April 2008   **Report No. 08-25**

Postsecondary Student Use of the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) Is Low

at a glance

The Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) provides a variety of tools to support academic planning and articulation for middle school, high school, and postsecondary students. Many of these tools provide individualized advising based on students' unique academic records and transcripts.

Most of the FACTS' tools created to assist postsecondary students are not widely used. Specifically,

- our review of approximately 140,000 community college students enrolled in 2006-07 found that only 11% had used any of the FACTS' personalized advising and articulation assistance tools, and less than 2% had used tools intended to support articulation; and
- FACTS' administrative tools such as admissions applications and transient student forms are more widely used but institutions have not fully automated these forms.

Postsecondary institutions report that their students tend to use internal systems rather than FACTS for advising purposes, including assessing progress toward meeting degree requirements and viewing transcripts.

Scope —————————————

This is the second report in a series pursuant to Chapter 2007-246, *Laws of Florida*, which directs OPPAGA to review the implementation of statewide articulation policies. [1] This report addresses two questions.

- What services does FACTS provide to secondary and postsecondary students?
- Do postsecondary students use the academic advising and articulation tools provided by FACTS?

Additional reports in this series address other statewide articulation policies, including the Statewide Course Numbering System, general education requirements, and approved acceleration programs.

Background —————————————

Florida's postsecondary education system includes a "2+2" articulation process through which students may successfully pursue a bachelor's degree by first receiving an Associate in Arts degree at a community college and then transferring to a state university to complete the remaining two years of coursework. A large number of students participate in the 2+2 system.

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[1] *Inconsistent Implementation of Common Prerequisites Creates Barriers to Effective 2+2 Articulation,* Report No. 08-11, March 2008.

For the three-year period (the 2003-04 academic year through the 2005-06 academic year) 96,037 students earned Associate in Arts degrees at community colleges and 30,817 transfer students enrolled at a state university. [2]

For Florida's 2+2 system to be successful, articulation between community colleges and state universities must be effective. The Florida Legislature has established several policies to help ensure that the system works as intended. Section 1007.23, *Florida Statutes,* requires the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors to develop and implement a statewide articulation agreement. This agreement guarantees that community college Associate in Arts degree graduates will be admitted to the upper division of a state university, with the exception of the degree programs that are limited access or require an audition or portfolio (in the case of fine and performing arts programs). In addition, the Legislature has directed the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors to implement other articulation policies including the Statewide Course Numbering System, the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS), general education requirements, and common program prerequisites.

FACTS was established to facilitate articulation for postsecondary students. In 1995, the Legislature directed Florida's higher education governing systems to design and implement a single, statewide computer-assisted student advising system. The legislation mandated that the system include a degree audit and an articulation component to assist students in course selection, document their status toward degree completion, and verify when students complete graduation requirements. A working prototype of these features was completed in 1999, and by 2004, 38 of the 39 public postsecondary institutions had implemented the degree audit, transcript, and admissions application functionalities. [3]

FACTS' mission has expanded to include middle and high school students. Following the Florida Education Governance Reorganization Act of 2001, FACTS' mission was expanded to support Florida's "K-20 seamless education system." Several high school tools were added including a personalized high school planner (Electronic Personal Education Planner or ePEP) and a variety of scholarship, dual enrollment, and academic planning information. In 2006, the Legislature required that all middle school students use FACTS to create an ePEP as part of a class required for promotion to 9th grade. The legislation also required high school freshmen to declare a major area of study for high school. To help meet these requirements, FACTS developed a search tool to allow students and parents to view course and majors offered by their schools. [4]

The information systems supporting FACTS operate differently for its secondary and postsecondary functions. Features that serve postsecondary students operate on a distributed basis, with each state university and community college linking its internal computer systems to FACTS through a standard communication protocol. This allows student information to be exchanged between institutions. [5] In contrast, features that serve middle and high school students operate on a centralized commercial database that maintains data on individual students.

The Legislature has appropriated more than $49 million for FACTS development and maintenance. Over the past 10 years, the Legislature has appropriated over $49 million for the development and implementation of the FACTS system, with over half of the funding going directly to the institutions to provide connectivity and update information. Currently FACTS is a recurring budget item for the State Board of Education, and it was appropriated $2,053,233 for Fiscal Year 2007-08. Exhibit 1 shows appropriations for FACTS since its establishment.

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[2] The 2005-06 academic year data was the most recent data available.

[3] New College of Florida has a different mission and admissions and grading structure than other state universities. New college is on a different FACTS' implementation schedule and not all FACTS functionalities are applicable to the college.

[4] Chapter 2006-74, *Laws of Florida.*

[5] Certain information required for students to use the admission and transient student forms and the postsecondary career portfolio function is stored on the FACTS server at the University of South Florida.

Exhibit 1
The Legislature Has Appropriated
Over $49 Million for FACTS

Fiscal Year	Total Amount Appropriated
1997-98	$ 6,900,000
1998-99	4,500,000
1999-00	4,654,000
2000-01[1]	4,654,000
2001-02[1]	4,481,802
2002-03	4,342,837
2003-04	4,342,837
2004-05	4,342,837
2005-06	4,277,633
2006-07	4,277,633
2007-08[2]	2,053,233
Total	**$49,142,398**

[1] In both Fiscal Year 2000-01 and 2001-02, $200,000 was redirected for a special monitoring project.

[2] This reflects the final amount appropriated in FY 2007-08 approved by the Legislature in March 2008.

Source: General Appropriations Acts for Fiscal Year 1997-98 through 2007-08.

The Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support is responsible for managing, developing, maintaining, and operating FACTS. The center has 23 full-time positions, 19 are located at the University of South Florida and four are in the Department of Education in Tallahassee. All staff are employees of the University of South Florida, which is the fiscal agent for FACTS. A board, composed of members representing all educational sectors, is appointed by the Commissioner of Education and oversees and advises the center on its operations.

Questions and Answers——

What services does FACTS provide to secondary and postsecondary students?

FACTS provides a variety of services to support academic planning and articulation for middle school, high school, and postsecondary students. Many of these computer applications provide personalized advising information that is based on students' unique academic records and transcripts.

These personalized advising tools require students to enter their student number and a personal identification number (PIN) to access their student information. FACTS also provides other advising tools that do not require student-specific information, such as career planning and general degree searches. Finally, FACTS, through its FACTS.org website, provides a central location for information and resources relating to articulation and postsecondary advising for both students and counselors.

Middle and high school students can use FACTS to plan high school coursework and determine eligibility for the Bright Futures Scholarship Program

FACTS provides a variety of advising and planning tools for middle and high school students.

The High School Academic Evaluation feature gives students access to key academic progress information. This function, implemented in 2002, allows students to monitor their individual progress by comparing transcript information to graduation, scholarship, and college admissions requirements. In addition, this feature allows high schools students to determine if they have completed the required courses to be eligible for the Bright Futures scholarship.

The Electronic Personal Education Planner (ePEP) provides a tool for planning critical high school coursework. The High School Electronic Personal Education Planner (ePEP) implemented in 2005, allows public high school students to map out courses for high school that will help prepare them for postsecondary education. In 2006, incoming 6th graders were required to complete an ePEP in order to be promoted to high school. Students create a log-in and PIN to access their individual ePEP. In addition, high school counselors can access each student's ePEP to assist with advising.

The High School Major Area of Interest Search function in FACTS provides information on high school majors. In 2007 FACTS began allowing incoming 9th graders to view the majors offered by their high school. Students entering 9th grade

in 2007 and thereafter will select a Major Area of Interest as part of their required electives for graduation. Although students need four Major Areas of Interest credits, the major can change each year without penalty or affecting graduation. This feature does not require a unique log-in. Once students select their high schools and majors, a list of all available courses that will meet the major requirements at their school is provided. In addition, the Electronic Personal Education Planner also allows students to select courses based on their major for their high school plan.

Postsecondary students can use FACTS to assess their educational progress, submit applications, and assess how coursework will transfer to another institution

FACTS provides a variety of advising and administrative tools to assist postsecondary students plan and manage their academic careers. As shown in Exhibit 2, these include online tools that provide students personalized information, as well as general web resources relating to articulation and postsecondary advising.

Exhibit 2
FACTS Provides a Variety of Tools to Assist Postsecondary Students in Planning Coursework, Monitoring Academic Progress, and Assessing How Their Degrees Will Transfer to Another Institution

Tool	Use	Provide Personalized Information Based on a Student 's Academic Record?
Institutional Degree /Program Audit	Students can assess academic progress by comparing their academic record (transcript) with the requirements of their chosen major at their current institution.	Yes
Local Degree /Program Shopping Audit	Students can assess the impact of changing majors by selecting any degree offered at their current institution and comparing their academic record against the requirements of the degree program.	Yes
Remote Degree /Program Shopping	Students can assess how well their coursework meets degree requirements at other public institutions in Florida by selecting a degree/program offered from the institution and comparing their academic record against the requirements of that degree/program.	Yes
2+2 University Transfer Evaluation	Community college students can assess how their degrees will transfer to a university program by comparing the courses they have taken to state university requirements.	Yes
College Transcripts and Grades	Students can access their unofficial transcripts online to check their grades and view progress toward their degrees.	Yes
Admission applications	Students can apply to more than one institution at the same time.	Yes
Transient student form	Students who are currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution may apply for temporary admission to another institution by completing a transient student form.	Yes
Degree/Program Requirements	User can select a degree/program offered from any public institution in Florida and review course requirements.	No
Degree Planning	Students can input classes they plan to take and see if they meet the requirements of a particular degree at selected institutions.	No

Source: Florida Department of Education.

Students can use FACTS to obtain personalized assistance based on their unique academic records. These personalized tools require students to use their institutional IDs and personal identification numbers (PIN) to access their student information. They enable students to monitor their individual academic progress, assess coursework requirements when changing majors, and complete administrative requirements for enrolling in a university or community college. These tools can be grouped into three broad areas.

▪ **Coursework planning and academic progress tools.** The Institutional Degree/Program Audit allows students to assess academic progress by comparing their academic record (transcript) with the requirements of their chosen major at their current institution. In addition, students can use the College Transcript and Grades tool to view their transcripts and grades online. Also, the Local Degree/Program Shopping -Audit tool enables students to assess the impact of changing majors at their current institution.

▪ **Articulation tools.** Community college Associate in Arts students can use the 2+2 University Transfer Evaluation function to assess how their degrees will transfer to a state university program by comparing the courses they have taken with university requirements. In addition, postsecondary students can use the Remote Degree/Program Shopping function to assess how well their coursework meets degree requirements for specific programs at other public institutions in Florida.

▪ **Administrative tools.** Students can use the Admissions Application to apply to multiple institutions at the same time, thus saving the time and costs of submitting a separate application to each institution. In addition, students who are currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution may apply for temporary admission to another institution by completing the transient student form.

The FACTS.org website serves as a central portal for information and resources relating to articulation. This website is a resource for both students and counselors, serving as a central location for information and resources relating to articulation and postsecondary advising. The site provides institutional profiles that include basic information about admissions, costs, degrees offered, and total enrollment, as well as links to the institutions' websites. The site also provides general information about types of degrees, types of institutions, acceleration programs, and financial aid. Finally, the website serves as a central location for links to a number of useful websites for students and counselors. For example, it houses the Common Prerequisites Manual, and also provides a link to the Florida Choices Planner website; the latter provides information about different careers and helps to match student interests to career choices.

Do postsecondary students use the tools provided by FACTS?

Most of the FACTS' tools intended to assist postsecondary students with advising and articulation are not widely used.

To assess postsecondary student use of the FACTS' tools, we examined a cohort of 139,535 Associate in Arts students who had completed at least 30 credit hours as of 2006-07. We examined this student group because community college Associate in Arts students are likely to transfer to another institution at some point and could receive the greatest benefit from using FACTS' tools that support articulation. We used data provided by FACTS to determine how many of those students had logged into the system during the prior two academic years (from June 2005 through July 2007) and what online functions they had used. See Appendix A for a complete description of our methodology.

Few community college students used FACTS to obtain personalized advising and articulation information

Most community college students did not use the FACTS' tools created to provide them with personalized advising and articulation information, which was the system's original intent. As shown in Exhibit 3, only 14,998 (11%) of the 139,535 community college students in our cohort logged into FACTS to access the College Transcripts, Institutional Degree Audit, 2+2 Transfer Evaluation, or Local and Remote Degree/Program Shopping functions. Thus, students were generally not using FACTS to assess their individual educational progress, analyze the impact of changing majors, or examine how their degrees would transfer to a university program.

Exhibit 3
Few Community Students Used FACTS for Online Advising or to Assist Them With 2+2 Articulation

Total Students in Cohort	139,535	
Number and Percentage of Students Who Used FACTS		
Total [1]	14,998	11%
Institutional Degree/Program Audit	1,579	1%
Local Degree/Program Shopping	936	<1%
Remote Degree/Program Shopping	82	<1%
2+2 University Transfer Evaluation	1,585	1%
College Transcripts and Grades	13,638	10%

[1] Students may have used multiple functions but were counted once for the total number of students who used FACTS.
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

The percentage of students who used FACTS' postsecondary advising and transcript tools varied by function. As shown in Exhibit 3, students were more likely to use FACTS to view their grades and transcripts than to assess how their community college degree would transfer to a four-year institution (2+2 University Transfer Evaluation). None of the other FACTS' tools providing individualized advising or articulation assistance were used by more than 1% of the students in our cohort.

Student use also varied by community college. No students in our cohort at 5 of the 28 community colleges used the 2+2 Transfer Evaluation Function. However, a relatively large percentage of students at five community colleges used FACTS to view their grades and transcripts. For example, almost all (98%) of the 846 students in our cohort from Chipola College used the College Transcript function. In addition, fairly large percentages of students used the College Transcript function at Brevard (74%), Pasco-Hernando (53%), Gulf Coast (40%), and Hillsborough (35%) community colleges. Appendix A shows usage rates for each institution by function.

Community college staff reported that the FACTS.org website is useful and informative. While student usage of the personalized FACTS' advising tools was low, community colleges reported that they use the FACTS.org website to help advise students. Academic advisors reported that having a central site to access documents, manuals, and links when assisting students was valuable.

Community colleges report that their internal systems provide advising tools similar to FACTS

To identify reasons why students generally did not use FACTS' advising and articulation tools, we contacted the community colleges with both the highest and lowest percentage of students using FACTS. These institutions reported that students generally used internal systems maintained by the individual community colleges in lieu of FACTS. In addition, some colleges reported that FACTS' 2+2 Transfer Evaluation and Remote Degree/Program Shopping functions are not widely used because they are not user-friendly or always accurate.

Community colleges report that they have internal systems that enable students to monitor degree progress and view transcripts. Many community colleges we contacted reported having their own advising systems that allow students to perform institutional degree audits and view their transcripts online. As a result, these colleges' students do not need to use FACTS to access these services. In contrast, two of the institutions with a high percentage of students using the FACTS' transcript function in our cohort reported that their internal systems do not allow students to view transcripts and grades online. Rather, these colleges rely on the transcript function of FACTS to provide this service.

Some colleges reported that FACTS tools are not always accurate or user-friendly. Some community college staff we contacted noted that their students do not use the FACTS 2+2 Transfer Evaluation or the Remote Degree/Program Shopping function because those functions are not user friendly or accurate. Specifically, the accuracy of the 2+2 Transfer Evaluation tool is affected by the implementation of state approved common prerequisites by universities. If a university is not following the common prerequisites for a student's degree program, the 2+2 Transfer Evaluation will provide students with inaccurate degree requirements.[6] The Remote Degree/Program Shopping function is confusing to students because each institution's audit is in a unique format and includes many codes for different requirements. This makes it difficult for students to compare degree requirements at different institutions.

Students use FACTS to submit admission applications and transient student forms but some inefficiencies exist

Students use the administrative functions of FACTS such as the common admissions applications and transient student forms. However, institutions reported concerns with these functions.

Students are using FACTS to submit applications to postsecondary institutions. From July 2005 to June 2007, Florida's universities and community colleges received more than 200,000 admissions applications through FACTS. The FACTS on-line admissions application is the common application used to apply to the state's public postsecondary institutions. This function is helpful for students who are applying to multiple institutions, as they can submit the same application to multiple institutions by completing the FACTS application one time.

While students submitted a large volume of applications through FACTS, some institutions expressed concerns with this function. Half of the state universities and community colleges have not completed the programming necessary to receive FACTS' applications directly into their internal admission systems and must manually enter each application received from students.[7] In addition, some institutions require applicants to submit additional information that is not part of the FACTS' common admissions application. In those cases, the institution requires students to use a separate admissions form accessed through the institution's website. However, to avoid this duplication of effort, FACTS' staff reported that they provide institutions the option to customize portions of the FACTS' common application to include admission requirements that are specific to a particular institution.

While students generally are using FACTS to temporarily enroll in other institutions as transient students, this function is not available at all institutions. Students are also using the FACTS' transient student form to temporarily enroll in other institutions. Between July 2005 and June 2007, students at state universities and community colleges submitted more than 26,000 transient student forms using FACTS. These forms are required when students temporarily enroll at another institution, such as when university students take a course at a community college over the summer.

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[6] OPPAGA Report No. 08-11 reviewed the implementation of the common prerequisites.

[7] Fifteen community colleges and five universities cannot receive FACTS applications directly into their internal admission systems.

FACTS enables students to submit these forms electronically, which community colleges and universities reported is very useful. However, three institutions have not implemented the portion of the transient student form that allows their students to submit these forms through FACTS. These institutions can receive FACTS transient student forms from students at other institutions, but their students cannot send the forms to other institutions.

Other Considerations ———

While our review concluded that community college students generally do not use most of FACTS' functions, there are four issues that the Legislature should consider in future decisions regarding the system. Notably, we did not examine the system's usefulness in serving middle and high school students; postsecondary students and institutions may not be fully aware of FACTS and its uses; and internal advising systems used by community colleges may not have all of the capabilities of FACTS.

FACTS has the potential to be more useful for secondary students since they are required to use it. Middle school students are required to use FACTS to create a Electronic Personal Education Planner (ePEP) as part of a class required for promotion to 9th grade, and high school freshmen are required to declare a major area of study and can use FACTS to access information they can use when choosing a major. However, we did not evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of these tools for secondary students.

Postsecondary students and institutions may be unaware of FACTS and its use. Some community colleges indicated that one explanation for the low usage of FACTS is that students may not be aware of the system and how it can help them choose and complete a postsecondary degree. Student awareness can be affected by institutional advising practices. For example, some institutions do not

prominently display a link to FACTS.org on their institutional websites, and our report on common prerequisites noted that some community colleges have limited requirements for how and when students must see advisors. [8]

Some community colleges we contacted were also not aware of how many of their students were using FACTS' postsecondary functions. FACTS staff does not provide institutions with this type of information, but instead report student usage using a duplicated hit count—the number of times students log in and access functions. As a result, students can be counted multiple times, which can overstate apparent use of the system. Better tracking and reporting of student use could enable community colleges to educate their students on potential uses of FACTS.

The internal advising systems maintained by institutions may not have all of the capabilities of FACTS. All the community colleges and universities have internal systems that can perform some type of institutional degree audit and other advising functions. However, it is not clear how many of these systems allow students to access the various functions through a web enabled tool or application similar to what is provided by FACTS. For example, all institutions have internal systems that maintain student transcripts and grades, but not all institutions have web-based advising systems that allow students access to information and services through the web. If institutions lack these web-enabled capabilities, their students may benefit from using the FACTS online advising tools. However, students may only benefit from FACTS if they are aware of all of its services.

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[8] *Inconsistent Implementation of Common Prerequisites Creates Barriers to Effective 2+2 Articulation,* OPPAGA Report No. 08-11, March 2008.

Recommendations ———

Legislative options

To address the low usage of FACTS by postsecondary students, we recommend that the Legislature consider the actions described below.

- Require the Department of Education, Board of Governors, and the Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support to assess the current need for FACTS' postsecondary advising tools at all public institutions. The department should report the results of the needs assessment to the Legislature by December 31, 2008. This needs assessment should include:
    - o a requirement for each postsecondary institution to certify the extent to which its internal advising system and/or processes have the same web-enabled capabilities provided by FACTS ' college administrative and advising tools;
    - o a plan to improve postsecondary student usage of FACTS 'functions that are not comparably provided by internal systems at specific institutions; and
    - o an assessment of whether and how FACTS' interface maintenance requirements can be scaled back at those institutions which certify that their internal advising systems are capable of performing specific web enabled functions provided by FACTS.
- Require the Department of Education and Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support to evaluate and report to the Legislature by December 31, 2008, the effectiveness and usefulness of the FACTS' tools for middle and high school students.

Agency recommendations

We recommend that the Department of Education, the Board of Governors, and the Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support take the actions described below.

- Track unduplicated student use of FACTS' functionalities. This would provide more accurate data on how many students are using the system.
- Develop and disseminate student usage data that institutions can use to measure the extent to which individual students are accessing the various FACTS' functions. This will enable postsecondary institutions to determine which functions of FACTS are serving the needs of their students.

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 and to the chancellor of the Board of Governors to review and respond. The Commissioner's written response to this report is in Appendix B followed by OPPAGA comments.

Appendix A

Methodology and Student Data

To determine if postsecondary students were using FACTS, we focused our analysis on Associate in Arts students in community colleges because these students are likely to transfer to another institution and thus are likely users of FACTS' functions supporting articulation. Using data provided by the Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges, we identified a cohort of all 139,535 community college students who enrolled in Associate in Arts programs and had completed at least 30 credit hours as of the 2006-07 academic year. The department requested that the state's 28 community colleges identify the FACTS identification number for each of these students, and FACTS staff then determined if each student had logged into FACTS and which functions they accessed between June 2005 and July 2007.

Table A-1 provides the number of students in our cohort by community college and the number of students who logged into FACTS and used the different personalized postsecondary functions of FACTS. While nearly 140,000 students were in our cohort, few (10.7% or 14,998) logged in to use a postsecondary function of FACTS.

Table A-1
Few Community College Students Use the Postsecondary Functions of FACTS

Community College	Total Students in Cohort	Total Students Who Logged into FACTS	Percentage of Students Who Logged into FACTS	Total Students Who Accessed Postsecondary Functions				
				Transcripts	2+2 Transfer Evaluations	Graduation Degree Audits	Local Degree Program Shopping	Remote Degree Program Shopping
Brevard	5,738	4,274	74.5%	4,255	282	160	118	2
Broward	12,011	104	0.9%	48	34	35	13	2
Central Florida	2,670	5	0.2%	5	0	0	0	0
Chipola	846	833	98.5%	829	45	43	52	4
Daytona Beach	2,372	4	0.2%	2	0	0	0	2
Edison	3,122	26	0.8%	18	5	1	1	4
FCC-Jacksonville	11,041	1,337	12.1%	1,264	91	38	28	9
Florida Keys	231	7	3.0%	6	3	0	1	0
Gulf Coast	1,895	832	43.9%	755	63	223	53	5
Hillsborough	7,485	2,724	36.4%	2,648	142	246	130	10
Indian River	3,349	798	23.8%	733	67	137	30	3
Lake City	650	6	0.9%	6	0	0	0	0
Lake-Sumter	1,474	67	4.5%	57	8	5	7	1
Manatee	3,683	367	10.0%	251	104	76	58	1
Miami Dade	20,010	656	3.3%	320	241	186	144	5
North Florida	464	30	6.5%	24	6	5	3	1
Okaloosa Walton	2,634	64	2.4%	43	24	5	11	2
Palm Beach	7,619	442	5.8%	235	227	61	57	3
Pasco Hernando	2,128	1,155	54.3%	1,123	69	149	82	3
Pensacola	3,222	16	0.5%	12	1	4	1	1
Polk	2,089	4	0.2%	3	0	0	1	0
Santa Fe	11,446	367	3.2%	303	50	43	37	1
Seminole	5,014	38	0.8%	22	15	11	5	2
South Florida	634	20	3.2%	17	2	1	3	0
St. Johns River	1,527	33	2.2%	28	2	2	2	3
St. Petersburg	8,132	736	9.1%	601	95	141	92	6
Tallahassee	6,986	40	0.6%	22	9	7	5	8
Valencia	11,063	13	0.1%	8	0	0	2	4
Total	**139,535**	**14,998**	**10.7%**	**13,638**	**1,585**	**1,579**	**936**	**82**

Source: Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges and FACTS.

Appendix B

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Just Read, Florida!

April 9, 2008

Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D.
Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis &
  Government Accountability (OPPAGA)
Claude Pepper Building, Room 312
111 West Madison Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Re: Report 08-xx: *Postsecondary Student Use of the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students is Low.*

Dear Dr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report entitled *Postsecondary Student Use of the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students Is Low.* FACTS.org is the State's online student advising system, which provides a wide array of services promoting college access, preparation, and success. The system ensures that college information and academic advising are available to all students regardless of location and size of institution. It provides information regarding the courses students need to complete to gain admission to programs and earn a degree, thereby helping them avoid taking excess hours.

We appreciate the report's attention to the complexity of FACTS implementation and, overall, support the recommendations. However, there are some aspects that warrant further comment:

1. **Methodology utilized to determine usage.** OPPAGA used a forward-looking cohort methodology starting with 140,000 associate in arts students who had attained 30 credit hours or more to ascertain whether postsecondary students use the advising functions provided by the FACTS system. OPPAGA found that 11% or 14,998 students from the cohort had used the FACTS system. However, in utilizing a "case-control" or backward-looking methodology, FACTS staff identified 71,293 unique community college users in 2006-2007. Dividing the number of unique users by the number of associate in arts (247,914) and associate in science (83,050) degree students enrolled during the same period, resulted in a minimum user rate of 21%. Therefore, while the forward-looking methodology used by OPPAGA is one way of

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assessing usage, it typically results in an understatement when compared to the backward-looking methodology.

It should also be noted that the OPPAGA report only accounted for community college usage of the system and not state universities. During the last fiscal year, university students completed a total of 350,025 audits (not unique users) and accessed 209,557 transcripts. For students at some of the universities, FACTS is the only method of retrieving their audits or transcripts and grades.

2. **Community colleges use internal systems.** Some community colleges reported that one of the reasons for their "non-use" of the audit function is that students generally used internal systems maintained by the individual community colleges in lieu of FACTS. However, as the study found, some colleges do not have the capability to provide student access to audits, transcripts, or grades without FACTS.org. In addition, the FACTS 2+2 Transfer Evaluation includes the common prerequisites, which are required for admission into the university program. Of the 28 community colleges with online audits, 16 indicate that they have AA degrees with pre-majors, but only five institutions include the prerequisites in those audits. This means that most community colleges are not providing all the information required for transfer with their internal audit system.

   FACTS helps smaller colleges leverage their resources and provide their students with the same level of online services as do larger institutions. The system also provides the ability, through the inter-institutional network established by FACTS, for students to conduct audits at institutions other than their home institution. In addition, that same network makes it possible to provide other articulation services like the Transient Student Form.

3. **Accuracy and user-friendly information**. The community colleges also reported that the information provided in FACTS is "not always accurate or user-friendly." The inaccuracy of the data was noted in a previous OPPAGA report, *Inconsistent Implementation of Common Prerequisites Creates Barriers to Effective 2+2 Articulation (Report No. 08-11)*. In order to provide correct advising information to community colleges, it is the responsibility of universities to convey and adhere to approved common prerequisites for admission to upper-division programs. The FACTS system displays the common prerequisites mandated by s. 1007.25, F. S., and determined by the Articulation Coordinating Committee (ACC). Therefore, the information provided by the 2 + 2 evaluation is accurate as approved by the ACC, but lacking in "real-world" application. Prior to the issuance of the report, the Board of Governors in conjunction with the Division of Community Colleges, the Office of Articulation, and FACTS, began working on a significant project to review common prerequisite requirements for all baccalaureate programs. As of this report, most of the institutions found with diverging requirements have made corrections.

   In terms of user-friendliness, the FACTS system was designed to provide a "real-time" evaluation of each student's transcript against an institution's degree audit. Since colleges use different systems, each student transcript audit is unique. FACTS staff is currently assessing the possibility of standardizing the format for audits so that students have the ability to compare institutions. Key to the success of FACTS is increasing the accuracy or real-world application of data and making it more standardized. Some of these changes are in process and will be implemented by Fall 2008, at which time a concerted effort will be made to inform students and community college advisors of the resources at their disposal.

Gary R. VanLandingham
April 9, 2008
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While acknowledging that improvements can be made, the Department firmly believes that the current distributed system of delivering advising information via FACTS.org to students is viable. However, it is important to note that efforts toward improvement cannot be undertaken without the full support and participation of our community college and university partners who assist FACTS in providing students with the most accurate and timely information possible.

Sincerely,

Dr. Eric J. Smith

EJS/cwg

c: Dr. Connie Graunke Executive Director, Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support
        Dr. Heather Sherry, Director, Office of Articulation
        Dr. Willis N. Holcombe, Chancellor, Division of Community Colleges (DCC)
        Dr. Mark B. Rosenberg, Chancellor, Board of Governors
        Dr Dottie Minear, Vice Chancellor, Board of Governors
        Dr. Judith Bilsky, Executive Vice Chancellor, DCC

OPPAGA Comments to Agency Response

Regarding the number of community college users, OPPAGA provides the following clarification to the agency response on pages 11 through 12:

While the Department of Education reported that 71,293 community college students used FACTS during 2006-07, they cannot confirm what types of academic programs these students were enrolled in that year. The department based its usage rate on the number of unique community college users divided by the total students who were designated by individual institutions as enrolled in associate of arts or associate of science degree programs. However, other types of community college students could have used FACTS during this timeframe. The criteria for designating students as enrolled in specific academic programs vary by institution, and do not include students identified as "general freshmen." Data from the Division of Community Colleges indicated 529,640 students enrolled in college credit or college preparatory courses at community colleges during 2006-07. Since all of these students could have used FACTS during the year, the 71,293 students identified by the department represent a FACTS' usage rate of 13%, which is similar to the results of our analysis (11%).

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