



## **IMPACT OF WITHDRAWING FROM COURSES ON STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE**

FLORIDA COMMUNITY COLLEGES & WORKFORCE EDUCATION



**Jim Horne, Commissioner**

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**J. David Armstrong, Jr., Chancellor**

Many studies have been conducted over the years in an attempt to identify factors that contribute to student success in postsecondary education. Some factors that have consistently been correlated with high completion rates include attendance directly following high school graduation, high placement scores, low or no hours of working, and rigorous high school preparation (Choy, 2002; Windham, 1995).

In May 2003, Dr. Clifford Adeleman with the United States Department of Education shared information on the impact of withdrawing from courses. Chancellor David Armstrong of the Florida Department of Education, Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Education (DCCWE), requested his staff investigate any impact this same phenomenon was having on Florida's community college students. Florida collects unit level records on the grades earned each term and thus was in a position to track the number of withdrawals or W's recorded for a cohort of students and the potential impact on completion rates.

The DCCWE had previously conducted several longitudinal studies tracking students for five years and determining such actions as graduation rate, retention and employment. This work formed the basis of the withdrawal study.

Students who entered the Florida Community College System (FCCS) in the fall 1997 and were recorded as first-time-in-college were tracked for five years through the spring term of 2002. The students considered in this study were those who tested as being college ready, i.e., they passed all three sections of the placement test, or they needed some type of remedial (College Preparatory) coursework.

The accompanying chart indicates that the completion rate for students with W grades is lower than for those without them. The overall completion rate of "ready" students was 39.4%. Those with W grades had a rate of 34.7% while those without W's had a rate of 49.3%. Students needing remedial coursework had an overall graduation rate of 17.0%. Those with W grades were at 16.1% and those without recorded, a rate of 18.8%.

**Completion Rate for Students with Withdrawal Grades**

	Completion Rates Overall	Completion Rates With "W" Grades	Completion Rates Without "W" Grades
College ready students	39.4	34.7	49.3
Students in remedial coursework	17.0	16.1	18.8

The next step was to look at the number of W grades received. Both groups of students with W's were divided into those that had one to three W grades and those with four or more. For the college ready students, the ones with 1-3 W grades had a graduation rate of 38.4% while those with four or more had a rate of 25.5%. Thus, students with four or more W's had a graduation rate of approximately half that of students with no W's.

Students needing remedial coursework had the same trends, but the differences were less dramatic. Students with one to three W's had a graduation rate of 17.7% while those with four or more had a rate of 11.9%. The difference between students with four or more W's and those without W's was 11.9% versus 18.8%. The chart below illustrates these data.

### **Completion Rate Based on Number of Withdrawals**

	<b>1-3 Withdrawals</b>	<b>4 or more Withdrawals</b>	<b>Completion Rates Without "W" Grades</b>
<b>College ready students</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>25.5</b>	<b>49.3</b>
<b>Students in remedial coursework</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>18.8</b>

This study supports the work of Dr. Adeleman and suggests that withdrawing from classes tends to negatively impact completion rates. For both groups of students with W grades who earned an award, approximately 80% of the awards earned were by students with three or fewer W's.

Two-thirds of the cohort studied had at least one W grade recorded in the database used. These students were withdrawing from an average of three classes. This study did not attempt to determine if these withdrawals tended to be from the same or different courses. Florida has a "Withdrawal and Forgiveness" rule which limits a student to three attempts in any given course before they have to pay full costs.

A second aspect of this study was based upon the students who earned an Associate in Arts degree in 2002-03. The course records for these students were pulled for the six years beginning in 1997-98. While this did not provide an official transcript of these students, it was felt this would provide a reasonable picture of the grades earned. The AA graduates were divided into those with at least one W and those without. The percent of graduates with at least one W was determined along with the minimum, mean and maximum number of W grades.

The percentage of AA graduates with at least one W ranged from a low of 36.9% at Chipola to 85.7% at Valencia. The same institutions also had the lowest and highest percentage of graduates with one to three W's and those with four or more. The average number of W grades ranged from 1.78 at Chipola to 3.28 at St. Petersburg.

While the data indicate that having a high number of W's does not totally preclude a student from completing the AA degree, it does severely impact the probability of obtaining that degree.

### **References**

- Choy, Susan (2002) "Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students." American Council on Education, Center for Policy Analysis.
- Windham, P. (1995). "The Relative Importance of Selected Factors to Attrition at a Public Community College". *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, Volume 3, Number 1, p 65-78.

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