



State Policies for Excess Hours Remain Unchanged; Steps Taken to Strengthen Academic Advising

at a glance

The Legislature, the Department of Education, and community colleges have taken steps to decrease the occurrence and cost of excess hours taken by community college students.

- 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. The Legislature considered, but did not pass, similar legislation in 2006 and 2007.
- The department and the community colleges have developed and published guidelines for strengthening student academic advising, better tracking student progress, and improving articulation between community colleges and the state university system.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken in response to a 2005 OPPAGA report that identified the extent to which students take excess hours at community colleges and options for reducing these hours.¹ This progress report does not

include a trend analysis of the current total or cost of excess hours.

Background

While postsecondary institutions require students to earn specified numbers of credit hours in order to graduate, students often take more classes than required. The Florida Legislature defines excess hours as those that exceed 120% of degree requirements.

OPPAGA's 2005 report examined a cohort of 14,015 community college students and found that nearly two-thirds had earned credit hours that exceeded this standard. These students earned a total of 293,714 excess hours. The cost to the state for the students we examined in our 2005 report was at least \$30 million.

While there are no direct financial penalties for students who earn excess hours, these courses are costly to the students. When a course is repeated due to a failure or a withdrawal more than two times, Florida law requires that students pay the full cost of instruction for that course.² This cost is calculated as four times the cost of Florida resident rates or equivalent to Florida non-resident rates.

¹ *Excess Hours at Community Colleges Warrant Attention by the Department of Education and the Legislature*, OPPAGA Report No. 05-30, April 2005.

² Section 1009.285, F.S.

In addition, students receiving federal financial aid have incentives for managing the number of hours they attempt. Financial Aid recipients may not attempt more than 150% of the credit hours required for their degree or certificate program to maintain their financial aid eligibility.

Our report identified several reasons why students earn excess hours. These included inadequate academic advisement, students' inadequate educational preparedness to take college coursework, and students' dropping or failing courses due in part to their work and family responsibilities. Other factors for potentially earning excess hours include change of major or double major decisions, frequently prompted by the demands of the changing economy or advances in technology.

To address the excess hours issue, our report recommended that the Legislature consider options for creating institutional and student-based financial incentives to discourage excess hours and community colleges strengthen student academic advising.

Current Status ---

While state level policies for excess hours have not changed since the publication of our report, the Legislature and the Division of Community Colleges within the department of education have taken steps to address the issue. In 2005, the Legislature passed a bill that would raise the tuition for students accumulating excess hours. However, the Governor vetoed this legislation. The department has taken steps to improve information sharing among community colleges and has established guidelines for academic advising.

The Legislature has considered creating financial incentives to reduce excess hours

The Legislature has considered options to create financial incentives for institutions and students to reduce excess hours. Specifically, the 2005

Legislature passed SB 2236 which would have required students to pay 75% of the actual cost of credit hours earned beyond 120% of the hours required for their degree. However, the Governor subsequently vetoed the legislation. The Legislature considered, but did not pass, similar legislation in 2006 and 2007.

The department and community colleges have taken steps to improve academic advising and keep students on track to earn their degrees

The Department of Education and the state's community colleges have taken steps to improving academic advising and better help their students plan for an appropriate course of study, track their progress, and stay on course.

In 2006, the Council of Community College Presidents, working with the Department of Education and FACTS.org, developed, endorsed, and published guidelines for student advising and tracking student progression. These guidelines are suggestions and are not considered mandatory. They include

- requiring students to select majors and develop multi-year course plans by the time they have accumulated 18 college credit hours or sooner;
- using "electronic degree audit systems," to track student progress toward their associate degrees and requiring students who are off-track to consult with advisors; and
- using FACTS.org "2 + 2" audits degree audits to ensure that student academic plans will allow them to transfer seamlessly into their selected majors at Florida's public universities.³

In addition to these guidelines, the department provided examples of initiatives implemented by individual community colleges to ensure that students are minimizing their attempted hours toward degree completion (see Exhibit 1).

³ FACTS.org is Florida's official online student advising system. High school students, college students, parents, and even counselors can use the website to help plan and track educational progress in Florida. FACTS.org is provided free by the Florida Department of Education to help students make informed choices about their education

The department is also working on improving communication among the community colleges. Specifically, the department has created a feature within the Division of Community Colleges website that facilitates the exchange of best practices among the state’s community colleges. This website feature, which was implemented in May 2005, identifies student advising as one of the areas for colleges to submit best practices.

However, as of August 2007, only one college, Miami Dade College, had best practices for student advising posted to this website. To encourage more colleges to post innovative ideas to the website, the department created the Chancellor’s Best Practices Awards, which will be announced at the annual Florida Association of Community Colleges conference in November.

Exhibit 1

Since 2005, Individual Community Colleges Have Implemented Strategies to Reduce Excess Hours

<p>Santa Fe Community College now requires that all associate in arts students indicate a major course of study upon completion of 24 college-level hours. In addition, students are blocked from registering without first accessing their on-line audit and viewing their progress toward degree requirements each term.</p>
<p>Florida Community College at Jacksonville has added a requirement for students in academic peril based on withdrawals and grade point average, to meet with an advisor or counselor to complete a “success agreement” which specifies actions the student plans to take to improve the probability of earning a degree.</p>
<p>Valencia Community College has implemented the LifeMap, an education and career planning tool that students and advisors use to both plan and track student progress toward their goals.</p>
<p>Brevard Community College has implemented an Early Alert program by which students whose instructors flag them as being in academic jeopardy prior to midterm are contacted and offered advisement, tutoring, and other support.</p>
<p>Indian River Community College now requires student declaration of a major within the first 18 credit hours and assigns a specific counselor to each degree seeking student to monitor progress. A new student advising system provides students and counselors with 24/7 online access to a student’s individualized program plan.</p>
<p>Miami-Dade College uses a college call center to contact and intervene with students who are taking courses out of program. An Individualized Education Plan is used for advisement and tracking student progress toward their degree.</p>
<p>Lake City Community College requires AA students to declare a major track by the conclusion of 12 hours of earned credit. students who have accumulated 45 hours of credit are identified each term and notified that it is time to see an advisor to complete a degree audit and prepare for graduation.</p>

Source: Division of Community Colleges, Department of Education.

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