



Most AA Graduates Pursue Baccalaureate Degrees, but Many Lack Information About Articulation Policies

at a glance

Over the past five years, the number of students who transferred to a baccalaureate degree program after earning associate in arts (AA) degrees grew by 29%. This reflects growth in the number of AA degrees produced by Florida College System institutions (formerly the Florida Community College System) during this period. However, 31% of students who earned AA degrees did not transfer to a baccalaureate program. Most of these students never applied for admission to a state university. Only two percent of the AA graduates who do not transfer are denied admission by all the state universities to which they apply.

A lack of information was the most common reason students reported for not applying to a baccalaureate program. During the last five years, the state spent over \$150 million producing AA degrees for students who did not pursue a baccalaureate degree.

Scope

As directed by the Florida Legislature, this report examines the rate at which students with associate in arts degrees enter baccalaureate degree programs in Florida. A second report will examine the academic outcomes of these students after they transfer to a state university.

Background

Florida's postsecondary education system includes a 2+2 articulation process through which students may pursue a baccalaureate degree by first receiving an associate in arts (AA) degree from one of the 28 institutions in the Florida College System (formerly the Florida Community College System).¹ These students then transfer to a public or private institution to complete the remaining two years of coursework. This system provides students with additional options for pursuing a baccalaureate degree.

The AA degree is not intended to be a terminal degree; rather, it is to be a step toward earning a baccalaureate degree. Over 260,000 students participated in AA degree programs during the 2007-08 academic year.²

State articulation policies support the 2+2 system. The Florida Legislature has established policies to help ensure that AA degree graduates are able to successfully transfer to baccalaureate degree programs. As required by s. 1007.23, *Florida Statutes*, the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors of the State University System have developed and implemented a

¹ In this report, we refer to the 28 institutions that were part of the Florida Community College System and are now members of the Florida College System as 'Florida colleges.'

² *The Fact Book: Report for the Florida College System*, The Florida Department of Education, 2009.

statewide articulation agreement. This agreement guarantees that Florida college AA degree graduates will be admitted to the upper division of a state university and receive 60 credits toward their baccalaureate degrees. The agreement has an exception for programs that are limited access or require an audition or portfolio (in the case of fine and performing arts programs). However, this guarantee does not provide that students will be admitted to their first or preferred choice for a university. Students may need to apply to multiple state universities in order to be admitted.

In addition, the Legislature has directed the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors to develop and implement other articulation policies and tools. These include the Articulation Coordinating Committee, Statewide Course Numbering System, general education requirements, the FACTS.org counseling system, and common program prerequisites.

The state has established articulation agreements with private postsecondary institutions. To provide additional transfer options for AA degree recipients, the Florida Division of Colleges has entered into a system-wide agreement with the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF) as well as with other private institutions, including Keiser University and Strayer University. These agreements allow students who earn an AA at a Florida college to transfer credit when they enter a participating private institution.

Florida colleges have established regional and local articulation agreements with both public and private colleges. In addition to the system-wide agreements, Florida colleges have established many local and regional agreements with public and private baccalaureate granting institutions. For example, 10 institutions in the Florida College System have entered into agreements with St. Leo University under which this private university offers many

upper division courses on the campuses of Florida College System institutions. This allows AA graduates to pursue a baccalaureate degree without traveling to the St. Leo campus.

Direct Connect is an example of a regional partnership between Florida colleges and a state university. This program is designed to offer a seamless process in which AA graduates from Brevard Community College, Lake-Sumter Community College, Seminole State College of Florida, and Valencia Community College can transfer to the University of Central Florida. Participating students receive academic counseling from staff familiar with the University of Central Florida's program requirements while attending their AA institutions. Students who fulfill the program requirements while earning their AA degrees are guaranteed admission into the University of Central Florida.

The state has established baccalaureate degree programs at several Florida colleges. Fourteen institutions in the Florida College System have been authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees. These programs allow students to earn baccalaureate degrees at these state colleges. The baccalaureate programs at these state colleges include programs that are targeted toward areas of labor shortages such as nursing and education.

Methodology

To assess whether students who earn AA degrees at Florida College System institutions successfully transfer to baccalaureate degree programs, we examined the transfer outcomes of 147,000 students who earned AA degrees at Florida colleges between 2002-03 and 2006-07.³ We

³ We excluded from our analysis 11,801 (7%) of the 158,596 student records provided by the Department of Education because we were unable to validate their transfer data and/or because the students attempted to transfer in a time period outside of our analysis.

tracked these students' outcomes through the 2007-08 academic year using data provided by the Department of Education's Data Warehouse, which collected the data from the Division of Florida Colleges, the State University Systems, Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP), and financial aid databases. In addition, we surveyed AA students to determine their education plans and their understanding of transfer policies and processes.⁴

Findings

The number of students who earned AA degrees and transferred to baccalaureate degree programs increased by 29% over the last five years, reflecting the growth in the number of students who earned these degrees. However, 31% of students who earned AA degrees over that time period did not successfully transfer to a baccalaureate program.

Most students who did not transfer did not apply for admission to a state university. Only 2% of the AA graduates who did not transfer were denied admission by all the state universities to which they applied.

During the last five years the state spent over \$150 million producing AA degrees for students who did not pursue a baccalaureate degree.⁵ Students reported a

⁴To conduct our survey, we selected 12 Florida colleges that were geographically distributed. These colleges then provided us email addresses for approximately 40,000 AA students who had earned at least 45 credit hours. However, the schools could not verify whether these were valid email addresses. We emailed a survey to all identified students and received 3,200 responses, with 1,600 respondents saying that they did not plan to transfer to a state university. Exhibit 4 is based on the responses from these 1,600 students and the information in Exhibit 3 is based on responses to a set of follow-up questions from these same students.

⁵This estimate is based upon those students who did not continue their education after earning their AA. We used the cost analysis for 'Advanced and Professional hours' that is listed in *The Fact Book: Report for the Florida College System* for each respective year the students attended. The estimated cost is \$184 million if we base the estimate on the 72 hours that the typical AA student earns while pursuing

lack of information about transfer policies as a primary reason for not applying to universities.

More students are earning AA degrees and transferring to baccalaureate degree programs

As shown in Exhibit 1, the number of students who earned an AA degree from a Florida college and transferred to an in-state baccalaureate program has grown substantially over the past five years. The number of these students rose by 29%, increasing from 17,245 to 22,233. This increase reflects growth in the number of AA degrees produced by the Florida College System, which rose 36% from 24,836 to 33,674 during this same time period.

Approximately 70% of AA degree recipients transferred to in-state baccalaureate degree programs. Exhibit 1 also shows that the percentage of AA degree recipients who transfer to baccalaureate programs (the transfer rate) has remained relatively stable over the last six years, varying between 66% and 70% during this period. Most of the AA recipients who entered a baccalaureate program transferred to state universities.

The majority of AA graduates transfer to the state university system. In 2007-08, approximately 20,000 AA graduates transferred to the state university system. This constituted 59% of all AA degree recipients. The largest numbers transferred to the University of Central Florida, the University of South Florida, Florida International University, the University of Florida, and Florida State University.

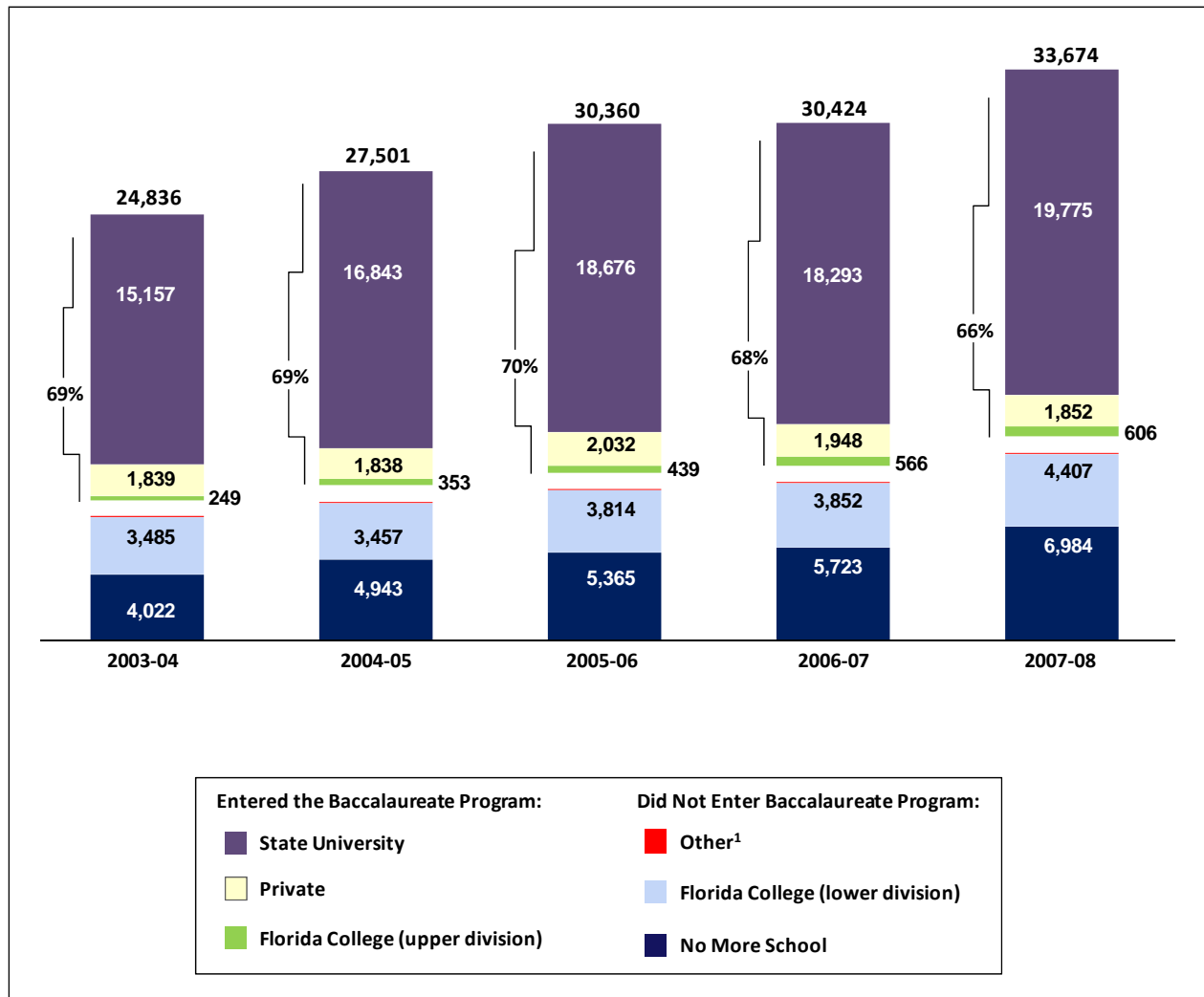
Approximately 5% of the students who earned AA degrees at Florida College System institutions transferred to a private institution that is a member of the Independent Colleges and Universities of

an AA. If we use the 60-hour minimum requirement, the cost is \$153 million.

Florida (ICUF). St. Leo University enrolled the highest number of these students, followed by Barry University, Nova Southeastern University, Flagler College and the University of Miami. The relatively large number of students who transferred to

St. Leo University reflects its articulation agreements with 10 Florida colleges. In addition, approximately 50 students transferred to other private institutions that are members of the Commission for Independent Education.

Exhibit 1
While a Growing Number of AA Recipients Transfer to Baccalaureate Programs, the Overall Transfer Rate Has Varied Little Over Time



¹ The values for the 'Other' category are included in the yearly totals but are not shown in the bar chart.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

A small but growing number of students who earn AA degrees enter baccalaureate programs offered by Florida College System institutions. About 2% (606) of the AA degree recipients in the most recent year entered a baccalaureate degree program at one of the state colleges. This represented a 143% increase in the number of such students over the past five years. There were 249 AA degree graduates who entered baccalaureate programs at Florida colleges in 2003-04, when there were fewer such programs.

Some AA degree recipients continued to take lower division courses at Florida colleges. In 2007-08, approximately 13%, or 4,407, of the AA recipients continued their education at Florida colleges. These students continue to enroll in lower division courses, many of which lead to associate in science or other workforce degrees and certificates.

Over 20% of AA degree recipients did not pursue further higher education in Florida. The remaining 21%, or 6,984, of AA degree recipients were no longer enrolled in higher education institutions in Florida. It is unlikely that many of these students continued their education in another state. While the Department of Education does not collect data on AA degree recipients who transfer out-of-state, our survey of students who were about to earn their AA degrees found that only 3.6% planned to continue their education in another state.

Most AA degree recipients who do not pursue baccalaureate degrees do not apply to a state university

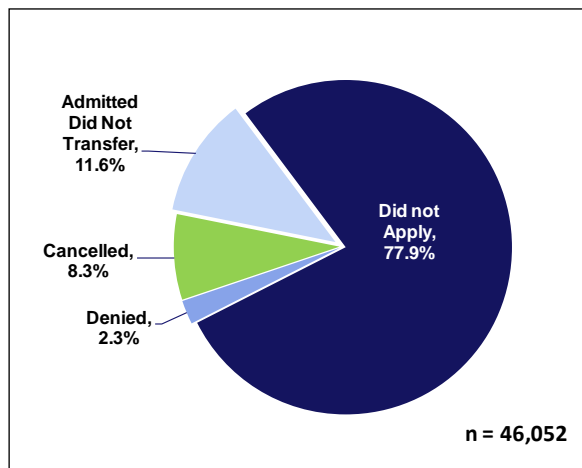
AA degrees are not intended to be terminal degrees; however, for the five years we examined almost 20% of the AA graduates did not continue their education. Only 2% of these students were denied admission by the state universities to which they applied.

AA degree graduates not continuing their education is problematic to the state, which paid over \$150 million to support these students while they earned their AA degrees. In addition, the number of these students who were employed full-time increased only slightly after the students completed their degrees.

Most AA recipients who did not transfer to pursue a baccalaureate degree never applied for admission to the State University System. Some Florida College System administrators have expressed concerns that the 2 + 2 articulation system can be weakened if state universities limit AA degree transfers due to enrollment caps. However, as shown in Exhibit 2, our analysis found that few students who earned AA degrees at Florida College System institutions were denied admission to the state university system. Of the students who earned an AA degree and did not transfer to a baccalaureate degree program, only 2% were denied admission, while 12% were accepted but did not transfer, and 8% had their applications cancelled.⁶ Universities cancel applications because they do not include complete information or because students request to no longer be considered. Most (78%) of the AA degree recipients who did not transfer never applied to the state university system.

⁶ Application information for Florida's private colleges and universities was unavailable.

Exhibit 2
Most AA Graduates Who Do Not Transfer Never Apply to the State University System



Source: OPPAGA Analysis of Department of Education and Board of Governors, State University System data. The chart represents all AA graduates who did not transfer to a baccalaureate degree program between 2003-04 and 2007-08.

Those AA graduates that did not transfer after receiving their AA, did not experience a substantial change in their employment status or earnings. Approximately 45% of these students were employed full-time prior to earning their AA degrees, and this percentage increased to only 49% a year after they received their degrees.

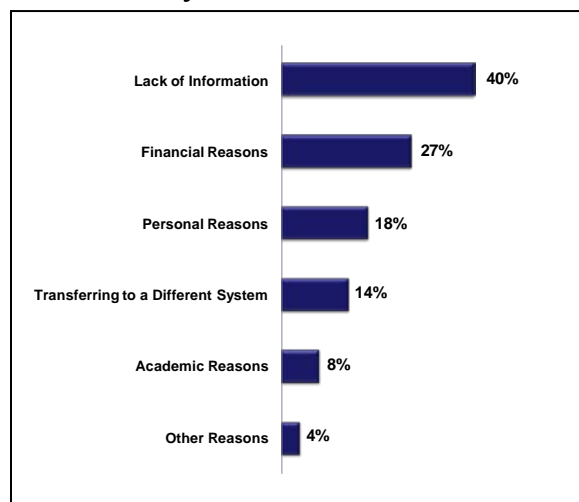
The overall income of this group of AA graduates did not increase either. Prior to earning their AA degrees the median income was \$7,775 per year. A year after they earned their AA degrees their median income was \$7,211. However, the subset of these students who worked full-time prior to earning their AAs did increase their incomes. Their median income rose from \$22,000 to \$25,000 per year.⁷

⁷ Source: OPPAGA analysis of DOE FETPIP data. In order to determine full-time employment we looked at the number of workers who earned an income that was equal to or exceeded the minimum full-time income in each year.

Many students do not understand articulation policies

To determine why many students who earn AA degrees do not continue their education, we surveyed a group of AA degree students who reported that they were not planning to apply to a state university. As shown in Exhibit 3, the most frequently cited reason given by these students for not seeking university admission (reported by 40% of the students surveyed) was a lack of information about the steps they needed to take in order to transfer. Financial and personal reasons were the second and third most cited reasons. The remaining students reported that they planned to transfer to a different system (such as to pursue an associate in science degree at a Florida college or to transfer to a private institution), or cited academic or other reasons for not continuing their education.

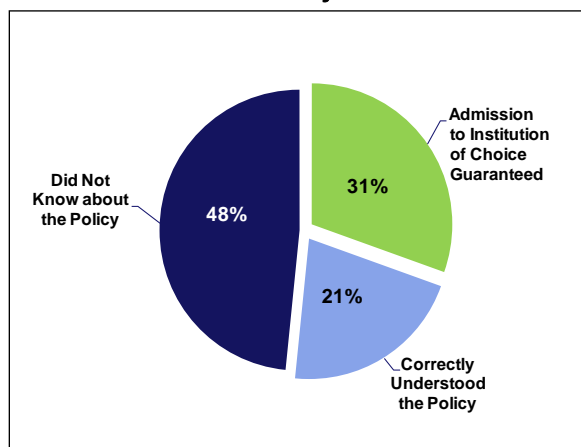
Exhibit 3
A Lack of Information About Transfer Processes Was the Top Reason Cited by AA Students for Not Applying to a State University



Source: OPPAGA survey of 1,600 Florida College System students who earned at least 45 hours towards an AA and had not applied to a state university. Total exceeds 100 because multiple responses were allowed.

In addition, most (79%) of the AA degree students we surveyed reported that they did not understand the state's 2+2 articulation policy. Exhibit 4 shows that 48% of the responding students indicated that they did not know about the articulation policy, while 31% mistakenly thought that the policy guaranteed that they would be automatically admitted to the state university they applied to after they earned an AA degree. Less than a quarter of the students correctly understood that the policy guaranteed them admission to a state university but not necessarily to the universities of their choice.

Exhibit 4
Most Surveyed Students Did Not Understand the 2+2 Articulation Policy



Source: OPPAGA survey of Florida College System students who earned at least 45 hours towards an AA. These responses reflect 1,600 respondents who reported that they did not plan to transfer to a state university.

AA students' lack of information and confusion about transfer policies may stem from the complexities that these students face in transferring to another institution at the midway point in earning their baccalaureate degree. To make a successful transition to upper division programs, AA students must take several actions. They must (1) identify the universities or institutions that offer the specific baccalaureate degree programs that they wish to pursue, (2) determine whether these programs have limited access restrictions

that could affect their transfer, (3) identify the admission requirements for such programs at the selected universities, and (4) determine if their AA coursework and academic standing is sufficient to meet those requirements. The students must also submit applications and required information such as official transcripts by the prescribed deadlines and identify and pay various fees.

These processes are more complex than those faced by native university students who enter upper division programs. As discussed in a prior OPPAGA report, several universities have established student advising and tracking mechanisms designed to help students select majors and stay on track to earning their baccalaureate degrees.⁸

While Florida colleges offer student advising, these programs are not focused upon AA students' transition to upper division programs. Most institutions require advising for new students or for those who are at risk of falling behind. However, for AA students who have completed their first year of coursework, the focus of advising is to ensure that students are on track to complete their AA. Florida colleges reported that they offer transfer related advising to students who seek this service, and they encourage their students to use FACTS.org, which the Department of Education reports was recently revised to better support the 2+2 system.

The Florida College System institutions that have entered into baccalaureate partnership programs with other colleges and universities have established strong advising systems for participating students. Students who participate in these programs often receive extensive advising prior to earning an AA and have a more defined path to earning their baccalaureate degree.

⁸ *Several Universities Have Improved Systems to Track Student Progress*, OPPAGA Report No. [09-22](#), March 2009.

Strengthening advising for other AA degree-seeking students would likely improve articulation rates for other students as well.

Transfer rates for Florida College System institutions vary widely

Our analysis shows that transfer rates vary widely between institutions in the Florida College System, ranging from 47% to 77%. These differences are due in part to geographic proximity between the AA degree-granting institutions and state universities. Many Florida colleges develop relationships and institutional partnerships with nearby state universities. These relationships play a strong role in fostering high transfer rates. Several geographically isolated institutions' transfer rates also are bolstered by agreements they have established with private institutions and state colleges that offer baccalaureate degrees.

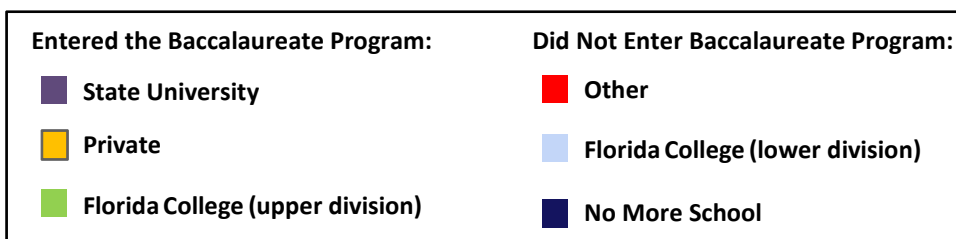
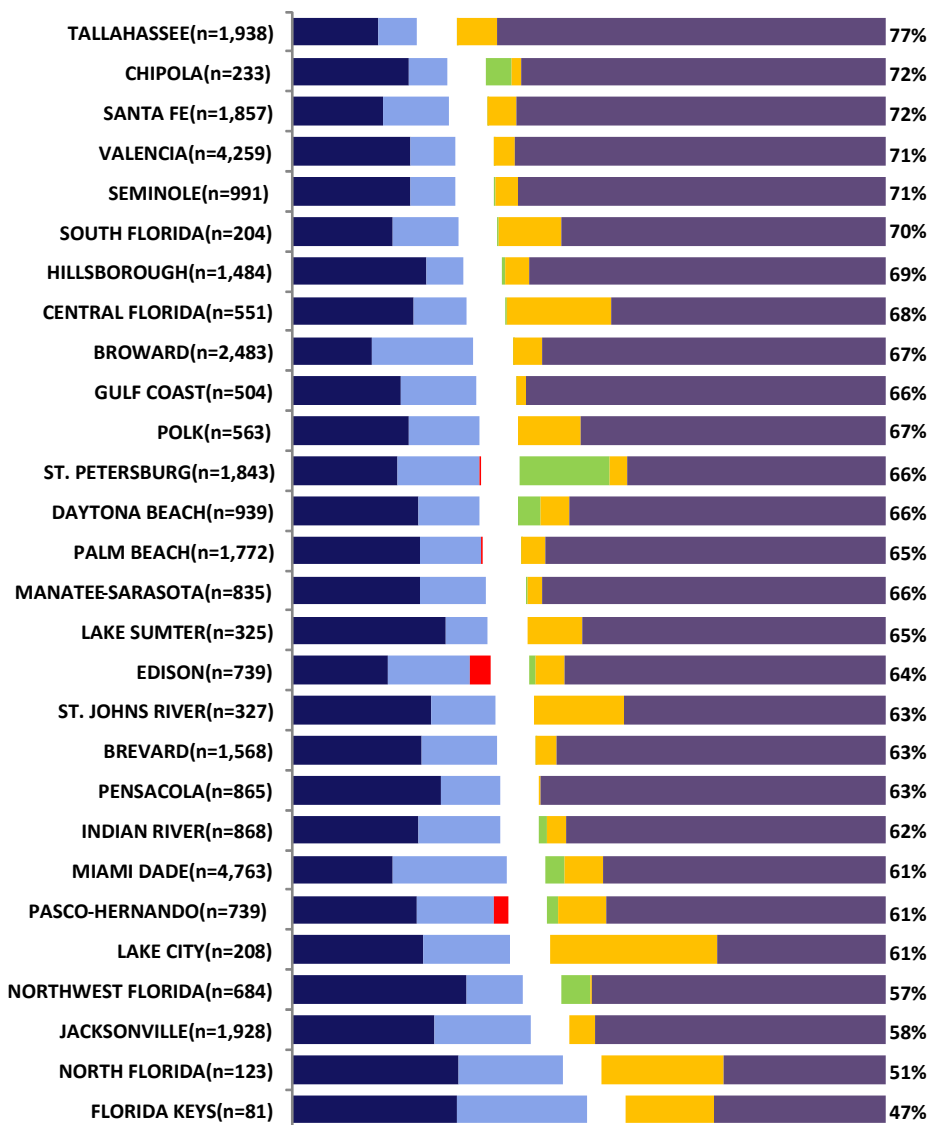
Geographic proximity to state universities and local partnerships affect transfer rates. In general, the Florida colleges that are geographically close to state universities have the highest transfer rates. These Florida colleges tend to attract students who plan to transfer to the nearby university after completing their AA degrees. These Florida colleges generally develop relationships with nearby universities and tailor their AA degree programs to align with those universities' baccalaureate program requirements.

As shown in Exhibit 5, Tallahassee Community College, Valencia Community College, Santa Fe College, and Seminole State College have some of the highest transfer rates for AA degree recipients. Most of these institutions' AA transfer students pursue baccalaureate degrees at their neighboring state universities. For example, Tallahassee Community College

has a long-standing relationship with Florida State University, and 83% of its transfer students enroll at this university. Similarly, 75% of Santa Fe State College's transfer students enroll at the University of Florida. Seminole and Valencia are two of four Florida College System institutions that participate in the Direct Connect program. Approximately 88% and 84% of the transfer students of these two institutions respectively enroll at the University of Central Florida.

Most of the institutions with the lowest transfer rates are geographically isolated. Exhibit 5 also shows that institutions with relatively low AA transfer rates are typically located in cities that are geographically distant from state universities. For example, Lake City Community College, North Florida Community College in Madison, Florida Keys Community College in Key West, and Northwest Florida State College in Niceville have among the lowest AA transfer rates. These schools are each located at least 50 miles from the main campus of a state university, and thus their students would need to either move or commute long distances to attend a state university.

Exhibit 5
Florida College System Institutions' Transfer Rates to Baccalaureate Programs Differ Substantially



Note: Percentages represent students transferring into baccalaureate programs in 2007-08.

Source: OPPAGA Analysis of Department of Education and Board of Governors of the State University System data.

However, three of these four geographically isolated institutions (Lake City, North Florida Community College, and Florida Keys Community College) have taken steps to provide transfer options to their students by establishing agreements with St. Leo University, which offers baccalaureate degree programs at or near the schools' campuses. Most of these schools' AA students who transfer to private institutions subsequently attend St. Leo University (91%, 85%, and 54%, respectively). Northwest Florida State is also taking steps to increase baccalaureate options for its students by offering baccalaureate degree programs; it has the second largest number of AA graduates who pursue baccalaureate degrees.

Florida State College in Jacksonville also has a low baccalaureate transfer rate. However, Florida State College in Jacksonville has a large and diverse set of career education programs. Many students, after earning AAs, continue taking lower division courses that lead to associate in science and other workforce degrees.

Recommendations——

To improve articulation for students who earn AA degrees from the Florida College System, we recommend that the Department of Education work with the Florida colleges to review their current advising policies and develop options to strengthen communication with students regarding the articulation process. Specifically, this review should examine the feasibility of implementing advising policies that require AA students to periodically meet with academic advisors to ensure that students are aware of their transfer options and take courses they need in order to complete their transfer.

Agency Response ——

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

Both written responses have been reprinted herein in Appendix A.

Appendix A

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Commissioner of Education



December 28, 2009

Dr. Gary R. VanLandingham
Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and
Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Dr. VanLandingham:

In response to the draft report entitled *Most AA Graduates Pursue Baccalaureate Degrees, but Many Lack Information About Articulation Policies*, the Department of Education supports the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) recommendation to strengthen communication with students on articulation policies and processes. Florida's articulation policies are comprehensive, which challenges the Department, the Division of Florida Colleges, the Office of the Board of Governors, colleges and universities to maintain a continuous stream of communication with students regarding transfer options. The study's findings are indicative that The Florida College System and State University System are working well together; most Associate in Arts (AA) students are transitioning and are academically successful. In fact, the 29 percent increase in the number of AA transfers over the past six years is a certain sign of success.

Of the 1,600 students surveyed who indicated they did not apply to the State University System, less than half indicated that they did not know about the 2+2 policy. It would be helpful to obtain more specific information regarding these students to enable institutions to help target communication to student groups identified as less likely to know about Florida's articulation policies. We ask OPPAGA to provide whatever additional information it can to help us follow up on their recommendation.

Although we agree that colleges should provide advising opportunities through college enrollment to help guide students in course selection towards their stated goals, with the steep enrollment increases and budget shortfalls, it may not be feasible to require more face-to-face advising. In many cases, adult students that are working full-time and attending college part-time in the

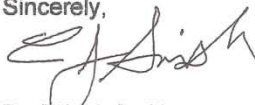
Dr. Gary R. VanLandingham
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evenings do not have the time or desire for periodic advising sessions. In response to these and other constraints, many colleges are employing the use of virtual, online advising systems, like FACTS.org, to provide ongoing advising. While advising is a necessary component of a college's responsibility to its students, it is also important for students to take responsibility for seeking information and advice.

Section 1009.286, Florida Statutes, requires colleges to notify incoming students of the possibility of excess hour surcharges for exceeding the number of credit hours required for a baccalaureate once they transfer to a state university. This is an opportunity for colleges to also provide broader details about the 2+2 guarantee. The Department and the Division of Florida Colleges will work collaboratively with the colleges to ensure students are receiving clear and comprehensive information. In addition, The Florida College System will maintain an open dialogue and share best practices to ensure policies and practices are appropriate and sufficient.

Thank you for providing an opportunity to offer feedback on your findings. Inquiries should be directed to Dr. Heather Sherry, Office of Articulation, by telephone at (850) 245-9483 or e-mail at heather.sherry@fldoe.org; or Ms. Julie Alexander, Division of Florida Colleges, by telephone at (850) 245-9523 or by e-mail at julie.alexander@fldoe.org.

Sincerely,



Dr. Eric J. Smith
Commissioner

wnh/jac

c: Dr. Judith Bilsky, Executive Vice Chancellor, Division of Florida Colleges (DFC)
Dr. John Hughes, Associate Vice Chancellor for Evaluation, DFC
Dr. Heather R. Sherry, Director, Office of Articulation, DOE
Ms. Julie Alexander, Senior Director, Office of Instruction and Student Services, DFC
Mr. Ed W. Jordan, Inspector General, DOE
Ms. Kim Mills, Director of Auditing, Executive Office of the Governor



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December 16, 2009

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

RE: Report 09-xx. *Most AA Graduates Pursue Baccalaureate Degrees, but Many Lack Information About Articulation Policies*

Dear Dr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the report titled *Most AA Graduates Pursue Baccalaureate Degrees, but Many Lack Information About Articulation Policies*. The Board of Governors is supportive of articulation efforts that assist associate in arts (AA) students in preparing for and making the successful transition into and through baccalaureate programs. The Board and its staff will continue cross-sector work to appropriately refine and improve “2 + 2” articulation policies and processes to accomplish this goal.

We support the OPPAGA recommendation that Florida public colleges review their current advising policies and develop strategies to strengthen communication with AA students regarding the articulation process. We believe that much can be learned from the Florida College System institutions that have developed strong baccalaureate partnership programs with other institutions. For instance, as noted in the report, early discussions with AA students regarding their ultimate baccalaureate and career goals are beneficial in keeping them on track and preparing them for a successful transfer. Such discussions should include the availability of baccalaureate programs at state and private universities, as well as at Florida public colleges. The admission requirements of limited access baccalaureate programs and the highly technical programs that require numerous common prerequisites also need to be thoroughly covered.

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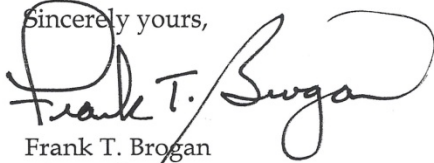
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December 16, 2009
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The Board of Governors recognizes the important role that clear articulation standards have in providing smooth access to AA students from a Florida College System institution to a university. The Board will continue to work with the Articulation Coordinating Committee, its partners, and university faculty and staff to align expectations, share promising practices, and monitor AA student transfer and success.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to review and respond to this report.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank T. Brogan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "B" at the end.

Frank T. Brogan
Chancellor

FTB/dml

The Florida Legislature
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability



OPPAGA provides performance and accountability information about Florida government in several ways.

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Jane Fletcher, Staff Director, Education Policy Area

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director