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Topic: About English Language Programs

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Posted by: EastCoast

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About English Programs

English language programs of high quality can be found at a variety of U.S. educational institutions. High-quality programs have a professionally trained faculty, an excellent curriculum, and superior facilities for study. Such facilities may include classrooms, libraries, laboratories, computers, and other equipment. As a prospective student, you should examine the following criteria carefully and use them to help you decide whether a program is appropriate for you.

Program Types

There are three main types of English language programs available in the United States:

Intensive English Programs (IEPs):

These programs generally require 20 to 30 hours per week in the classroom. Courses include classroom instruction, small group discussions, language labs, and out-of-class work. Intensive courses may or may not allow students to attend regular academic classes in subjects outside the English-as-a-second-language curriculum. Most programs are developed as pre-academic preparatory courses, designed to prepare students for admission into a U.S. college or university.

Semi-intensive English Programs:

Like IEPs, semi-intensive courses include classroom instruction, small group work, language labs, and out-of-class work, but students usually also take academic courses in subjects other than English. A university may require you to take a few semi-intensive English-as-a-second-language (ESL) courses if your Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores were sufficient for admission into a degree program at the university, but further proficiency is desired.

Professional English Programs:

Many private English language programs and some university-based ones are tailored to fit the needs of professionals. These may include programs in business English or special certificate programs in fields such as law, engineering, education, medicine, architecture, computer science, aerospace, hospitality management, and travel. Internships with U.S. businesses are available with some programs, both private and university-based.

This section will focus on Intensive English Programs (IEPs) only.

Standards

Before you apply to a language school, you should make sure it meets accepted minimum standards.

Accreditation is the process whereby standards are established and maintained for educational institutions in the United States. There are two specialized accrediting bodies for Intensive English Programs in the United States: the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET) and the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA). Check to see whether the programs you are considering are accredited by either of these bodies.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) authorize English language programs to issue the government Form I-20, which you will need to apply for your student visa. The INS will consider a program as an Intensive English Program only if it offers a minimum of 18 classroom hours (also called contact hours) per week for its students, and if it is accredited by a national or regional accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Therefore, if an Intensive English Program has approval by the INS to issue the government Form I-20 that is one indicator that the program is accredited. Read further information on accreditation and recognized accrediting bodies.

Two professional organizations for Intensive English Programs have established standards that all of their members' programs must meet: the Consortium of University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP) and the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP). Ask whether the programs you are considering are members of UCIEP or AAIEP.

It is also important to know the academic standing of the faculty who will be teaching you. Look at the program's brochure, catalog, or Web site to see what degrees the teachers of a particular program have earned. Look for institutions whose teachers have degrees in English as a second language (ESL) or in applied linguistics.

Lastly, you can ask whether the program's faculty members belong to NAFSA: Association of International Educators or to Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). NAFSA has a Code of Ethics to which members are expected to subscribe. Both NAFSA and TESOL have established standards of good practice for their members.

Curriculum

Most language programs' curricula are divided into levels, starting with courses for beginners who have never studied English and progressing to courses for advanced students who are refining their skills in preparation for beginning studies at a university or college in the United States.

A typical language program's curriculum is designed to improve the student's understanding and use of English in reading, writing, listening, and speaking; some define grammar as a distinct skill. Some language programs focus exclusively on English for academic purposes, while others concentrate on preparation for such examinations as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Test of Spoken English (TSE).

To find out more about what a particular English language program offers, check the program's Web site. If you cannot access the information you need on the World Wide Web, contact the admissions office of the IEP by e-mail, in writing, or by telephone, and request that they send you detailed information about their programs.

Length of Study

How long will it take to achieve the language skills you desire? It is difficult to determine how long a student will need to spend in an IEP. At the beginning of each program, all students take a placement exam so they can start their studies at the appropriate level. Some students will progress quickly, while others may take longer to develop the necessary skills. It could take one or two terms/semesters, or in some cases longer, to reach the level you are aiming for. Progress from one level to the next depends on the abilities of the individual student as well as on his or her existing English language skills.

Location and Setting

The United States is a large country with a diverse range of geographic features, climates, urban environments, and cultural flavors. An important factor in your choice of a program will be where it is located. There are high quality programs in all regions of the United States.

In addition to the geographic location, you should consider the setting in which a program is offered and find out what services are available. There are three common models:

- Programs run within and by a department of a university or college, such as the English language department;
- Privately owned (proprietary) language schools that are associated with a university or college and are on or near the campus;
- Private schools that are not connected to a college or university.

IEPs in all settings provide a variety of academic and student services. It is important to find out whether a program has a connection with an academic institution, what services are available to you, and how the program will meet your academic advising, housing, health, and social needs. IEP students who attend a program on a traditional U.S. college or university campus are typically offered use of the institution's dormitory housing, advising, and health services. Private language schools usually offer students a variety of housing options, provide academic advising and orientation counseling, and arrange health services for their students. A good-quality IEP, regardless of its setting, will clearly state what services are provided "either by a university or by the language school itself" so that you can select the right program for you.

How Classes Are Organized

The way that classes are structured is another good indicator of a quality IEP. Some questions you might want to ask are:

- What is the average class size?
- How many students are there per teacher?
- Is there a standard policy concerning the number of students with the same native language who are placed in one class?

The class size and student-to-teacher ratio can indicate the level of personal attention that students might reasonably expect to receive. Having students from many language backgrounds, and not just your own, usually will provide a setting in which you will learn English more quickly.

Costs

A very important item to consider in choosing any program is cost. Besides tuition, programs may require payment for student fees, housing, board (meals), books, health insurance (required for

anyone who is in the United States on a student visa), and other miscellaneous expenses. Many programs require an application fee, which is often nonrefundable. Some programs also require a tuition deposit.

It is important to find out the total cost of the program before you apply. Full payment is made after arrival at the school, so make sure you are prepared to pay all of the required costs.

Admission Requirements

Each IEP in the United States sets its own admission requirements. These vary from program to program; however, most require that you have completed secondary school, and that you provide financial information showing you can pay the full cost of the program. Some programs will ask you to provide additional information such as educational transcripts and documentation of English proficiency and some will require that you devote the majority of your time to language studies while you are studying with them. You should be able to find all of the requirements for admission in the program's brochure or catalog or on its Web site.