



Excess Hours Cost State \$62 Million Annually; University Actions May Help Address Problem

at a glance

To ensure that higher education is affordable, the Legislature historically has mandated relatively low tuition and general fees. However, most students attending the state's public universities graduate with credit hours in excess of graduation requirements, which increase state higher education costs. In Fiscal Year 2004-05, these excess hours cost the state \$62 million.

OPPAGA's 2004 report offered several policy options for legislative consideration to decrease the state's cost of excess hours, including requiring that certain students pay for at least a portion of the cost of excess hours. In 2005, the Legislature passed SB 2236 to require students to pay 75% of the actual cost of credit hours beyond 120% of the hours required for their degree. However, the bill was vetoed by the Governor.

Florida public postsecondary institutions have taken steps to reduce time to graduation and excess hours. Because these strategies have been implemented relatively recently, it is too early to draw conclusions on their effectiveness.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken in response to a 2004 OPPAGA report regarding

financial incentives for encouraging students to graduate with fewer excess hours.^{1,2}

Background

Universities receive funding for their educational program primarily from legislative appropriations (general revenue and lottery funds) and student tuition and fees. For Fiscal Year 2005-06, the university system received a total of \$2.7 billion. In fall 2005, Florida's 11 state universities served over 287,000 students.

Our previous report found that during Fiscal Year 2002-03, students attempted 719,660 credits in excess of graduation requirements.³ These excess hours cost the state \$62 million. To reduce the costs of excess hours, OPPAGA's report presented three options for legislative consideration:

- charge the full cost for credit hours in excess of 115% of graduation requirements;

¹ [Section 11.51\(6\), F.S.](#)

² *Stronger Financial Incentives Could Encourage Students to Graduate With Fewer Excess Hours*, OPPAGA [Report No. 04-44](#), June 2004.

³ Our previous report identified several factors that may result in excess hours, including students changing majors; taking courses not needed for graduation but which may help prepare students in their chosen fields of study; and withdrawing from or failing courses, and later retaking such classes. For more information, refer to the Florida Board of Governors [Information Brief](#), Issue 4, October 21, 2004.

- provide tuition rebates to students who graduate with minimal excess hours; and
- offer “locked-in” tuition, under which students who do not graduate within four years would pay higher tuition rates charged to new students.

Current Status

To reduce the number of excess hours, the 2005 Legislature passed SB 2236, which would have required students to pay 75% of the actual cost of credit hours beyond 120% of the hours required for their degree.⁴ However, the bill was vetoed by the Governor. Among the reasons the Governor provided for his veto was the concern that higher tuition could place additional financial burdens on community college students, who already face several significant obstacles to completing their degrees. During the 2006 legislative session SB 246 was considered which was similar to SB 2236, but it did not pass.

Florida universities and community colleges have implemented strategies for student advising and academic progress monitoring that are intended to equip and encourage students to graduate in a timely manner. These strategies may help to reduce excess hours. For instance, several state universities are developing or have implemented automated systems that monitor student progress toward degrees and, when students are off track, place holds on their ability to register until they have seen an academic advisor. This assists universities in targeting academic advising resources and helps students graduate on time.⁵ Of the universities with automated systems, the University of Florida’s has been in place the longest (since 1996) and is the most highly developed.

In addition, all public universities and community colleges and private, non-profit colleges and universities are implementing strategies to improve student graduation rates,

which also may help to reduce the number of excess hours students accumulate.⁶ The primary strategies most institutions are using include proactive student advising, enhancing and making student support services more accessible, offering learning skills courses for first-year students, and providing tutoring services. Because many institution-based strategies have been implemented relatively recently, it is too early to draw conclusions on their effectiveness.

Nonetheless, based on the most recent data available from the Florida Board of Governors, students continue to accumulate a large number of excess hours. We analyzed the records of 37,424 students receiving bachelor’s degrees from Florida public universities in Fiscal Year 2004-05, and found that they attempted 780,769 credits in excess of graduation requirements.⁷ While over three-quarters of students accumulated some excess hours, most excess hours were earned by a relatively small number of students. Twenty percent of the students accounted for over one-half (58%) of all credit hours over the minimum graduation requirements. The percentage of graduates with excess credit hours and the average number of excess credit hours students accumulated upon graduation remained about the same from 2001-02 to 2004-05. (See Appendix A for excess hours by institution.)

The large number of excess hours students accumulate continues to drive up the cost of higher education. The 780,769 excess hours that students took in Fiscal Year 2004-05 cost the state \$62 million. Excess hours increased student tuition and fees by \$71 million (an additional \$2,418 in tuition and fees per student with excess hours).⁸

⁴ This bill would have allowed students to take up to 24 additional credit hours (8 additional 3-credit hour courses) over typical degree requirements without an increase in cost per credit hour.

⁵ *Student Tracking Systems Can Be Used to Enhance Graduation and Retention Rates*, OPPAGA [Report No. 06-48](#), May 2006.

⁶ *Florida’s Postsecondary Institutions Employ a Variety of Support Services for Students*, OPPAGA [Report No. 06-52](#), June 2006.

⁷ OPPAGA calculated excess hours by counting credit hours attempted (including failed and dropped courses) while attending a public postsecondary institution. The analysis also includes excess hours that students transferred from community colleges but excludes credits not earned in a public postsecondary institution and remediation course credits.

⁸ The costs of excess hours were determined by using the average cost per credit for lower level courses at the state’s 11 public universities in Fiscal Year 2004-05.

Appendix A

Number of Excess Hours Varies by University

The percentage of graduates with hours in excess of 115% of graduation requirements varies by university. Table A-1 shows that the percentage of graduates who earned hours in excess of 115% of those required for graduation in Fiscal Year 2001-02 ranged from 58% at Florida International University to 31% at Florida State University. Those institutions with the highest percentage of students with excess hours over the 115% standard were Florida International University (58%), Florida A&M University (57%), and Florida Gulf Coast University (53%). Although percentages remained relatively similar for graduates in 2004-05, three universities changed considerably: Florida Gulf Coast University (14 percentage point decrease), Florida International University (7 percentage point decrease), and the University of South Florida (6 percentage point increase). Similar to the findings for the 115% threshold, the percentage of graduates with hours in excess of 120% of the graduation requirement also varies considerably by institution (see Table A-2).

Table A-1
SUS Students Over the 115% Standard

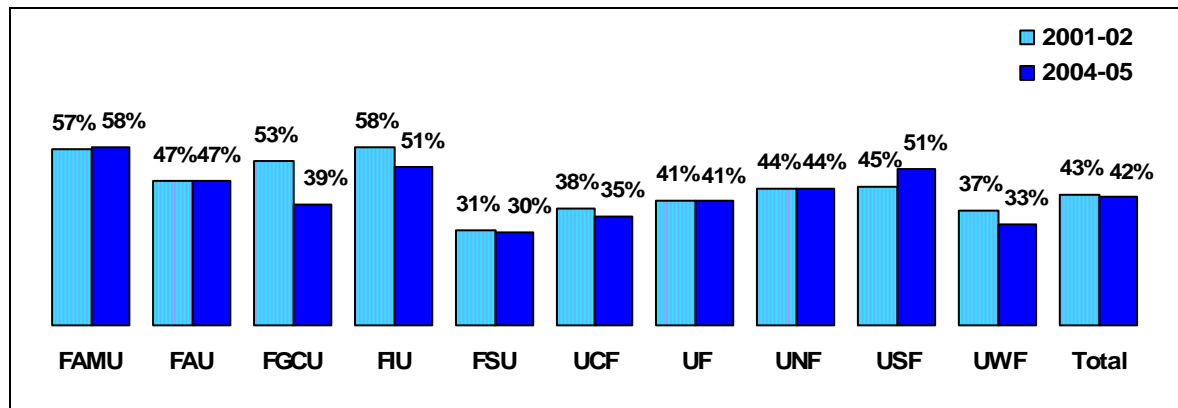
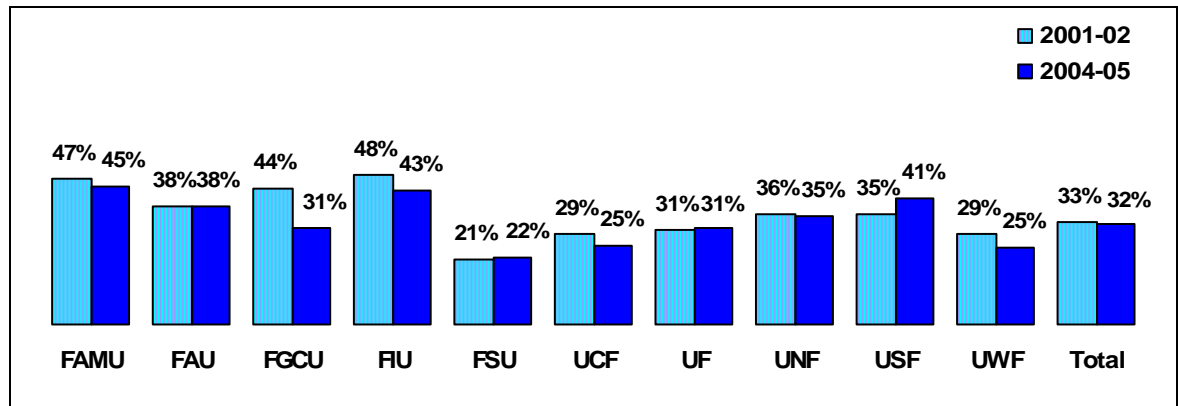


Table A-2
SUS Students Over the 120% Standard



Source: OPPAGA analysis of SUS Hours to Degree file.

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



Visit the [Florida Monitor](http://www.floridamonitor.com), OPPAGA's online service. See www.oppaga.state.fl.us. This site monitors the performance and accountability of Florida government by making OPPAGA's four primary products available online.

- [OPPAGA publications and contracted reviews](#), such as policy analyses and performance reviews, assess the efficiency and effectiveness of state policies and programs and recommend improvements for Florida government.
- [Performance-based program budgeting \(PB²\) reports and information](#) offer a variety of tools. Program evaluation and justification reviews assess state programs operating under performance-based program budgeting. Also offered are performance measures information and our assessments of measures.
- [Florida Government Accountability Report \(FGAR\)](#) is an Internet encyclopedia of Florida state government. FGAR offers concise information about state programs, policy issues, and performance.
- [Best Financial Management Practices Reviews of Florida school districts](#). In accordance with the *Sharpening the Pencil Act*, OPPAGA and the Auditor General jointly conduct reviews to determine if a school district is using best financial management practices to help school districts meet the challenge of educating their students in a cost-efficient manner.

Subscribe to OPPAGA's electronic newsletter, [Florida Monitor Weekly](#), a free source for brief e-mail announcements of research reports, conferences, and other resources of interest for Florida's policy research and program evaluation community.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

Florida Monitor: www.oppaga.state.fl.us

Project supervised by David D. Summers (850/487-9257)

Project conducted by Holly Walter and Brian Underhill

Jane Fletcher, Education Staff Director (850/487-9255)

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director