



Policies and Procedures That Reduce the Amount of Excess Hours Accumulated by Community College Students

A Program Review

John Winn, Commissioner

December 2005

J. David Armstrong, Jr., Chancellor

Introduction. One of the on-going debates among educators is the point at which a student transitions from merely exploring various academic areas as part of earning a degree to taking courses that are not needed and thus using space and funds that should be reserved for additional students. This transition from a well-rounded education to an “excess hours” student has been defined by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), an office of the Florida Legislature, as the point at which a student has accumulated more than 120 percent of the hours needed for the degree being sought. For an Associate of Arts degree, that point is more than 72 hours.

In April 2005, OPPAGA produced a report entitled *Excess Hours at Community Colleges Warrant Attention by the Department of Education and the Legislature*.¹ The report listed the primary causes of excess hours as student characteristics and inadequate advisement. The primary reason for concern is the cost to both the state and the student. Currently, the State funds approximately two-thirds of the cost of community colleges while the student pays one-third. The dollar amount is approximately \$100 per credit hour for the state and \$50 for the student. Public policy debates continue to focus on finding a good balance between the efficient use of public funds and providing opportunities for students to access and advance in postsecondary education. While different audiences hold different views on the use of public funds, it is clear to all that the State is not in a position to provide unlimited support for everyone enrolled in public postsecondary education. In keeping with this need to balance public funds and student opportunity, the Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Education (DCCWE) and the Florida Legislature have incorporated into the Performance Based Program Budgeting process a measure which rewards an institution for each student completing the Associate of Arts degree in 72 hours or less.

This program review focuses on the policies and procedures in place at some institutions that should be shared with the remaining members of the Florida Community College System (FCCS) to ensure activities such as advising and scheduling are being done in the most effective manner possible. A review of the FCCS identified the following as practices worthy of consideration by other institutions:

General Recommendations. General recommendations were derived from information gathered from individual institutions (See Appendix A). They fall into three categories: advising, student services and best practices. It is often difficult to classify a strategy in only one area, but an attempt has been made in an effort to provide a scheme for the recommendations.

Advising. Students should be advised continuously and use automated registration systems such as web based registration *only after a multi-term course list has been developed with an advisor.*

Any community college not already connected to the FACTS.org 2+2 advising system should do so in 2005-06. This system provides several different ways of comparing the courses a student has already taken to the requirements for a selected major at a particular university or allows a student to plan out the

¹ A complete copy of the report can be obtained from <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/educ/r05-30s.html>.

courses that would be needed. Monies have been appropriated by the Legislature for this system and should be utilized as soon as possible. A committee is in the process of developing guidelines that will assist with implementing the remaining components of the FACTS.org system.

Student Services. Routine graduation checks or “audits” should be provided to students in order to share information on courses needed. Use should be made of e-mails as a way of maintaining contact with individual students. Colleges should consider the First Year Experience Program or a similar means of providing information about the institution and support during the first semester.

Best Practices. Students should be encouraged to select a major as soon as possible. First-generation, low-income, and students needing more than one area of remediation are characteristics often associated with lower success rates. These students are sometimes classified as being “at-risk.” Students should be identified as “at-risk,” if appropriate, and then tracked within each semester as well as from semester to semester. Students should be placed in study skills courses as well as needed College Preparatory classes. Classes should be both sequenced and offered in a way that allows students to move smoothly through the institution and graduate in a timely manner. Students should be taught how to use FACTS.org and encouraged to check regularly on their progress.

Excess hours result in a strain on the resources of both the student and the state. This situation can be improved by better preparation prior to postsecondary work and better counseling and advising once a student has enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Specific strategies for postsecondary institutions are listed in Appendix A.

An Analysis of OPPAGA Data. OPPAGA was limited in the data it could use to that reported for native students on the Annual Student Data Base. Therefore, OPPAGA results and results calculated by individual institutions for their entire graduating class may differ. An analysis by DCCWE of the data used by OPPAGA in their report found that, on average, Associate of Arts (AA) degree graduates had earned 73.4 hours and had attempted 81.0 hours. This means that the typical community college AA graduate had successfully completed one course above the 120% limit (or four courses above the 60 hours required for graduation) and had attempted or taken three additional courses. Attempted hours are hours for which a student enrolls but credit is not necessarily earned. This is usually due to either failing the course or withdrawing from it. Since the state is providing support for these classes even though the hours do not count toward a degree, it is important that this type of outcome is minimized. OPPAGA found that less than 9% of the excess hours were due to failures or withdrawals.

The average of three failures or withdrawals is in keeping with previous research conducted by DCCWE that found more than three such courses had a negative impact on graduation rates.² The ability of students to successfully complete college level courses is directly tied to high school preparation.³ Thus, community colleges can improve the academic success of their students by working with the K-12 sector to increase the rigor of high school courses taken by all students. This process is part of the new high school reform project that is being undertaken by the Department of Education.

² See Fast Facts 81 posted to <http://www.fldoe.org/CC/OSAS/FastFacts/FastFacts.asp>.

³ See Data Trend 33 posted to http://www.fldoe.org/CC/OSAS/DataTrendsResearch/Data_Trends.asp.

A second component of reducing the amount of excess hours is advising. While the average number of earned hours is 73.4, the range is from a low of 68.0 at Okaloosa-Walton College to 83.5 at Miami Dade College. Similarly, the range for attempted hours is from 71.5 at South Florida Community College to 90.1 at Miami Dade College. There are legitimate reasons for these differences. However, this is not the focus of this program review.

For more information about this Excess Hours Program Review, please contact Dr. Pat Windham at (850) 245-9482 or Pat.Windham@fldoe.org.

Appendix A
Specific Recommendations/Strategies from Selected Colleges

College A

- Quality academic advisement offered on a semester by semester basis.
- Routine course/graduation checks after completion of 24 semester hours.
- Addressing the excess hours issue with students in orientation/study skills courses.

College B

- Ensure that courses are aligned well so that students are adequately prepared for the next course in the sequence when they pass the first one.
- Ensure that college preparatory and English as a Second Language for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum provide adequate foundation for success in subsequent college level courses.
- Ensure that grading practices reflect skill level mastery that leads to future course success.
- Encourage continuous enrollment, especially in course sequences.
- Identify students at risk for withdrawing or failing early in the term and provide appropriate support.
- Practice strong advisement to ensure that students take the right courses and an appropriate number of courses.
- Consider restricting registration after the first day of classes.

College C

- A statement will be placed on the [registration page] about need for appropriate course selection and possible ramifications of taking excess hours.
- A system will be devised to have students informed about checking their degree audits when they have 24 college level credits completed.
- Orientation will make the discussion of picking a major an integral part of the presentation.
- Advising Handbook will include a portion about excess hours.
- Excess hour information will be posted in the Divisions.
- Student Services will explore the possibility of having degree audit capability in the Divisions to be used by academic advisers.
- Student Services counselors will discuss excess hours with students as part of the appeals process when students are academically suspended.

- Transfer students will be advised to run a degree audit at the point of receiving a transcript evaluation.
- First-time-in-college 2005 students will be notified when they reach 24 college credit hours about choosing a major, enrolling in excess hours, and the ramifications of enrolling in hours which will not meet their degree requirements.
- Financial Aid will notify their students with an early warning letter about excess hours.
- Financial Aid will inform students of the problems with excess hours when students are notified about not meeting the academic standards of progress for financial aid.
- Financial Aid will have a discussion about excess hours with students when they go through the appeal process.
- Financial Aid will inform students about the Career Center and FACTS.org.
- A degree audit will be run during registration and after drop/add.
- Student Development will continue to work with Computer Services to develop the FACTS.org 2+2 system.
- General Education AA (GEN-AA) students cannot register on the web until they see an academic adviser.
- Each student who applies to the college will receive a letter discussing concerns about remaining a GEN-AA student and will inform them about the web page containing information about GEN-AA.
- GEN-AA division academic advisers will be trained to discuss issues with students remaining in GEN-AA.
- The Career Center will help students in using FACTS.org and will develop workshops informing students of the need in choosing a field of study.
- In the Testing Center, information will be posted and students will be informed about what to do and where to go when choosing a major.

College D

- Hard-coded prerequisites ensure that students take courses in sequence and are prepared for coursework.
- Requires AA students to declare a major/program code by the time they earn 24 college-level credit hours. This enables students to identify the preprofessional requirements for their degrees and avoid taking "unnecessary" courses.
- Require students to access advisement, onsite or online, prior to registration. Students accessing advisement online will register through their degree audits, which helps them stay on track to degree. Students in AA, Associate in Science (AS), and even developmental classes can access interactive online degree audits almost 24 hours a day.

- [College D]'s interactive online advisement also identifies the preprofessional electives required for a student's major at each state university.
- Schedules sections of the highest demand classes (e.g., ENC 1101, MAC 1105) at all times of day, afternoon, and evening. Offers online and/or hybrid (online/onsite) versions of these classes. Some are also offered early (7 am) or on weekends. Thus, students should be able to progress toward their degrees without registering for "placeholder" or "unnecessary" classes.
- [College D]'s academic advisement has built a strong partnership with their peers at [a university], the transfer university of choice at [College D]. They meet regularly with the advisors at [the university]'s colleges and hold an [event] annually at [College D], which draws advisors from almost 20 [university] colleges. Keeping these lines of communication open enables students to register for the required preprofessionals.
- [College D] is planning a degree tracking system that will provide "soft stops" to students who register out of degree or off track. These will be logged for review by advisement staff, who will work on developmental advisement plans for the students.
- [College D] is planning a "block schedule" approach to academic scheduling. All classes needed to complete a general AA degree and the preprofessionals for the top 10 majors will be offered during three blocks of time: morning, afternoon, evening/weekend. This will enable students to identify a block of time to commit to the college and know that the classes they need will be offered in this block.
- [College D] is expanding online and hybrid offerings to assist students with scheduling issues.
- Notes: The OPPAGA study stressed the importance of academic advisement. No one would dispute this, but the wide variety of requirements at the various state universities for identical majors makes it difficult for effective faculty advisement. And, colleges are not funded at a level to sufficiently staff professional advisement centers. This is one reason [College D] went to an interactive online system--to ensure accuracy within funding constraints. What we've found over time is that students like the flexibility that comes with online advisement: they can use it at 11 pm or at 5 am.
- As indicated above, the State University System (SUS) really does vary in requirements for majors from institution to institution. We're increasingly hearing frustration from students who feel they have to cover their bases and are taking extra classes to do so. I think part of the solution to addressing excess hours in community colleges is greater alignment of the required preprofessional electives across the SUS. Also, although the OPPAGA report suggests students are taking these courses at community colleges because they are cheaper, in reality, [College D] students are taking them because they will not be considered for admission to [university] if they have not already successfully completed the courses.

College E

- Academic Advising Guides are easily accessible by students on the College's web site. This self-service system helps students to avoid making registration mistakes.
- Degree Audit Program is readily available through FACTS.org and provides students with an up-to-date assessment of completed vs. needed courses.
- We offer advising appointments during non-peak registration periods so students may sit with an advisor for a thorough review of their program.
- We are implementing a web portal to provide better communication to students regarding deadlines and other administrative reminders.
- We offer a Summer Bridge Program that helps prepare students for college and allows us to explain degree programs and other important details.
- We offer a First Year Experience (FYE) Program that provides similar information as the Summer Bridge Program.
- We provide students in the FYE Program with a mentor and an assigned advisor. The mentor and advisor help the students to avoid mistakes such as enrolling in excess hours.
- We provide University Transfer Centers on each campus to explain the requirements for university transfer.
- We hold Advising Days where academic advisors reach out to students by setting up tables in areas populated heavily by students.
- Career Days and Job Fairs are held at each of the campuses to share information about various careers with students. This helps students identify a career goal and encourages them to complete programs of study.
- Career Center personnel visit classrooms whenever possible.
- We support the SUS Tour on our campuses to keep students informed of the requirements of the 11 state universities.
- Various institutional research studies are done to track and monitor student progress including Achieving the Dream studies, Student Outcomes in Gateway Courses, Program Reviews, Student Athletes, and various other research briefs.

College F

- We have developed an annual guaranteed schedule. Students can plan their schedules for a year; the courses will not be cancelled, so they can be assured of the courses they need to graduate.

- We are also improving our advising system. We are using grant funds and college funds to develop a tracking system. In addition, we now require all first time students to attend an advising session to teach them academic planning and use of the system. All students are required to see an advisor to develop an academic plan. If they stay on track, they can develop their schedules without seeing an advisor; but, if they do not have a plan or are not on track, they cannot register until they have seen an advisor. The system is not completely automated yet. The most difficult part is assuring they choose a major and university (if they are AA students) so that appropriate prerequisites are in the system. (They can check these on FACTS.org, but it isn't tied to our degree audit well.)
- We are also improving our career planning center; many students do not know what they want to major in or what options they have for transfer. Some leeway must be allowed for them to take some courses to learn their strengths and abilities. We must also allow for things such as foreign language, intermediate algebra, career course, college success course, and the like. It is also important to note that this is not "time to degree" since so many students are part-time. We are working to improve "credits to degree."
- We are also moving to require students to use their college emails for all critical information. We are working toward individualizing the information they receive.
- One other issue is the additional "degree requirements" of some universities--for example, [a university] requires an extra foreign language course for many majors, a diversity course, a speech course, etc. These are not specifically required before they transfer, but it is best for students to try to meet these requirements before transfer. We try to keep students up to date on these as well. Sometimes, though, they cannot do that without extra hours. And, of course, there are those students who transfer with excess hours from other colleges.

Appendix B
OPPAGA Excess Hours File

College		Number	Average Hours	Over 72 Hours (%)		Number of hours (%)				
				No	Yes	<=72	73-79	80-89	90-99	100+
Brevard	Attempted	682	77.2	48.39	51.61	48.39	17.89	15.25	9.09	9.38
	Earned	682	69.8	73.31	26.69	73.31	11.44	8.06	4.69	2.49
Broward	Attempted	933	79.2	39.98	60.02	39.98	17.26	18.65	10.29	13.83
	Earned	933	72.4	61.63	38.37	62.64	15.58	13.62	5.45	2.72
Central Florida	Attempted	346	74.7	52.89	47.11	52.89	19.65	16.18	6.07	5.2
	Earned	346	69.9	69.65	30.35	69.65	15.61	8.38	4.34	2.02
Chipola	Attempted	200	75.3	51	49	51	21	14.5	5.5	8
	Earned	200	71.3	62	38	62	21	9	4	4
Daytona Beach	Attempted	408	79.2	37.99	62.01	37.99	19.61	23.53	7.84	11.03
	Earned	408	72.1	63.73	36.27	63.73	14.95	13.48	5.39	2.45
Edison	Attempted	231	78.4	39.83	60.17	39.83	18.61	19.05	13.42	9.09
	Earned	231	72.7	62.77	37.23	62.77	12.99	13.42	4.76	6.06
Florida CC @ Jack	Attempted	801	80.4	37.7	62.3	37.7	20.1	18.48	10.36	13.36
	Earned	801	71.4	64.17	35.83	64.17	15.98	11.74	5.12	3
Florida Keys	Attempted	25	73.6	60	40	60	20	8	4	8
	Earned	25	72.7	60	40	60	20	8	4	8
Gulf Coast	Attempted	256	82.4	33.2	66.8	33.2	17.58	23.44	11.72	14.06
	Earned	256	73.1	59.38	40.62	59.38	18.36	12.11	5.47	4.69
Hillsborough	Attempted	573	80.7	34.38	65.62	34.38	19.02	21.64	13.96	10.99
	Earned	573	72.4	59.51	40.49	59.51	18.67	13.09	5.41	3.32
Indian River	Attempted	184	82.2	33.7	66.3	33.7	17.39	20.65	12.5	15.76
	Earned	184	75	54.89	45.11	55.19	10.93	19.13	9.29	5.46
Lake City	Attempted	117	85.8	34.19	65.81	34.19	16.24	11.97	9.4	28.21
	Earned	117	79.5	50.43	49.57	50.43	10.26	9.4	13.68	16.24
Lake-Sumter	Attempted	68	83.2	29.41	70.59	29.41	19.12	22.06	14.71	14.71
	Earned	68	75.8	42.65	57.35	42.65	25	16.18	13.24	2.94
Manatee	Attempted	416	79.1	36.06	63.94	36.06	22.36	23.08	10.34	8.17
	Earned	416	72.3	58.17	41.83	58.17	21.15	13.46	5.05	2.16

College		Number	Average Hours	Over 72 Hours (%)		Number of hours (%)				
				No	Yes	<=72	73-79	80-89	90-99	100+
Miami-Dade	Attempted	2,059	90.1	21.27	78.73	21.27	14.72	21.08	15.4	27.54
	Earned	2,059	83.5	37.2	62.8	37.2	16.37	17.29	10.83	18.31
North Florida	Attempted	77	77.3	58.44	41.56	58.44	14.29	11.69	6.49	9.09
	Earned	77	71.8	75.32	24.68	75.32	9.09	6.49	1.3	7.79
Okaloosa-Walton	Attempted	340	75.3	49.71	50.29	49.71	21.47	18.24	5.88	4.71
	Earned	340	68	79.71	20.29	79.71	10.59	7.35	1.47	0.88
Palm Beach	Attempted	837	77.4	45.28	54.72	45.28	20.07	16.13	9.56	8.96
	Earned	837	70.7	69.65	30.35	69.65	14.22	9.32	2.63	4.18
Pasco-Hernando	Attempted	257	73.5	60.31	39.69	60.31	18.68	10.12	5.06	5.84
	Earned	257	68.1	80.93	19.07	80.93	8.95	5.45	2.72	1.95
Pensacola	Attempted	575	79.5	37.91	62.09	37.91	22.61	18.26	10.43	10.78
	Earned	575	72	61.74	38.26	61.74	17.22	12.17	6.26	2.61
Polk	Attempted	281	76.8	45.91	54.09	45.91	18.51	20.64	8.54	6.41
	Earned	281	69	71.89	28.11	71.89	12.46	12.81	1.07	1.78
St. Johns	Attempted	219	75.2	54.34	45.66	54.34	14.16	16.89	8.68	5.94
	Earned	219	70.1	70.32	29.68	70.32	12.33	11.42	3.65	2.28
St. Petersburg	Attempted	955	80.1	39.79	60.21	39.79	17.91	19.79	10.79	11.73
	Earned	955	71.2	65.65	34.35	65.65	14.24	11.94	4.19	3.98
Santa Fe	Attempted	702	83.1	31.05	68.95	31.05	18.23	21.23	13.53	15.95
	Earned	702	74.1	58.83	41.17	58.92	15.12	12.41	6.56	6.99
Seminole	Attempted	335	78.3	39.4	60.6	39.4	21.19	22.99	8.36	8.06
	Earned	335	69.6	68.96	31.04	68.96	15.82	11.34	2.69	1.19
South Florida	Attempted	100	71.5	62	38	62	18	13	3	4
	Earned	100	68.3	76	24	76	14	7	2	1
Tallahassee	Attempted	588	77.3	45.92	54.08	45.92	17.69	17.52	10.03	8.84
	Earned	588	69.7	69.9	30.1	69.9	14.97	10.03	3.57	1.53
Valencia	Attempted	1,450	84.3	26	74	26	20.14	23.86	13.93	16.07
	Earned	1,450	73.8	55.03	44.97	55.03	21.17	14.83	4.69	4.28
System	Attempted	14,015	81	37.08	62.92	37.08	18.5	19.57	11.15	13.7
	Earned	14,015	73.4	60.3	39.7	60.37	15.85	12.55	5.57	5.66