



April 2005 (Revised)

Report No. 05-30

Excess Hours at Community Colleges Warrant Attention by the Department of Education and the Legislature

at a glance

Approximately 97% of community college students in a cohort of 2001-02 graduates accumulated at least one excess hour and 61% accumulated hours that exceeded 120% of degree requirements. Excess hours occur when students enroll in classes that they either do not successfully complete or do not need to meet graduation requirements. The excess hours students in our cohort took cost the state about \$30 million. However, since our cohort represented only 39% of those graduating in 2001-02, the full cost of the excess hours taken by all students is likely to be much higher.

The main causes of excess hours at the community college level are student characteristics and inadequate academic advising. In addition, some students take community college courses that will satisfy upper division requirements, which causes excess hours to be taken at the community college level.

Scope and Methodology—

This project was conducted in response to a legislative request to determine the extent to which students take excess hours at the community college level and identify options for reducing these hours. Excess hours occur when students take courses that exceed degree requirements. These include courses students successfully complete, withdraw from, or fail.

To determine the extent to which students take excess hours, we analyzed courses taken over a six-year period by a cohort of 14,015 students who earned an Associate in Arts (AA), Associate in Science (AS) or Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree from a Florida community college in 2001-02.¹ We excluded from our analysis students who did not appear to earn enough hours to graduate, all remedial courses, and graduates who transferred between institutions or earned more than one degree.² As a result, our cohort represented approximately 39% of all 2001-02 community college graduates. See Appendix A for further explanation of the methodology.

Background

Florida's community college system consists of 28 community colleges serving approximately 816,000 students. Community colleges have diverse missions, providing education for two-year associates degrees, workforce and certificates, life-long vocational learning, and recreation and leisure. This report focuses on associate degree programs. In Fiscal Year 2003-04, approximately 320,000 students were enrolled in an associate degree program and

¹ We chose this period for our analysis so we could track these students into universities and determine whether their excess hours contributed to upper division baccalaureate requirements.

² Students who appeared to have insufficient credit hours to graduate likely began taking community college courses more than six years prior to their graduation.

approximately 41,000 students earned an associate degree.

The Florida Board of Education is the chief implementing and coordinating body of public education in Florida. Individual boards of trustees oversee each Florida community college.

The Legislature funds Florida public postsecondary education operating costs through two primary sources: legislative appropriations from general revenue and lottery funds, and tuition and fees that students pay. In Fiscal Year 2004-05, the Legislature appropriated approximately \$948 million in general revenue and lottery funds to support Florida’s 28 community colleges. These appropriations funded 65% of the costs for community college students. The remaining 35% came from student tuition and fees. Florida subsidizes the cost per credit hour for every student equally, regardless of financial need or their program of study. The total average cost per credit hour in 2003-04 was \$150.09 of which the state paid \$97.99 and students paid \$52.10.

Findings

Community college students accumulate a high number of excess hours

Almost all of the cohort of community college students we examined had excess hours, and nearly two-thirds had 20% or more hours than they needed to earn their associate degrees.

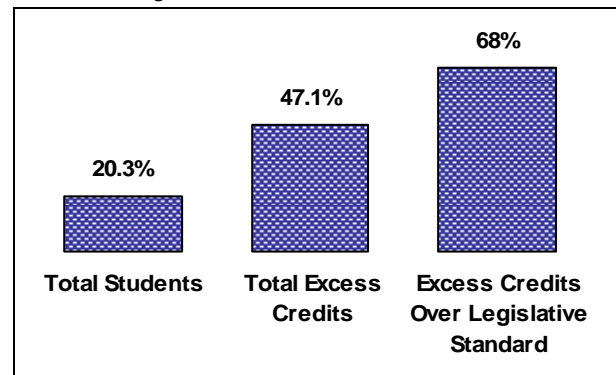
Most community college students graduate with excess hours. The cohort of 14,015 community college students we examined accumulated 293,714 excess hours. Almost all (97%) of the students accumulated at least one excess hour. On average, the students accumulated 21.7 more credit hours than they needed to graduate. Given that the typical college course is three credit hours, these students enrolled in about seven courses beyond degree requirements.

Nearly two-thirds of the students exceeded the legislative standard for excess hours. To help control excess hours, the Legislature has established a performance standard that community college students not have more than 120% of the hours needed to meet degree requirements. This allows the typical student to take 12 credit hours or four three-credit-hour courses more than needed for graduation. Community colleges are to take steps to reduce the percentage of students whose excess hours exceed this standard.

Nevertheless, approximately 61% of the students in our cohort accumulated hours in excess of the 120% standard. On average, students who exceeded the standard acquired 30.3 credit hours more than they needed. This equates to approximately 10 three-credit-hour courses or more than two semesters of full-time college work.

A relatively small percentage of students account for a large proportion of excess hours. While almost all community college students accumulated excess hours, a relatively small group of students accounted for a large proportion of the excess hours taken. As shown in Exhibit 1, 20% of the students in our cohort accounted for almost half (47%) of the total excess hours accumulated by the graduates, and 68% of hours in excess of the legislative standard. The student with the highest number of excess hours took 199 hours in total, more than three times the graduation requirement for the typical associate in arts degree.

Exhibit 1
20% of Students Took 68% of the Excess Hours Over the Legislative Standard



Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE data.

Relatively few excess hours are the result of dropped or failed courses. The excess hours earned by community college students generally were not the result of dropped or failed courses. Less than 9% of the excess hours of students in our cohort resulted from dropped or failed courses.³

Excess hours varied widely among the state's 28 community colleges. As shown in Exhibit 2, the percentage of students who accumulated hours in excess of the legislative standard ranged from a low of 33.9% at Pasco-Hernando Community College to a high of 83.7% at Miami Dade College.⁴ Most (10) community colleges experienced between 50% and 60% of their students with excess hours above the legislative standard.⁵

³ In contrast, a prior OPPAGA review found that 57% of university students' excess hours were the result of dropped or failed courses. The low drop and failure rate indicates that community college students are more likely than their university counterparts to take classes not needed for their associate degree. See *Justification Review: State University System*, OPPAGA [Report No. 01-28](#), May 2001.

⁴ Florida Keys Community College was eliminated from the analysis due to low graduate numbers which would negatively skew the results.

⁵ The percentage of students in the cohort with excess hours did not vary significantly across degree programs in Florida community colleges. For instance, 61.4% of students earning AA degrees in 2001-02 accumulated hours in excess of the legislative standard compared with 61.7% of students earning an AS degree.

Excess hours cost both students and the state

Excess hours are costly to both the state and students. The state paid approximately \$30 million for the excess hours students in our cohort attempted, while the students paid \$16.2 million in tuition. In addition, excess hours tend to delay students' graduation, and research shows that students who do not graduate in a timely manner are more likely than others to never complete their degrees.

Excess hours are costly to the state. Based on the per-hour subsidy paid through legislative appropriations, the additional hours all students in our cohort attempted cost the state \$30 million (see Exhibit 3). Most of these hours were incurred by students whose hours exceeded the legislative standard. Excess hours taken by those students who exceeded the legislative standard cost the state \$26.6 million. The hours these students attempted that exceeded the 120% legislative standard cost the state \$15.8 million.

However, these figures likely substantially understate the full cost of excess hours at community colleges since our cohort contained only about 39% of all students graduating from community colleges in Fiscal Year 2001-02.

Exhibit 2 The Percentage of Students With Excess Hours Varies Significantly Among Community Colleges

Percentage of Students With Excess Hours Over the Legislative Standard	Community Colleges
Less than 50%	9 community colleges: Brevard (50%), Central Florida (40.2%), Chipola (46.5%), North Florida (41.6%), Okaloosa-Walton (49.7%), Pasco-Hernando (33.9%), Polk (47%), St. Johns River (41.6%), South Florida (38%).
51% - 60%	10 community colleges: Daytona Beach (55.6%), Florida CC at Jacksonville (54.3%), Gulf Coast (59.8%), Hillsborough (60%), Indian River (53.8%), Manatee (59.9%), Palm Beach (57.9%), Pensacola (55.3%), St. Petersburg (56.5%), Seminole (54.3%).
61% - 70%	6 community colleges: Broward (63%), Edison (60.6%), Lake City (60.7%), Lake-Sumter (61.8%), Santa Fe (64.4%), Tallahassee (61.7%).
More than 70%	2 community colleges: Miami Dade (83.7%) and Valencia (72.8%).

Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE data. Florida Keys was not considered due to low graduate numbers.

If all students graduating in that year accumulated the same average number of excess hours as the students in our cohort, the total cost to the state for hours in excess of graduation requirements would have been approximately \$80.8 million, or 9.9% of the total amount appropriated to community colleges. If 61% of graduating students accumulated the average number of hours in excess of the legislative standard, the cost to the state would have been approximately \$40.8 million, or 5% of the appropriations for community colleges.

Exhibit 3
Students in Our Cohort Took Excess Hours at a High Cost to the State and the Students

	Excess Hours for All Students	Excess Hours for Students Who Exceeded Legislative Standard	
		Above Required	Above 120%
Number of Excess Hours for Students in Cohort	293,714	260,310	154,580
Number of Students in Cohort	13,537	8,594	8,594
Percentage of Students in Cohort	97%	61%	61%
Total Average Cost Per Credit Hour	\$157.26	\$157.26	\$157.26
State Support Per Credit Hour	\$102.15	\$102.15	\$102.15
Student Cost Per Credit Hour	\$55.11	\$55.11	\$55.11
State Cost of Excess Hours	\$30,002,885	\$26,590,666	\$15,790,347
Student Cost of Excess Hours	\$16,186,579	\$14,345,684	\$8,518,904

Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE data.

Excess hours are costly to students. Since community college students contribute to the cost of their education, excess hours are also costly to them. The students in our cohort paid \$16.2 million, or an average of about \$1,200 per student for the hours they attempted that exceeded graduation requirements. Reducing these excess hours also would potentially

reduce the amount that students borrow to pay for their education.

Students who incur a large number of excess hours also may be at risk of not obtaining a degree. Research shows that students who remain in college for longer periods of time are less likely to graduate. Since students who incur excess hours take longer to satisfy their degree requirements, they can be at a high risk of never completing their degrees. Community colleges currently have low graduation rates. As noted in a 2001 OPPAGA report, only 34% of community college students we examined had earned a community college degree or continued study after five years.⁶ Reducing excess hours thus could help community colleges to raise their retention and graduation rates.

However, increased retention rates will result in colleges having higher numbers of full-time equivalent students than they do now, which will offset some of the savings. For example, in an effort to reduce excess hours, the University of Florida improved its counseling services. As a result, even though it held admission of new students constant, the university experienced a 1% growth in its population of undergraduate students. If applied to our cohort, this type of increase would reduce anticipated savings by \$806,862.⁷

Student characteristics and inadequate advisement are the primary causes of excess hours. Community college administrators we interviewed believe that the primary causes of excess hours are

- student characteristics such as age, marital status, employment status, English language proficiency, and educational preparedness;
- students taking courses for baccalaureate degrees at their community colleges rather than at universities, although such excess

⁶ *Progress Report: Community College Budget Incentives and Interagency Articulation Improve, But Graduation Rates Still Inflated*, OPPAGA Report No. 01-30, June 2001.

⁷ The \$806,862 was calculated by multiplying a 1% growth in graduates by the average number of excess hours per graduate multiplied by the cost per credit hour to the state.

hours often are not accepted by universities; and

- college academic advising practices.

The characteristics of community college students contribute to excess hours. Community college students are often older than university students. They also are more likely to hold full-time jobs while attending college and to need financial aid. In addition, in some areas, a large proportion of community colleges students have limited proficiency in English.

These characteristics can contribute to excess hours. For example, students who work may experience problems scheduling the courses needed for their major and may sign up for classes they do not need in order to keep their status as full-time students. Students need to retain this status to be eligible for federal financial aid, to be covered under their parents' health insurance policies, and to be classified as dependents for income taxes. Part-time students also can experience scheduling problems, especially when they cannot take courses in the proper sequence.

In some areas, a high proportion of students have limited English proficiency (LEP). These students are likely to take excess hours to improve their English language skills. Three of the four community colleges that have the highest percentages of students with excess hours also have a high proportion of LEP students.

In addition, community colleges students are more likely than university students to be academically unprepared for college. A community college student is often the first person in the family to attend college. These students may have poor study habits and need more time to be successful in mastering subjects, particularly in the areas of math and science.

Community colleges have attempted to help academically unprepared students in various ways such as requiring them to take a student life skills course to teach studying basics and

critical thinking skills.⁸ Miami Dade has split the required algebra course into two separate courses to make it more manageable for students to learn. While life skills classes and separate algebra courses may help students succeed, they often do not count towards graduation requirements and result in excess hours.

Taking community college courses to satisfy upper division requirements can contribute to excess hours. Community college administrators noted that some students choose to take courses for their baccalaureate major while still attending community college. Community colleges charge less than universities per credit hour, and some community college courses can satisfy upper-division requirements in certain majors. Even though they do not need these courses for associate degrees, students can take these courses in community colleges to save money and benefit from smaller class sizes. Community college officials implied that students who take such courses would avoid excess hours at the university level, as the hours in excess of associate degree requirements would count toward their upper division baccalaureate degree requirements.

However, our analysis indicates that state universities typically only accept transfer of a median of about 60 credit hours, the number needed for an Associate in Arts degree. On average, universities accepted only about one-third of the excess credit hours the students in our cohort attempted. Further, not all of the accepted credit hours could be used to satisfy baccalaureate degree requirements. Thus, most of the excess hours community college students attempt do not help them meet baccalaureate degrees requirements.

Inadequate academic advising increases excess hours taken by community college students. Given the challenges of serving non-traditional and often academically unprepared students, academic advising is particularly important for community colleges.

⁸ The Lumina Foundation is providing grant funding of a study at four community colleges in Florida to identify and address gaps in student achievement.

Effective academic advising lays out for students the courses they need to take and at what point they should take each class. This counseling helps students plan their courses of study to meet degree requirements and graduate with the skills needed to obtain employment. Without such advising, students are more likely to take courses they do not need for their major or to change majors and take additional classes to meet the requirements of their new majors. While there is no statewide data on how frequently community college students change majors, a Florida Community College at Jacksonville study found that of the 312 graduates with excess hours, almost all (311) had changed majors at least once during their college career. A similar study conducted by Miami Dade College found that 58% of graduates with excess hours changed majors more than once.

Community colleges typically advise students during their initial entrance into the college. However, not all of them require students to develop a written plan showing the courses they will need to take to achieve their objectives. Without such a plan, students are likely to make unwise course selections. In addition, after providing the initial counseling, colleges then rely on students to use the college catalog and on-line registration processes to select their courses. This allows students to stray from their plan of study.

Some community colleges are taking steps to reduce excess hours by improving their academic counseling. For instance, Florida Community College at Jacksonville requires beginning students in all fields of study to receive face-to-face advising and develop an academic plan. The college then uses an automated system that channels students along their academic plans when they register for courses and prompts them to consult with an advisor if they stray from these plans. This system was constructed to manage the academic careers of veterans using Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

South Florida Community College conducts degree audits regularly to intervene and adjust student course selections to help students stay on course for degree completion. Miami Dade College recently has developed an intervention strategy for students who declare themselves liberal arts majors since historical data shows these students are more likely to have unplanned courses of study and to need additional help with advising and setting up a course roadmap. This program is relatively new and did not affect students in our cohort.

Recommendations

Both community colleges and the Legislature can take actions to reduce excess hours which cost the state at least \$30 million in the cohort we examined. Community colleges can strengthen academic advising and the Legislature can provide institutional and student-based incentives.

We recommend that all community colleges strengthen advising. To implement this recommendation, community colleges should provide career counseling to help incoming students select majors that suit them and develop plans for the courses students will need to take for those majors. They then should implement procedures, such as periodic graduation audits, to ensure that students adhere to these plans and to counsel those who do not.

Community colleges should track the results of their counseling improvements and share successful counseling strategies with one another. In addition, community colleges should examine other ways to reduce excess hours, such as examining schedules to ensure that they do not impede students from getting required courses in the proper sequence and, when appropriate, helping students to access and complete coursework on line.

We recommend that the Legislature consider providing institutional and student-based financial incentives. To reduce the costs associated with excess hours, the Legislature may wish to consider several financial options designed to provide incentives for institutions or students to reduce excess hours. These include

- instituting higher tuition rates for students who accumulate excess hours above the legislative standard and
- creating a shared savings incentive program in which community colleges retain a portion of the cost savings associated with a reduction in excess hours.

Charge Higher Tuition for Excess Hours. The Legislature could charge higher tuition rates for excess hours. For instance, if the Legislature required community college students who take more than the credit hours needed for graduation to pay the full cost of these hours, the state could save as much as \$80.8 million annually.

However, if the Legislature only required community college students who take more than 120% of the credit hours needed for graduation to pay the full cost of these hours, the state could save as much as \$40.8 million annually. Charging higher tuition for excess hours above the legislative standard would provide a strong financial incentive for students to reduce excess hours and still allow the typical student to take 12 credit hours or four three-credit hour courses above those required for a 60-credit-hour degree.

Community college officials expressed concern about this option, noting that many community college students are raising families and working full-time. The officials cautioned that some students could withdraw from college and not finish their degrees if the cost of their degrees substantially increased.

Create a Shared Savings Incentive Program. As part of performance-based program budgeting, the Legislature has appropriated approximately \$7.6 million in performance

funding for community colleges for Fiscal Year 2004-05. Approximately \$679,000 of this performance fund is distributed to community colleges based on their pro-rata share of the number of students who earn their Associate in Arts degrees with 72 or fewer hours. This provides some incentive for community colleges to reduce excess hours; statewide, the number of students who meet this standard has increased by about 2%.

The Legislature could strengthen this incentive by sharing the savings that would result from decreasing excess hours with community colleges. The projected savings associated with this option would depend on the desired reduction in excess hours and the share of the total savings provided to community colleges.

For example, the Legislature could provide a 50% share of the net savings for each community college that achieves a 10% decrease in its excess hours and, as a result, experiences a 1% increase in its student population.⁹ Assuming that all institutions met the 10% goal and improved their retention rates by 1%, the net savings would be approximately \$8 million, half of which (\$4 million) could be retained by the state and the other half provided to the community colleges. Community colleges could use these incentive funds to add academic advisors or conduct other activities to reduce excess hours. This option would encourage community colleges to be innovative in reducing excess hours.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Commissioner of Education to review and respond.

The Commissioner's written response has been reproduced in Appendix B.

⁹ The decrease in excess hours would be measured by comparing the excess hours accumulated by the current year's graduation class to that of the previous year.

Appendix A

Methodology

To determine the extent to which community college graduates took excess credit hours, OPPAGA analyzed a graduation cohort of all students who received an Associate in Arts or an Associate in Science degree from a Florida community college in 2001-02. We selected this time period to enable us to determine if excess hours subsequently were accepted by Florida universities and used to meet baccalaureate degree requirements. For each of the students in the cohort, we examined the coursework the students took at community colleges during the previous six years. We excluded all remedial coursework from our calculation of excess hours as those courses do not receive college credit. From the initial cohort of approximately 36,000 students, we also excluded several student groups noted below to ensure an accurate analysis.

- Students who transferred credits into a community college (13,357 records), as we were unable to allocate excess hours among all the institutions attended.
- Students who were enrolled in a secondary program (250 records), as we were unable to ascertain which hours were necessary to fulfill the secondary program requirements.
- Students who had duplicate records.
- Students who earned fewer hours than required to fulfill degree requirements but who were subsequently granted a degree (8,119 records). These students apparently took classes outside of the six-year period covered by our study. As research shows that students who take a longer time in college generally more excess hours, these students likely had accumulated excess hours.
- Students who had earned a prior associates degree at the same institution (700 records).

Our final cohort included 14,015 students, which represents 39% of the students who graduated in 2001-02 (see Table A-1).

Table A-1
Our Final Student Cohort Used to Analyze Excess Hours Contained 39% 2001-02 Graduates

Initial Cohort	Transfers	Secondary Program	Duplicate Records	Anomalous Records	Prior Degree	Final Cohort
36,445	13,357	250	4	8,119	700	14,015

Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE database.

Appendix B

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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April 25, 2005

Mr. Gary VanLandingham
Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability
325 West Madison Street, Suite 312
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

The Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Education (DCC WE) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the OPPAGA report regarding Excess Hours at Community Colleges Warrant Attention by the Department of Education and the Legislature. We share the goal of encouraging and assisting students in achieving their educational goals in the fewest number of hours possible for them and we agree with the first recommendation that "all community colleges strengthen advising." Having students interact on a regular basis with a trained advisor has been shown to increase graduates and reduce the hours taken. Good advising on a campus involves both resources and staff which would need to be addressed in an appropriate fashion.

Along with good advising, there are other procedures that institutions can use to ensure students move as quickly as possible through the system. One procedure mentioned in the report is the expanded use of the degree audit systems that are a component of FACTS. We support requiring each student to share a degree audit with their advisor at least once a year or incorporating it into the registration process which would both get students in to see an advisor and get them focused on degree attainment. Another referenced item is that the transfer of lower division courses to a university in excess of the sixty hours that constitute the Associate in Arts is not assured. The report states that one-third of the excess credit hours are being accepted by the universities. This illustrates the importance of the Common Pre-Requisites manual and the need to continue to maintain it in a way that reflects the current practice of each public university, something our Division staff works closely on with staff of the Division of Colleges and Universities.

Mr. Gary VanLandingham
April 25, 2005
Page 2 of 2

The second recommendation, ". . . that the Legislature consider providing institutional and student-based financial incentives," is already underway as part of our Performance Based Budgeting. The DCC WE has incorporated a financial incentive for institutions to reduce the number of excess hours earned by graduates by including the percent of graduates with less than 72 hours as one measure within Performance Based Budgeting. The positive impact of this has been shown in the increasing percentage of Associate in Arts graduates that meet this requirement. We appreciate recommendations that encourage the use of incentives such as Performance Based Budgeting and strengthen the positive outcomes of those incentives.

The second part of this recommendation, student-based incentives, needs to be reviewed in light of the students we serve. Charging higher tuition for excess hours would place additional financial burdens on those students least able to pay. Eighty percent of Pell Grants provided to lower division public higher education students are awarded in the community college system. Requiring these students to pay more could easily have the unintended consequence of producing drop-outs rather than graduates. Another approach would be to increase the monies appropriated for Performance Based Budgeting and continue to include the current measure of efficiency or perhaps double the weight of each Associate in Arts earned in 72 hours or less. Similar consideration could be provided for Associate in Science, but would have to be calculated on a program-by-program basis since there is no Associate in Science/Associate in Applied Science standard program length. Offering financial incentives and rewards to students who complete their degrees or certificates is yet another way to directly encourage students.

Research indicates that many other issues enter into the need for additional hours, including pre-college preparation in academic areas and many socio-economic issues. We are currently participating in a national study to analyze policy, program and research regarding student success and expect to make several improvements in these areas. Related to this, many of the improvements now underway in high schools, including more rigorous curriculum and higher standards, should lead to improvements in excess hours.

We are working with each institution to help improve advising and increase the number of Associate in Arts degrees earned with 72 hours or less. However, we strive to balance these efforts with the needs of our students and urge that, to the extent possible, unintended consequences be considered, including a disincentive for students to change majors, or to improve their basic skills such as English and mathematics in ways that ensure success. The top priority of the Florida Community College System is a combination of student access and success.

Sincerely,

/s/

John L. Winn
Commissioner

JLW/jmf/br

c: J. David Armstrong

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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