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## Steps Taken to Improve FACTS; Better Information on Postsecondary Student Use Is Still Needed

### *at a glance*

The Department of Education has improved the consistency and accuracy of information provided by the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS)' online tools, which support academic planning and articulation for middle school, high school, and postsecondary students. The department is planning, but has not yet implemented a system enhancement that will enable it to track the number of individual postsecondary students who use FACTS.

### Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 2008 OPPAGA report.<sup>1, 2</sup>

### Background

The Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) provides online tools and services to support academic planning and articulation for middle school, high school, and postsecondary students. Many of these online tools provide personalized information that is based on

students' unique academic records and transcripts. Students can use this information to help plan their academic careers and help ensure that they take the courses needed for admission to postsecondary institutions and programs. In addition, the FACTS.org website provides a central location for information and resources relating to articulation and postsecondary advising for both students and counselors. The Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support within the Department of Education is responsible for managing, developing, maintaining, and operating FACTS. Over the past 14 years, the Legislature has appropriated approximately \$49.6 million to support FACTS, of which approximately \$23 million was distributed to institutions to link their systems with FACTS.

As shown in Exhibit 1, FACTS' tools for postsecondary students fall into three general categories: advising, articulation, and administrative. These tools enable students to monitor their individual academic progress, assess options for transferring to state universities and colleges, and complete the administrative requirements for enrolling in a university or college. However, our 2008 report found that these tools were not widely used by students enrolled in Florida College System institutions; notably, our review of approximately 140,000 community college students enrolled in 2006-07 found that only 11% had used any of FACTS' personalized advising and articulation assistance tools.

<sup>1</sup> Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

<sup>2</sup> *Postsecondary Student Use of the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) Is Low*, [OPPAGA Report No. 08-25](#), April 2008.

**Exhibit 1**

**FACTS Provides a Variety of Tools to Assist Postsecondary Students in Planning Coursework, Monitoring Academic Progress, and Assessing Transfer Options**

Tool	Use
<b>Advising Tools</b>	
<b>Institutional Degree/Program Audit</b>	Students can assess their academic progress by comparing their academic record with the requirements of their chosen major at their current institution.
<b>Local Degree/Program Shopping</b>	Students can assess the impact of changing majors by comparing their academic record against the requirements of an alternative degree program.
<b>College Transcripts and Grades</b>	Students can access their unofficial transcripts online to check their grades and view progress toward their degrees.
<b>Articulation Tools</b>	
<b>Remote Degree/Program Shopping</b>	Students can assess how well their coursework meets degree requirements at other public institutions in Florida by comparing their academic record against the requirements of the degree/program.
<b>2+2 University Transfer Evaluation</b>	Florida College System students can assess how their degrees will transfer to a university program by comparing the courses they have taken to state university requirements.
<b>Administrative Tools</b>	
<b>Admission applications</b>	Students can apply to multiple institutions at the same time.
<b>Transient student form</b>	Students who are currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution may apply for temporary admission to another institution by completing a transient student form.

Source: Florida Department of Education.

## Current Status

Consistent with our 2008 recommendations, the Department of Education has assessed the need for FACTS’ postsecondary advising tools at public colleges and universities and has taken steps to improve the consistency and accuracy of FACTS’ postsecondary articulation tools. The department is planning, but has not yet implemented a system enhancement that will enable it to track the number of individual postsecondary students who use FACTS.

***The Department of Education has taken steps to improve FACTS’ tools for postsecondary students; additional improvements are needed***

Our 2008 study found that most Florida College System students had not used FACTS’ postsecondary advising and articulation tools. We noted that FACTS’ advising tools may duplicate online services that postsecondary students can access through individual institutions’ advising systems.

The department has assessed online advising tools at all Florida colleges and universities. As we recommended, the department has assessed the advising systems used at all 39 public colleges and universities and determined that most of these institutions provide systems that have similar online tools as FACTS. However, the department found that the advising systems used by five colleges and three universities do not enable students to assess their academic progress or the impact of changing majors online, and six institutions’ systems do not enable students to access grades and transcripts online. Therefore, students at these institutions must use FACTS for these services.

The department has taken steps to enhance FACTS' postsecondary articulation tools, providing more standardization and better accuracy. FACTS' articulation tools involve inter-institutional transactions that are not available through postsecondary institutions' internal advising systems. These tools are intended to help students compare degree requirements at different institutions and determine whether they are taking the courses needed for admission into university degree programs. However, our 2008 report noted that FACTS' articulation tools were not user friendly and could provide inaccurate information. Specifically, the 2+2 Transfer Evaluation tool could provide students with inaccurate degree requirements if universities were not following the state-approved common prerequisites, and FACTS' Remote Degree/Program Shopping function did not provide information on degree requirements at different institutions in a consistent format.<sup>3</sup>

To address these problems, the department has developed and implemented a plan to make the FACTS' 2+2 University Transfer Evaluation component more accurate and easier to use. The 2+2 evaluation format is now standardized and includes a Transfer Program Admissions Information module that draws common prerequisites and program admissions requirements directly from university systems. This new module will help ensure that students and advisers receive accurate information on university degree requirements and prerequisites. The department also has conducted 29 regional and on-site workshops at universities and colleges to demonstrate the enhanced FACTS' 2+2 University Transfer Evaluation function.

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<sup>3</sup> [OPPAGA Report No. 08-11](#) reviewed the implementation of the common prerequisites by universities and found widespread inconsistencies. [OPPAGA Report No. 10-43](#) found that universities addressed our 2008 report's recommendation by better aligning their requirements with the common prerequisites but that some minor inconsistencies still exist.

However, the department has not standardized FACTS' Remote Degree/Program Shopping function. Department administrators believe that it is cost-prohibitive to standardize this tool at this time because it would require each institution to re-program its interface with FACTS.

The department has not yet assessed whether more individual postsecondary students are using FACTS. At the time of our 2008 report, the department compiled and published student usage data for FACTS that did not account for the number of unique or individual users. To provide more accurate information on postsecondary student usage of FACTS, our 2008 report recommended that the department, the Board of Governors, and the Florida Center for Advising and Academic Support track unduplicated student use of the system's functionalities and disseminate this information to institutions. While the department is planning to implement a new student portal in FACTS that will enable it to track individual student use of the system, this enhancement will not be available until early 2011. Until this portal becomes operational, the department cannot reliably determine whether more individual postsecondary students are using FACTS over time.

### ***The department has taken steps to assess FACTS' tools for middle and high school students***

Our 2008 report recommended that the department assess the overall effectiveness and usefulness of FACTS' tools for middle and high school students. The system's primary tool for these students is the Electronic Personal Education Planner (ePEP), which provides a secure, password-protected system that allows students to map out their coursework for high school, track their academic progress, check Bright Futures Scholarship eligibility, and perform various other functions.<sup>4</sup> Florida law

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<sup>4</sup> The ePEP consists of several different tools. For example, the High School Academic Evaluations function allows students to compare their transcript information to current requirements

requires students to complete a personal education plan using ePEP prior to entering high school.<sup>5</sup> High school counselors can also access each student’s ePEP to assist with advising.

Consistent with our recommendation, the department has taken steps to assess the usefulness of ePEP. The department reports that approximately 88% of Florida public school eighth grade students in school year 2008-09 used ePEP to create a personal education plan. This high percentage reflects the fact that middle school students are required to complete a personal education plan prior to entering high school.

In addition, the department conducted a survey of middle and high school guidance counselors to determine their opinions of

FACTS. The department reported that 1,015 counselors responded to the survey, representing 27% of all middle and high school counselors in Florida, and that respondents were divided almost equally between high school and middle school counselors. Most (85%) of the counselors responding to the department’s survey had used FACTS to assist students in some manner. This included helping students create their ePEPs (74%), evaluating their transcripts for graduation or Bright Futures eligibility (41%), or applying for college admission (22%). Of the counselors who did not use FACTS, approximately 73% reported they used another system to advise students, 22% reported they were not aware of FACTS, and 5% reported they did not like it.

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for graduation, scholarships, and college admissions.

<sup>5</sup> The 2010 Legislature passed Chapter 2010-22, *Laws of Florida*, that revised Florida’s high school graduation requirements specified in s. 1003.4156, *F.S.* The law listed information that FACTS’ ePEP must provide students including high school graduation requirements, university and Florida College admission requirements, and programs through which a high school student can earn college credit. The law also eliminated the need for one FACTS’ ePEP tool, the Major of Interest Search function, as it deleted the requirement that high school students earn credits in a major area of interest.

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