Florida A&M University
School of General Studies
The Undergraduate Experience

An Investigative Study of the Distribution of Grades in Selected General Education
Sequence Courses for Fall 2006

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May 6, 2008
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to review the grade distribution of General Education Sequence courses with a not passing rate of thirty-one percent (31%) or higher during the fall 2006 semester. The reason for undertaking this investigation is that academic advisors in the Undergraduate Experience Program, formerly the Freshman/Sophomore Year Experience, realized that an extraordinary number of students in all majors were withdrawing from or failing many classes in the General Education Sequence. Many of these students had enrolled in college preparatory courses in high school and had very high scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Testing Program Test (ACT). Additionally, they had performed well in the non-barrier courses at the University. Therefore, the dean and the assistant dean of the School of General Studies, the home of the Undergraduate Experience Program, became very concerned about the students' performance and decided to determine the overall pass/not pass rates of students in the General Education Sequence.

Since this study is concerned with only one semester, it cannot be concluded that the distribution of grades in various courses is a trend. Therefore, further study over a number of semesters needs to be conducted to determine the courses in which over 31% of the enrolled students fail semester after semester.
However, the study includes all students, regardless of their majors, who were enrolled in the barrier courses.

The General Education Sequence consists of thirty-six state mandated courses that all students enrolled in an associate of arts degree program or a baccalaureate degree program in a state community college or university must pass. They include six credit hours of English, six credit hours of mathematics, six credit hours of humanities, eight credit hours of natural sciences, six credit hours of social sciences, and a two or three credit hour elective. Florida A&M University requires students to take African American History or African American Experience as one of their social sciences. Students must earn a minimum grade of "C" in order to pass General Education Sequence courses.

The investigators requested Enterprise Information Technology (EIT) to compile a list containing the distribution of grades in the General Education Sequence classes. To be fair, the investigators reviewed the total enrollment of the classes and determined the passing/not passing rates based upon the grade distribution (A, B, C, D, F, and W). Grades of D, F, and W are considered as not passing because the Gordon Rule stipulates that students must earn a "C" or better to pass the Gordon Rule courses. Most General Education Sequence courses are Gordon Rule courses; therefore, a "D" is considered as not passing. Withdrawals are considered because they are used to determine repeat credit surcharges, a fee that students must pay when enrolling in the same course three
or more times. Additionally, most students who withdraw from classes indicate that they are not passing the classes.

The Gordon Rule or State Board of Education Rule 6A.10.30(2) stipulates that students enrolled in a baccalaureate degree at a state university or an associate degree program at a state community college must satisfactorily complete twelve hours of English course work in which the students write at least 24,000 words, and six hours of mathematics at the college algebra level or higher. FAMU has a state approved list of courses to satisfy the writing requirement.

FINDINGS

There are sections of most courses in the General Education Sequence that can be classified as barrier sections. For this study, a barrier course is one in which thirty-one percent or more of the total student enrollment did not pass. Of the sixty-one (61) General Education Sequence courses surveyed, twenty-eight (28) or 46% are barrier courses in which thirty-one percent or more of all enrolled students did not pass. Courses with over 50% of the students not passing are CHM 1045: General Chemistry I (71%); PHY 2048: General Physics I (60%); CHM 1046: General Chemistry II (58%); MAC 1105: College Algebra (58%); HUM 3421: African Americans in Film (57%); CHM 1020: Fundamental Chemistry (56%); CHM 2210: Organic Chemistry I (53%); BSC 2094: Anatomy and Physiology II (52%); and HUM 3238: European Renaissance and Reformation (52%).
There are nine barrier courses with a not passing rate of 40% to 49%. In descending order, they are BSC 1005: Biological Science I (48%); MAC 2312: Calculus II (47%); MAC 2311: Calculus I (46%); PSY 2012: Introduction to Psychology (43%); BSC 1010: General Biology I (41%); BSC 1010L: General Biology I Lab (40%); and MAC 1147: Pre Calculus (40%).

Among the barrier courses with 31% to 39% not passing rates are PHY 2049L: General Physics II Lab (39%); BSC 1011L: General Biology II Lab (36%); BSC 2094L: Anatomy and Physiology II Lab (36%); ENC 1102: Freshman Composition II (36%); HUM 3255: Modern and Post Modern Culture (34%); PSC 1121: Introduction to Physical Science (33%); BSC 1005L: Biological Science I Lab (32%); BSC 2093: Anatomy and Physiology I (32%); PHY 2053: College Physics I (32%); and BSC 1011: General Biology II (32%).

It should be noted that there are professors who have successful passing rates in the barrier courses. However, in some barrier courses, a few professors have seventy to ninety-three percent not passing rates. Similarly, there are professors in non-barrier courses that have not passing rates greater than 31%. These professors have a high not passing rate regardless of the courses that they teach. For example, in ENC 1101, one professor teaches two classes that have not passing rates of 71% and 57%. Another professor who teaches three classes has not passing rates of 59%, 57%, and 62%. Likewise, AMH 2010: American History 1492–1865 is not a barrier course; however, one professor who teaches three
visiting instructor. All four of the faculty with not passing rates of 31\% or higher in humanities are regular, full-time faculty members.

IMPACT

Each semester, first-time-in-college students and other students have problems enrolling in the General Education Sequence courses in a timely manner. Regardless of the number of sections offered, student demand is always greater than the enrollment limits in the courses. The classes close, and academic advisors and students have to plead with departmental chairpersons to permit additional students to enroll in the closed classes. Many departmental chairpersons attempt to help the students; however, there is a point when additional students cannot be admitted into the classes. Therefore, the students start out behind, especially in mathematics and English. Although academic advisors emphasize to students that they should not enroll in classes that cannot be used to fulfill the requirements of their majors, in many instances, students take non-required courses in order to carry a minimum class load of twelve hours. Students must enroll in and pass a minimum of fifteen credits per semester to graduate in four years. This investigation shows that the primary reason that students cannot enroll in the General Education Sequence courses is that students are recycled in the courses. A not passing rate of over 31\% in many courses indicates that there are problems in the General Education Sequence that impede academic progression. This affects both retention and graduation rates.
The investigators certainly do not know the answer to this issue; however, the problem has to deal with teaching and learning.

The soaring number of students not passing the General Education Sequence contributes to student attrition. Students are placed on suspension and, at some point, are dismissed from the University because of low grade point averages. Student attrition affects both the students and the university. It impacts the university’s operations and finances through the loss of tuition and the cost of recruiting additional students. Not passing rates also affect the students' financial aid. Students must earn twenty-four credit hours per academic year and a 2.0 grade point average to remain eligible for financial aid. The lack of financial aid is another contributing factor to student attrition. The students' loss of financial aid means that they will have to work more hours per week. This reduces their time for studying and completing assignments; therefore, they fail additional classes. Professors are not responsible for students' financial situations; however, it is important to know that over eighty-five percent of the university’s students are on financial aid, and most of them are first generation college students. Therefore, they cannot expect to receive financial support from their parents. Realizing the demographics of the students at this university, it is incumbent upon the university to support, educate and provide guidance to them.

Professors must help the University to fulfill its motto of “Excellence with Caring.” Academically, this means that the University has high expectations of
the students that it admits, and that the University expects its professors to be caring and to be excellent in teaching their students. Excellent professors find ways to help most of their students to succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the affected departments conduct further investigations to determine the reasons that students do not learn the material covered in the courses. Professors need to analyze course content and methods of delivering instruction and assessing learning. The findings should be used to restructure courses as needed. Obviously, with the high percentage of not passing rates, something is wrong. The results should also be used to provide the necessary academic support for improving student learning. Although some adjunct professors have a high not passing rate, based upon this investigation, the employment of adjunct professor is not the reason for students not passing courses. Most of the faculty members who have high not passing rates are full-time, seasoned, tenured professors.

Out of concern for teacher effectiveness, the investigators reviewed several articles on teaching and learning. Most of the writers agree that professors must show respect for students and must love teaching. Students know when professors respect them as individuals, and they know if the professors value their input. Professors must also have high, realistic expectations for students. Most students will attempt to meet the professors' expectations if they realize that they are attainable. If the expectations are
unrealistic, the students will give up because they perceive their effort as useless. The expectations should be delineated on the first day of class when the professors set the tone for the rest of the semester. Students should clearly understand the expected learning outcomes, the attendance policy, the grading policy, the professor's office hours, and other pertinent information for passing the class.

Students must also be held accountable for meeting the requirements of the courses. They must purchase their books, read in advance to prepare for their classes, attend their classes, complete assignments and pass tests. Because many students have weak backgrounds in the courses in which they enroll, they must take the initiative to seek help from their professors and from the academic support laboratories on campus. Additionally, a sufficient number of qualified tutors, both student and professional, must be provided in the academic support laboratories, and the laboratories must be equipped with appropriate equipment, technology and tutorial software for tutoring sessions.

The Undergraduate Experience Program can be a very effective resource for referring students to academic support laboratories if professors assess their students' progress a number of times before mid-term, and if they respond to the mid-term progress evaluations. Each semester, the Undergraduate Experience Program seeks professors' mid-term evaluations of freshmen and sophomores. This information is used to advise students on their progress in their classes;
however, this component has not been successful because of the lack of responses from the professors.

Finally, it is hoped that this investigation will be used to improve student learning and success at the University. All who are concerned with student success should become more involved with assisting students with understanding the importance of passing their courses on their first attempt. All students enrolled in the University must pass the General Education Sequence; therefore, their not passing rates affect all schools, colleges, and institutes. The longer it takes students to complete the General Education Sequence, the longer it will take them to enter the upper division and concentrate on their major courses. The Undergraduate Experience Program is committed to helping students enroll in courses in a sequential manner and with recommending that they receive the support, academic and otherwise, that they need to be successful. However, a major challenge of both the academic advisors and the students is the availability of classes.