

#### 4.0 Strategies used in the game

The various categories of players in this game have different goals, which they will try to ensure are met by using different strategies. For instance, SCSU's executive leadership (which includes players one through five as listed above) has demonstrated a strong commitment to the increased internationalization of the university, as outlined in the university's draft "International Vision and Plan" (SCSU International Vision Task Force, 2011). Increasing international student levels is a key component of this strategy. During Fall Semester 2011, international enrollments across all undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree programs stood at 1,085,

representing 6.3 percent of SCSU's total student body (S. Boehm, personal communication, December 15, 2011). Recent data has ranked SCSU an impressive twelfth in international enrollments among all master's institutions nationwide (IIE, 2011a). An important indication of the university's commitment to increasing international enrollments is its "Academic and Cultural Sharing Scholarship," which grants all matriculated international students who meet a modest set of requirements resident tuition rates (see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/internationalstudents/students/scholarships/ACS.asp>). Most institutions have taken the opposite tactic and charge international students much higher tuition (Dessoiff, 2010).

It could be surmised that much of SCSU's professorate would take a similar position, as the presence of international students enriches classroom discussions and broadens student perspectives. On a practical level, ensuring a steady stream of students from overseas also helps to stabilize overall enrollment levels and therefore leads to greater job security for faculty members. It could be argued, however, that not all professors would play the TOEFL game in the same way. Professors in more qualitative disciplines (such as the social sciences; see player eleven above) may place greater demands on their students in relation to reading and writing, and therefore wish that incoming NNES students are highly proficient in academic English. Professors in more technical or quantitative fields (including engineering and computer science; see player ten above) may not, on the other hand, require such advanced proficiency. In a study undertaken in relation to NNES engineering students, for instance, it was discovered that while academic success and TOEFL scores do have a high correlation, the linkage was weaker for engineering students than it was for students in other fields, given the nature of the work the students were expected to undertake in their different programs (Wait & Gressel, 2009). Many researchers (and the ETS itself) have suggested that institutions strive to connect scores from each skills section of the TOEFL with the specific needs of the program of study being applied to, instead of focusing exclusively on overall scores (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000).

English professors merit special consideration. It seems likely that the typical member of the English Department (player twelve) would have extremely exacting standards vis-à-vis English proficiency, given the high language demands that generally accompany courses related to literature and writing. At SCSU, however, the English Department also houses a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) Program, which offers both an undergraduate minor and a Master of Arts degree (see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/english/tesl.asp>). Most of the candidates for the Master's degree receive a Graduate Assistantship (GA) that is linked to instructing in one of SCSU's two English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs, namely:

1. The Intensive English Center (IEC), which is designed to help NNES students who are unable to demonstrate a sufficient level of academic English proficiency (which in the case of the TOEFL means failing to achieve a score of sixty-one) to develop the language skills requisite for entering a degree-granting program at SCSU (Inkster, Dorn, & Rundquist, 2003); or
2. The College ESL (C-ESL) Program, which provides language support to matriculated NNES students who have failed to attain a sufficient score on SCSU's own English placement exam (which must be taken by all NNEs students who submit a TOEFL score between sixty-one and ninety-nine; see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/esl/exam.asp>).

It is foreseeable that the TESL Director (player thirteen) has an interest in ensuring that a steady stream of NNES with low English proficiency apply for admission, in order that the university be in a position to offer as many GAs as possible. The Director of the IEC (player fifteen) could be expected to adopt a similar stance, in an effort to ensure that the IEC has enough student enrollments to remain viable. On similar grounds of self-preservation, the Director of the C-ESL Program (player fourteen) would be expected to aim for TOEFL scores in the sixty-one to ninety-nine range. The staff and graduate assistants linked to each of these programs would likely adopt similar strategies.

With regards to other players (eighteen through twenty-six), it is postulated that students who are native English speakers (NES) may have a preference for higher TOEFL requirements (given the prevalence of group work), while NNES may opt to maintain the status quo. It is assumed that there would also be a difference between NES and NNES applicants, although it is opined that both groups may prefer lower score requirements. It is foreseen that ETS officials would support a high score requirement, as achieving greater success is likely to necessitate taking the test multiple times (which would generate more revenue for the organization).

## **5.0 Nature of the payoff**

In this game, the payoff could be defined as having an optimal number of undergraduate international NNES students with an appropriate level of academic English proficiency enrolled at SCSU. As indicated previously, the payoff is not “winner-takes-all” (Koffi, 2012, p.48), and could be enjoyed by most – if not all – of the players at the same time. That being said, it should be noted that how each player defines what constitutes an “optimal” number of students and an “acceptable” level of proficiency may vary, in line with the arguments presented above.

## **6.0 Outcome**

There is no clear single-shot outcome to this game. It is played on a continual basis, with new students being admitted to commence their studies every semester. The Nash equilibrium will be maintained so long as all players are satisfied with the way the game is being played and the results it is yielding. If something were to drastically alter the situation in any way, it is likely that the way the game is played would change to keep everyone happy (Koffi, 2012).

## **7.0 Application of the Predictioneer’s Model**

Each of the groups of players named above has some role to play with regards to the outcome of this game and can be assigned particular Position, Saliency, and Influence scores. These scores are contained in Appendix A. The scales that have been used to determine these values are presented below.

### **7.1 Position**

In this game, Position (P) relates to where each group of players stands in relation to SCSU’s requirement for a TOEFL score. The four positions considered are shown in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1 Position Matrix**

No.	Position Scale Matrix	Position Scale
1	Minimum TOEFL score of 100	100
2	Minimum TOEFL score of 80	66
3	Minimum TOEFL score of 61	33
4	No minimum TOEFL score	0

## 7.2 Saliency

Players have been assigned a Saliency (S) score that reflects one of four interest levels in TOEFL scores. The values assigned to each stance are presented in Table 7.2.

**Table 7.2 Saliency Matrix**

No.	Saliency Scale Matrix	Saliency Scale
1	High interest in TOEFL scores	95
2	Moderate interest in TOEFL scores	65
3	Low interest in TOEFL scores	35
4	No interest in TOEFL scores	5

## 7.3 Influence

Players have been assigned individual Influence (I) scores ranging from zero to one hundred. Most of these assignments reflect the general hierarchy of the university. Furthermore, it is assumed that players outside of the SCSU community have little to no influence. The general range of scores assigned is contained in Table 7.3.

**Table 7.3 Influence Matrix**

No.	Influence Scale Matrix	Influence Scale
1	Executives	100-65
2	Professors	60-50
3	Administrators/staff	50-30
4	Graduate assistants (TESL Program)	15
5	Students	10
6	Non-SCSU affiliates	5

## 7.4 Weighted Mean

Applying the formula proposed by De Mesquita (as cited by Koffi, 2012, p. 58), namely  $\text{weighted mean} = I \times S \times P / I \times S$ , yields a weighted mean score of 33.90 percent. This score confirms that players of this game are supportive of SCSU's current policy that incoming NNES students must submit a minimum TOEFL score of sixty-one. If all players with a specific interest in the TESL Program, the IEC, and the C-ESL Program were removed, the weighted mean would jump to 42.34 percent, which could indicate that a higher TOEFL score may be a

preferential outcome. As a result, it could be concluded that the existence of large and well-developed ESL support programs has allowed SCSU to accept applicants with scores that are relatively low in comparison to what is being required for admission to many other institutions – and the score that SCSU truly believes is required for success, if one factors in that most incoming students who do not have a TOEFL score above one hundred are required to enroll in C-ESL courses. This situation is not unique to SCSU. Indeed, initial investigations reveal that a low TOEFL score requirement is a fairly strong indication that an institution offers extensive ESL programs. A good example is Arizona State University, which requires the same score as SCSU and hosts an “American English and Culture Program “ with a current enrollment of approximately five hundred (see <http://global.asu.edu/future/undergrad>).

## 8.0 Cost-benefit analysis

It is important to determine if the current outcome of the game (namely Position 3) is economically efficient. A rough “back-of-the-envelope” analysis reveals that SCSU’s ESL support machinery is generating approximately \$453,213 in revenue that would otherwise not be accessible to the university (bearing in mind that both the IEC and the C-ESL Program essentially function as non-credit-bearing programs) (Vinz, 2012). Table 8.1 below contains a summary of this analysis. An explanation of the figures used is contained in Appendix B.

**Table 8.1 Cost-benefit analysis:  
Position 3, Minimum TOEFL score of 61  
Fiscal year 2012**

No.	Item	Expenditure	Revenue
1	IEC	(\$623,923)	\$1,083,150
2	C-ESL program	(\$276,792)	\$281,287
3	Accuplacer Exam <sup>3</sup>	(\$10,509)	N/A
	TOTAL	(\$911,224)	\$1,364,437
	Net profit		\$453,213

This “bonus” revenue would be substantially reduced if the game were to result in Position 1 or 2 being adopted (with minimum scores shifting respectively to one hundred or eighty), given that the absolute numbers of NNES international students would decrease. This could also lead to a spillover effect of lower TESL Program enrollments (particularly at the graduate level, where the numbers of GAs would likely be substantially reduced). Position 4 (namely, no minimum score) could lead to even greater revenue, but would likely be unfeasible given personnel and facility constraints.

## 9.0 Summary

International education is a game being played on many levels. While it is important that the US as a whole play the game well if it wishes to maintain its position as the world’s most

<sup>3</sup> This test is required for all NNES international students who submit a TOEFL score of less than one hundred. It is supplemented by the C-ESL writing test (see <http://www.stcloudstate.edu/placementtesting/policy.asp>).



popular destination country, it is just as important that each U.S. institution play its own games in a satisfactory manner. It appears that in the case of the game being played to set the TOEFL score required for international NNES applicants to undergraduate programs at SCSU, this condition is being met. Despite appearing low, the score of sixty-one is acceptable to all players in that it generates high international student enrollments, ensures ultimately acceptable English proficiency levels, supports a thriving TESL program, and generates income. In short, the analysis of the game reveals that a policy that may otherwise seem anomalous for an institution committed to striving for excellence is actually a clever move. Well played, SCSU!

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sarah Vinz received her MA/TESOL in May 2012. Prior to coming to SCSU she ran an English department at a high school in Thailand and spent a number of years working for the United Nations in Europe and Africa. Vinz also holds a Master of International Affairs degree (Columbia University) and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science (Minnesota State University - Moorhead).

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## Appendix A: Weighted Mean of the TOEFL score game at SCSU

No .	Players	Influence Scale	Saliience Scale	Position Scale	I x S x P	I x S
	<b>SCSU Affiliates</b>					
1	University executives: President	100	95	33	313,500	9,500
2	University executives: Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs	90	95	66	564,300	8,550
3	University executives: Vice President for Administrative Affairs	95	95	33	297,825	9,025
4	University executives: Vice President for Student Life and Development	90	65	33	193,050	5,850
5	University executives: Associate Vice President for International Studies	85	95	0	0	8,075
6	University administrators/staff: Center for International Studies	50	95	33	156,750	4,750
7	University administrators/staff: Office of Admissions	50	35	33	57,750	1,750
8	University administrators/staff: College ESL	30	65	33	64,350	1,950
9	University administrators/staff: IEC, College ESL	30	65	0	0	1,950
10	University professors: Technical/quantitative fields	50	35	66	115,500	1,750
11	University professors: Qualitative fields	50	65	100	325,000	3,250
12	University professors: English Department	50	65	100	325,000	3,250
13	University professors: English Department: Director, TESL program	60	95	0	0	5,700
14	University professors: English Department: Director, College ESL	60	95	33	188,100	5,700
15	University professors: English Department: Director, IEC	60	95	0	0	5,700
16	Graduate assistants: TESL: College ESL	15	65	33	32,175	975
17	Graduate assistants: TESL: IEC	15	65	0	0	975
18	Current students: Native English speakers: Domestic	10	35	100	35,000	350
19	Current students: Native English speakers: International	10	35	100	35,000	350
20	Current students: Non-native English speakers: Domestic	10	35	33	11,550	350
21	Current students: Non-native English speakers: International	10	35	33	11,550	350
	<b>Non-SCSU Affiliates</b>					
22	Applicants: Native English speakers: Domestic	5	5	33	825	25
23	Applicants: Native English speakers: International	5	5	33	825	25
24	Applicants: Non-native English speakers: Domestic	5	95	0	0	475
25	Applicants: Non-native English speakers: International	5	95	0	0	475
26	ETS officials	5	65	100	32,500	325
	<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>2,760,550</b>	<b>81,425</b>
	<b>WEIGHTED MEAN</b>				<b>33.90</b>	<b>%</b>