What is the Professional Communication Advancement Program?

Professional Communication Advancement is a program designed specifically for incoming international students at Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business. The program offers a customized and targeted approach to communications skill-building that will help you achieve greater success in both your studies and the U.S. job market. Professional Communication Advancement gives you the support you need to:

- Transition from classroom English to real-world English
- Improve your academic performance at Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business
- Gain the cross-cultural knowledge necessary to succeed in American business
- Make a great first impression as you begin networking and interviewing with potential employers

According to the 2017 Corporate Recruiters Survey Report*, which tracks employment for college graduates, oral communication, listening skills, and written communication are three of the top five competencies employers seek in a potential employee. It is often a surprise to students when they learn that academic preparation alone does not earn them the best jobs at the most prestigious companies, and that grade-point average (GPA) doesn’t even make the list!

At Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business, a key element of our approach to business education involves ensuring that our students are competitive in today’s hyper-competitive job market. This means that students must focus on honing their English skills early so they’re prepared when it’s time to apply for internships or jobs.

*2017 Corporate Recruiters Survey Report, Graduate Management Admission Council

Who takes courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program?

All international students – regardless of country of origin or citizenship – are required to participate in an assessment of their English skills. The assessment evaluates the student in each of the following areas:

- Speaking
- Listening
- Pronunciation
- Academic and professional writing
- Business writing

Based on the results of these multi-part assessments, an individualized sequence of courses will be recommended for each student and will constitute that student’s program requirement. Students with high levels of English competency in all skill areas will have no requirements, while students who need help only with their writing will most likely have a one-semester requirement, and students whose English is deficient in multiple areas will likely have a two-semester requirement. Historically nearly all international students attending Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business are in need of one or more courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program.

Note: Only students who speak English as their native language and have a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. institution are exempt from the Professional Communication Advancement English assessment tests and requirements.
Are courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program required for graduation?
If the in-person assessment of your English skills indicates that you need additional English instruction, then the recommended sequence of courses becomes a requirement that you must fulfill in order to graduate from your degree program.

At Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business, our goal is to prepare students for success as they enter today’s increasingly competitive global business environment. Time and time again, we see bright, highly qualified students lose out on internships and jobs because they cannot communicate at the level employers require. We have designed the Professional Communication Advancement Program to build the English-language and cultural proficiencies students need both to succeed in their graduate studies and also to compete effectively on the job market.

We find that many of our new international students underestimate the English proficiency needed to succeed in their studies and on the job market. We want all Illinois Tech graduates to be successful in their careers and also to be credible representatives of Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business.

How many semesters are required?
Your specific Professional Communication Advancement Program requirement is based on the results of the assessments that will be conducted after you arrive at Illinois Tech. Until we know the results of your individual assessment, it is impossible to determine how many Professional Communication Advancement courses will be required. Each course lasts half of a semester, and students take up to two classes per semester. Some students will be required to take one or two courses; other students will be required to take more. No one is required to take more than four courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program.

Our results have demonstrated that international students taking courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program can greatly elevate their business communication skills. Since the inception of the program, more than 85% of all students taking courses have improved their written and/or spoken English and, as well, have gained valuable cultural knowledge to help them succeed in their Business classes and in the workplace.

Why is the course PCA 500 on my schedule since I didn’t choose to register for it?
Full-time international students will be registered by the Registrar for the placeholder course PCA 500 upon completion of the online academic advising orientation. After completing the in-person English assessments, PCA 500 will be converted to the actual PCA courses you need based upon your assessments. Students not needing any courses in the Professional Communication Program will have PCA 500 removed from their schedules prior to the drop/add date for the semester.

Students are responsible for checking their schedules daily in MyIIT prior to the beginning of the semester to find out which courses they must take. All students are required to attend the first day of class.

NOTE: For any students who choose not to attend the assessments, PCA 500 will remain on their schedules, and those students will be responsible for paying approximately $3,450 in tuition fees.

I have a U.S. bachelor’s degree; why is Professional Communication Advancement required for me?
In today’s increasingly competitive global business environment, it’s imperative that students be effective communicators. Historically, we’ve seen that a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. institution is not a guarantee that a student has the English skills and competencies necessary to succeed in graduate business school now, or later in the workforce. Therefore, we use the results of our comprehensive English-language assessment to determine whether students with U.S. bachelor’s degrees – but who are not native English speakers – are required to take Professional Communication Advancement courses. If the assessments determine that a student’s English skills are in need of improvement in any of the areas assessed, the student will be required to take one or more courses.

Note: Only students who speak English as their native language and have a bachelor’s degree from a U.S. institution are exempt from the Professional Communication Advancement assessment tests and requirements.
I grew up speaking English in school; why is Professional Communication Advancement required for me?
As noted above, requirements are based on your performance on our comprehensive English-language assessment. If
the assessment shows that your English is insufficient, then you will be required to take courses in Professional
Communication Advancement Program.

*Note:* Any students who do not speak English as their first language and do not have a bachelor’s degree from the U.S.
must participate in Professional Communication Advancement assessments and may be required to take classes.

**Can I choose which courses I will take?**
No. Your sequence of courses will be determined by the results of your individual assessment. Once you are enrolled,
the program may adjust the sequence based on your progress in building your English skills, but such changes are
determined by the Program Director, not the student.

**Can I delay starting the courses until my second semester?**
No. Students need to begin to build their English skills right away – so that they are sufficiently improved by the time
the student begins to look for an internship or job. This also ensures that you will gain maximum benefit in your
program of study.

**How much do the courses cost?**
Each course lasts half of one semester and is worth 1.5 credit hours. To underscore the importance of our commitment
to building students’ English-language proficiency and to assist students in defraying their costs, the tuition for each
course is $1,725. For example, a student required to take the maximum number of PCA courses (4) would pay a total
of $6,900 – rather than $10,350 – for the 6 credit hours of PCA.

*Please note:* The tuition charges for courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program are the same
for all Stuart students regardless of major or program of study.

**How are the courses graded and how will the grades show on my transcript?**
If you are required to take courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program, they will be considered
a requirement for graduation and you will earn a grade for your performance. The grades will appear as satisfactory (S)
or unsatisfactory (U) on your Illinois Tech transcript. However, PCA courses are not included in the calculation of
your GPA (grade point average).

**Are any waivers offered for the Professional Communication Advancement Program?**
No. Each student’s requirement is based on the results of that student’s individual English assessment, conducted after
arriving at Stuart. If our standardized assessment determines that your English skills are in need of improvement, then
PCA becomes part of your graduation requirement and cannot be waived. Just as each degree program has certain
required courses that cannot be waived, Stuart School of Business has English-language competency requirements and
it is not possible to graduate without fulfilling these requirements.

Students sometimes ask us if they can retake the TOEFL (or IELTS) in order to demonstrate their English skills. This
is not possible – the program requirement is dictated by the results of the in-person assessment conducted with each
student.

**My assessment results indicate I need to take more than four Professional Communication Advancement
courses. Why can’t I choose which four of those I will take?**
Your prescribed sequence of courses is based on your highest priority English needs in the context of maximizing your
graduate school performance and post-graduation success. If your sequence of courses changes as a result of your end-
of-first-semester reassessment, the Program Director will notify you of the changes.

**I wasn’t required to submit TOEFL or IELTS scores for admission, so why am I required to participate in an
English assessment and possibly take courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program?**
Students from certain countries are deemed to have sufficient English skills to study in the U.S. However, the
Professional Communication Advancement assessments are designed to evaluate the skills a student needs to meet the
graduation standards of Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business, which go beyond class performance to include
proficiency in a variety of business contexts. This includes such factors as the conversational and pronunciation skills
needed for real-life conversations in the U.S., appropriate business writing technique, and the cross-cultural knowledge.
expected of anyone participating in American business. If the assessments determine that a student’s English skills are not at the level that would make the student both competitive on the job market and a credible representative of Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business, the student will be required to take one or more courses.

**My I-20 states that I am proficient in English, so why am I required to take Professional Communication Advancement classes?**
The English proficiency requirement on your I-20 is based on whether you have the minimum English skills required for admission to Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business. Professional Communication Advancement requirements are determined by the English communication skills you need to fulfill the graduation standards of Stuart School of Business and to be successful post-graduation.

**I am going to live in the U.S. for two years, so why can’t I just learn English on my own?**
Often, international students coming to the U.S. assume that their English skills will improve simply by being here and by listening and speaking English in the classroom. While it is true that immersion in English-speaking culture and classes helps students feel more comfortable, it is not sufficient in providing students with the level of English they need to be competitive on the job market. We have designed Professional Communication Advancement specifically for business students so that you are comfortable and confident communicating in a variety of business contexts, using appropriate language.

**I’m planning to return to my home country after graduation, so why do I have to take Professional Communication Advancement?**
Today’s business world is a global one. Illinois Tech’s Stuart School of Business expects that graduates will be capable, confident communicators in a variety of contexts. Therefore, we have established a set of communication competencies that must be met by our graduates. In addition, your plans for after graduation may change after you have completed one or more semesters in your academic program and become comfortable living in the U.S.

**Can I be re-assessed again in order to change my recommended sequence of courses?**
At the end of each semester, students are re-assessed based on the courses taken to gauge their progress in building English skills. If changes to course sequencing are warranted, the Program Director will get in touch with you.

**How will I learn English if other students in the course speak my native language?**
Students are expected to speak only in English while in their Stuart classes. Research has shown that students who seek out opportunities to speak English in and outside of their classes will have greater success at increasing their English proficiency. You are encouraged to make a commitment to practice English in a variety of situations so that your language skills and ability to deal with cultural cues is sufficiently improved before you begin interviewing for internships and jobs.

**If my Professional Communication Advancement course is offered several times per week, can I attend a different section if I miss my regularly scheduled section?**
Attending a different section is allowed only if your Professional Communication Advancement professor has given you permission in advance and only on a case-by-case basis. Professors plan activities and specific lessons based on the number of regularly scheduled students in each section. It’s not possible to plan accordingly if the class sizes change from week to week.

**This course or level is too easy for me; why do I have to take it?**
Students sometimes tell us that they think their Professional Communication Advancement classes are too easy because they recognize the vocabulary that is part of the material being covered. However, vocabulary recognition is different from mastering the use of the vocabulary in a particular context. The courses in the Professional Communication Advancement Program require you to master – and demonstrate mastery of – specific language concepts and contexts before moving on to more difficult material. So, each class session builds on the material covered in the previous class. Remember that Professional Communication Advancement isn’t just about building your English skills—it’s about building culturally appropriate communication skills that are crucial for your success now and in the future.

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