



Several Universities Have Improved Systems to Track Student Progress

at a glance

Since our 2006 report, several of Florida's universities have taken steps to improve or implement automated systems that monitor students' progress toward degrees.

- The University of South Florida has developed the capacity to place an automatic hold on students' registrations if they do not make sufficient progress toward their chosen degrees.
- Florida International University is developing a new student degree tracking system, GradXpress, which is scheduled to be implemented in spring 2009. The system will allow students to plan and register for courses in advance, track progress toward their degrees, and view their progress in a web-based environment.
- The University of Central Florida is creating a new degree audit and a new student tracking system. It plans to implement the degree audit system in spring 2009, while the student tracking system's implementation date remains uncertain.
- Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University is planning to implement an enhanced automated student advising/tracking system in late summer of 2009 that replaces and reconfigures the advising system the university was using.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Board of Governors and universities in response to a 2006 OPPAGA report on student tracking systems used by state universities.^{1, 2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the Board of Governors and universities have addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

Background

Florida's State University System consists of 11 public universities which served approximately 294,821 students in fall 2008. For Fiscal Year 2008-09, the university system received \$2.3 billion in state general revenue and trust funds.³

An ongoing issue in the state university system has been the need to develop effective systems to track student progress toward their degrees and help prevent students from taking more classes than needed to graduate (excess hours).

¹ Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

² *Student Tracking Systems Can Be Used to Enhance Graduation and Retention Rates*, [OPPAGA Report No. 06-48, May 2006](#).

³ This includes a 4% state fund reduction across all public universities, and cuts ranging between 4% and 25% for the university system's research centers in January 2009.

Our prior report found that several state universities were developing or had implemented automated systems that monitor student progress toward degrees. These systems identified students who were not making sufficient degree progress and help universities target academic advising resources and ensure that students take the classes needed to graduate on time.

At the time of our 2006 report, the capability of these systems varied across the state with the University of Florida having the most highly developed system. This system required students to select a major early in their academic career and specified the critical courses and grade point averages needed for the student to remain on-track. The system automatically monitored student progress and future registrations were blocked if the student was off-track, and had been effective in increasing the percentage of students who stay in school and in decreasing excess hours. Florida State University also had implemented an automated system to track the progress of incoming freshmen. This system also allowed the university to project the need for critical courses and arrange for instructional staffing levels to meet the identified need.

Two additional universities were developing student course planning and tracking processes. In 2005, the University of South Florida developed schedules showing freshmen students when they should take critical courses, but had not yet linked its schedules of critical courses to its degree audit and registration systems. The University of Central Florida had instituted a voluntary program that guaranteed that students would be able to take critical courses if they followed a prescribed plan of study and took 15 hours each term. However, few students took advantage of this program. The university did not yet have an automated student tracking system and tracked students progress manually.

In contrast, smaller universities tracked student progress through their advising processes and did not appear to have a need for automated tracking systems. These schools often employed faculty and professional advisors to routinely conduct advising sessions with students. For example, at some universities advisors routinely checked students' progress using the Florida Student Academic Advisement System and notified students who were found to be off-track and required them to attend an advising session to alert them of needed improvement. The advisors also blocked the students from future course registration if they failed to take corrective action.

Our report recommended that the Board of Governors adopt policies to encourage all large universities to develop or acquire automated student tracking systems.

Current Status

Several universities have developed and implemented new ways to track student progress

Since our 2006 report, four state universities have taken steps to improve or implement automated systems that monitor their students' progress toward degrees. In addition, Florida State University has extended the use of its automated tracking system for incoming freshmen to all incoming students, including upper and lower division transfer students. As a result, six state universities currently have or are developing automated student tracking systems. The remaining five smaller universities have not reported implementing these systems and continue to use other mechanisms to track student progress towards degrees.

University of South Florida. The University has improved its student tracking system, which now has the capability to place a hold on a student's registration who is not meeting the critical tracking criteria of his or her chosen

degree. Similar to the University of Florida's system, the university's [Tracking the Academic Progress of Students \(TAPS\)](#) system ensures that all students are presented with a complete degree plan along with guaranteed availability of course selections when they declare their majors. Students are encouraged to select a major when they begin their academic careers. Students who are off-track in meeting the requirements of their designated major field of study must attend re-advising and are redirected to another college. Each college determines the specific criteria for identifying such students. The criteria generally are based on the student's progress in taking required classes, the hours attended, and the grade point average achieved in coursework.

Florida International University. In Fiscal Year 2007-08 the university received a special appropriation of \$750,000 to develop a new student degree tracking system, GradXpress. This new system is scheduled to become operational in spring 2009. GradXpress will allow students to plan and register for courses in advance, track progress toward their degrees, and view their progress in a web-based environment.

The system has three critical components. First, it will classify students according to how quickly they move through their degree requirements. Performance metrics in this classification system are based on GPA, credits completed, declared major and other milestones. The performance measures will be established according to each student's projected graduation timeframe. For instance, on a four-year timeline, a student will be classified "on-track" if he or she completes all general core requirements, declares a major, completes the pre/co-requisites for the major, completes 60 credits, satisfies the CLAST exam, and earns a competitive grade point average within the first two years. A student will be classified as off-track, on-track or on fast-track depending on how steadily and quickly he or she completes program requirements and graduation milestones.

Second, the system will generate and send critical enrollment messages to students. Students will receive these messages on the MyFIU portal when they reach each academic milestone. The messages either congratulates students on their progress towards their projected graduation date or alerts them that additional steps are needed to stay on track.

Third, the system's E-Advising component will allow students to contact an academic adviser via virtual chat technology. A "May I help you?" icon will be displayed directly on the GradXpress site as well as other advising websites. Students who click on this icon will be connected with an advisor who will answer questions, clear obstacles and guide students through the enrollment pathway. Students will receive a transcript of the session and an opportunity to evaluate the performance of the advisor. All information exchanged using this technology is recorded and available the next time the student uses the service. Advisors will be able to access the history of every session, which will help them provide meaningful, accurate and consistent advising service.

As of August 2008, the university has expended approximately \$163,000 on the initial phase of the project including degree validation, software maintenance fees, IT training and computer hardware. The remaining funds will be expended on moving student degree data between systems, on installing the communication system, and designing and delivering a comprehensive training program to students, faculty and advisors.

University of Central Florida. The university is developing a new way to track student progress that is similar to the systems used by the University of Florida. This will involve creating two new systems to provide degree audits and student tracking.

In 2008, the university purchased a new degree auditing system (Darwin) to replace its existing Student Academic Support System that did not meet the university's needs. The university plans to test this in spring 2009 and fully implement it in fall 2009. The university has not yet established an implementation deadline for the new student tracking system. Initially, administrators had planned for implementation in 2010, but the university indicates that this date will be pushed back due to budget reductions and reports that it will need more resources before the system can be implemented.

The university continues to make progress in developing its student tracking system. Each academic department is developing student progress benchmarks for each major that will identify the progress students should achieve each term. The university plans to use these benchmarks when it implements student progress tracking with its new system. In addition, the university staff is developing policies and procedures to determine when student will be considered to be off-track. The university has not yet determined how to put an automatic registration hold on students who are determined off track. It currently is not mandating that students receive academic advising, and indicates that it would need additional staff to do so. However, it plans to require students who are placed on hold to meet an advisor before the registration hold will be manually removed.

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. The university is planning to implement an enhanced automated student advising/tracking system in late summer of 2009 that replaces and reconfigures the advising system the university

was using. The new system will include an academic advising module that identifies the requirements for each major. When implemented, students will register for classes using this automated system, which will show the courses they have already taken and the remaining courses needed to meet their major requirements. The system will allow the student to select the next course needed for his or her major and then it will automatically process a class registration request for the student. The system does not place an automatic hold on students' records if they are off-track in their course work. Instead, based on a review of the student's course work, an academic advisor could place a hold on a student's record requiring the student to meet with an advisor before registering for the next semester.

Conclusion. Overall, 6 state universities—the University of Florida, Florida State University, the University of South Florida, the University of Central Florida, Florida International University, and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University—have either implemented or are developing automated student progress tracking systems. When completed, these systems should help to reduce the amount of time that students take to graduate and reduce excess hours. The remaining universities are typically smaller and may be able to use their student advising processes to guide student progress. The Board of Governors should continue to share information and best practices among the 11 state universities in this area.

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

Project supervised by Jane Fletcher (850/487-9255)
Project conducted by Sibylle Allendorff (850/487-9269)
Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D., OPPAGA Director