



# *oppaga* Progress Report

December 2003

Report No. 03-66

## DOE Could Do More to Reduce Costs by Improving Community Colleges' Articulation with Universities

### *at a glance*

Articulation between community colleges and state universities must be effective for Florida's "2 plus 2" system to work. Our prior report found that 20% of AA transfer students took a semester or more of lower division courses at a university. Over half of the lower division courses taken by AA transfer students were taken for degree requirements, indicating that some university degree programs were likely not consistent with common prerequisites requirements. Taking required lower division courses after transferring to a university cost students approximately \$8.7 million in tuition and the state \$13.8 million in support costs over a three-year period.

The Department of Education has implemented some of our recommendations, but has not addressed other needed changes. We continue to recommend that the department improve articulation by systematically reviewing university catalogs to ensure matching prerequisites, identifying causes of unsuccessful articulation, or encouraging community college students to establish a degree track. All 28 community colleges have developed partnerships with four-year institutions, which should reduce transfer problems.

To lower state costs, the Legislature should consider requiring students to pay the full cost of excess courses.

### Purpose

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of the extent to which the Department of Education has addressed the recommendations made in a 2002 OPPAGA report.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Background

Florida's postsecondary education system includes a "2 plus 2" articulation process through which students can earn a bachelor's degree with two years, or 60 credit hours, at a community college and the remaining courses at a university.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, most community college students who transfer to a state university with an associate in arts (AA) degree should only need to take an additional 60 credit hours at a university to obtain their bachelor's degrees.

Articulation problems can result in students taking lower division courses they could have completed while earning their associate of arts degrees, increasing costs to both students and the state.

<sup>1</sup> Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

<sup>2</sup> *Articulation Works for Most Community College Transfer Students but Some Problems Continue*, [OPPAGA Report No. 02-05](#), January 2002.

<sup>3</sup> [Section 1007.25\(8\)](#), *F.S.*, provides that a baccalaureate degree shall require no more than 120 semester hours unless granted prior approval by the State Board of Education. This would be equivalent to 60 credit hours at a community college and 60 at a university.

## Previous Findings

Our 2002 report found that there were weaknesses in the articulation process. Many community college students needed to take required lower division courses after transferring to a university, which cost students approximately \$8.7 million in tuition and the state \$13.8 million in support costs over a three-year period (1997-1999). Articulation success varied across community colleges and universities. However, over half of AA transfer students in our sample took lower division courses after transferring to a university.

There were several reasons why transfer students took lower division courses at universities. In some cases, students were likely not informed of the need to take needed classes because requirements for majors at some universities did not match those approved in the *Common Prerequisites Manual*, which is intended to identify courses that community college students should take during their first two years of study. In other cases, students likely did not take needed classes because they had not selected a major, (community college students cannot formally declare their majors), and thus may not have had the opportunity to tailor their community college academic courses to meet the requirements of their future majors.

In other cases, students may have needed to take additional classes because they changed their majors, or they may have taken additional courses in order to obtain a minor or otherwise improve their opportunities on the job market. Some students also may have delayed taking some courses until they reached a university for reasons such as preferring to take a given course at their intended university, avoiding classes perceived as difficult, or the need to take preliminary courses at the community college to prepare for subsequently taking higher level, albeit lower-division, courses at a university (such as calculus). Finally, students likely were taking some classes such as physical education for non-academic purposes.

We recommended the Department of Education take several steps to improve articulation results. Specifically, we recommended that

- the Division of Colleges and Universities review university catalogs to ensure that the lower level prerequisites for all majors match those in the *Common Prerequisites Manual*;
- the Articulation Coordinating Committee monitor articulation outcomes to identify transfer problems so that they can be addressed;
- the Florida Board of Education strongly encourage or require community college students planning to enter the SUS to select a “track” toward their future major and university; and
- community colleges examine the local need for new baccalaureate programs.

To reduce the number of general electives taken by transfer and other students, we also recommended that the Legislature consider requiring students to pay 100% of the costs for courses that exceed 115% of the hours required for a degree.<sup>4</sup> This would allow students to take some electives such as physical education without paying the surcharge, but place greater responsibility on those students who make poor course decisions and accumulate excess credit hours by requiring such students to pay higher fees.

## Current Status

The Department of Education has implemented some of our recommendations, but has not taken steps to address other needed changes. All 28 community colleges have developed partnerships with four-year institutions, which should reduce transfer problems.

### ***Review university catalogs to ensure common prerequisites***

Rather than taking a systematic approach as we recommended, the Department of Education has maintained its policy of randomly reviewing state university catalogs and referring articulation-related discrepancies to an Oversight Committee for resolution.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See OPPAGA [Report No. 01-28](#), *Justification Review of the State University System*, May 2001, for more information about excess hours at the state’s universities.

<sup>5</sup> The Oversight Committee also reviews new baccalaureate programs or revisions to verify adherence to the *Common Prerequisites Manual*.

We continue to believe that the Division of Colleges and Universities should systematically review all university catalogs to ensure that lower level prerequisites for all majors match those in the *Common Prerequisites Manual*. Our 2002 review found that 51% of the lower division courses in our sample were taken to meet degree requirements, indicating that some degree programs at some universities were likely not consistent with the *Common Prerequisites Manual* requirements. Therefore, we believe that a more systematic review of catalogs is required to identify and remedy discrepancies.

### ***Monitor articulation outcomes to identify and resolve problems***

The Florida Board of Education has identified seamless articulation and maximum access as one of its strategic imperatives. Its Articulation Coordinating Committee has formed several task forces to address articulation issues. The Inter-institutional Course/Credit Transfer Task Force has been charged with reviewing issues related to the transfer of courses and credits between and among postsecondary institutions, including AS to BA/BS program compliance, a review of general education courses, systemic articulation problems, student articulation advisement and other articulation issues. The task force is just getting underway, so it is not clear what actions it will take to address the issues identified in our report.

We recommend that the committee identify and address transfer problems to improve articulation and reduce costs.

### ***Encourage students to select their majors to reduce unnecessary courses***

The Department of Education has not required community college students planning to enter the state university system to select a track toward their future majors and universities so that they

can take appropriate lower division classes. We continue to believe that this step would help reduce articulation problems and reduce costs for both students and the state.

### ***Increase baccalaureate programs at community colleges***

All community colleges have taken steps to implement this recommendation. Four community colleges now offer their own baccalaureate degree programs: Chipola, Miami-Dade, Okaloosa-Walton, and St. Petersburg College. By offering four-year degrees for selected majors, community colleges reduce the articulation problems facing students who must transfer to a university. In addition, all of Florida's 28 community colleges have developed partnerships with one or more four-year institutions to offer baccalaureate degrees on campus.

### ***Excess hour fees***

The Legislature has not implemented our recommendation to require students to pay the full cost of excess courses. For a typical 120-hour major, this policy would allow a student to take an additional 18 hours of coursework, or six three-credit courses, beyond the requirements (including electives) before being asked to pay the full cost of courses. Such a charge would place the responsibility on students to plan their academic careers so as to limit the number of credits they must take, affecting both transfer students and those who complete all of their coursework at a university. This requirement would likely encourage students to graduate more quickly.

We recommend that the Legislature consider requiring students to pay 100% of the costs for courses that exceed 115% of the hours required for a degree.

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## FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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December 9, 2003

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Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Progress Report on the Articulation Program, a follow-up to OPPAGA Report No.02-05 — *Articulation Works for Most Community College Transfer Students, but Some Problems Continue*. I am requesting that the Articulation Coordinating Committee work with the universities and community colleges to review the material contained in the *Common Prerequisites Manual* to ensure it is up to date. I am also requesting the Division of Colleges and Universities work with the universities to ensure compliance with this document.

Another step will be to discuss the potential for appropriate advising and counseling with our colleges to help our students select a track and/or major at the earliest possible time. We also continue to work with our institutions as they explore the need for economic development and local community college-based baccalaureate degrees.

I would not be supportive of charging students 100% of the cost of excess courses until we have determined if this issue is the result of student error or institutional policies and procedures. An additional concern is that this recommendation appears to apply to community college Associate in Arts transfers exclusively, creating a policy inequity and a potential barrier to the State's "2+2" articulation process.

If there are any questions, please contact Pat Windham at 245-9482.

Sincerely,

/s/ J. David Armstrong, Jr.  
Chancellor

JDA/pws

cc: John Winn  
Debra Austin