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ABSTRACT

This report addresses program enrollment in the Florida Community College System (FCCS), focusing on possible reasons for and solutions to the decline in community college enrollment. The FCCS produced a set of enrollment headcount projections in mid-1997 that indicated that the system would be serving 330,000 credit students by fall 1999. Instead, preliminary fall 1999 data indicate the number of students will be closer to 310,000. Factors influencing this enrollment decline may include: (1) the number of high school graduates receiving a regular diploma has not increased as quickly as anticipated; (2) the state university system (SUS) has experienced major increases in lower division FTE over the past several years; (3) the Bright Futures Scholarship Program has had the effect of removing the financial differential between the FCCCS and the SUS, shifting students from community colleges to state universities; (4) in order to qualify for performance-based funding dollars, colleges have eliminated many less productive programs, negatively impacting FTE enrollment and increasing student outputs and outcomes; and (5) Florida is experiencing the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, and employers are spending billions providing on-the-job training, instead of outsourcing to colleges. Solutions suggested include: (1) maintaining the integrity of the "2+2" system; (2) preparing more high school students for college; (3) attracting more younger students; and (4) attracting more older students. (EMH)

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Program Enrollment in the Florida Community College System

Introduction

The Florida Community College System (FCCS) serves a variety of students who are interested in a wide range of programs. The differences in the student population must be considered when developing enrollment projections. Two main factors are age and intentions. Research has shown that students under the age of 24 tend to be more traditional in their approach to college. That is, they tend to be better able to put learning before earning. Students 25 and older often have family and financial responsibilities that mean they must put earning before learning. This often leads to part-time enrollments and taking longer to earn awards. A second major division among students is whether they are in a university parallel or workforce program. Students in the university parallel program generally seek the Associate in Arts (AA) degree and often plan to transfer to a university once the AA is completed. Students not seeking the AA are often looking to learn or improve job skills and plan on working at least for a while before furthering their education.

Current program enrollments are usually the basis of future projections. This information is also used in discussions of needed funding. The Legislature often cites the current declines in both headcount and full-time equivalents (FTE) as the rationale for not increasing funding to the same level as received by the public school system or the State University System. Thus, it is important to examine current enrollment levels and the potential impact of various economic and policy factors.

Some of those policies appear to be contradictory. For example, during the past four years community colleges have been under performance-based budgeting which allocates funding based on productivity (e.g., number of graduates) rather than FTE or headcount enrollment. Productivity has been increasing in spite of the decline in headcount and FTE. To be encouraged to increase productivity via one funding stream, while declines in enrollment appear to be impacting another funding stream places the institutions in the position of being without a stable funding process. This contradiction in policies - enrollment versus performance - is creating serious, long-term budgetary problems for the FCCS.

Program Descriptions

Associate in Arts - The AA degree is the single largest program in the FCCS. About one-third of the students reported in Fall 1998 were in the AA program. This was three times the number of students in the Associate in Science (AS) programs and over four times as many as are in certificate programs. Institutions officially enroll students in programs at various points in their academic career depending upon the courses taken. Many award-seeking students are initially classified as general freshman and later moved into a specific award program.

The AA degree is designed to be a university parallel degree by providing the first two years of undergraduate instruction. Longitudinal tracking has shown that seventy-five percent (75%) of

AA graduates will eventually transfer to a State University System (SUS) institution. SUS longitudinal tracking of these students indicates that two-thirds will graduate within six years of entering a university. In addition to the AA degree holders who transfer to the SUS, many AA degree seekers transfer prior to completion of the degree.

The Postsecondary Education Planning Commission (PEPC) conducted a survey of AA graduates in an effort to better understand why some students immediately transferred and others did not¹. The results of that survey indicated that for AA graduates not currently enrolled in a bachelor's degree program the "cost of education" and "family considerations" were the most often cited reasons for not pursuing the degree. Sixty percent of this group indicated that they planned to pursue a bachelor's degree within five years.

Workforce - Students seeking workforce awards are enrolled in programs leading to an AS, Associate in Applied Science (AAS) (beginning with the 1999-2000 reporting year), or certificate program. While many elect to continue their education upon completion of workforce programs, such programs are designed to provide the necessary skills to immediately enter the world of work. Recognition of the need to provide students with more options lead to the formation of the AS to BS Task Force and it's major work on the development of career tracks for selected AS degrees into Bachelor of Science (BS) degrees. In Fall 1998, 11% of students with an institutionally defined program code were in an AS program and 8% were in certificate programs.

Initial Projections

The FCCS produced a set of enrollment headcount projections in mid-1997 as part of the background work done for *A Strategic Plan for the Millennium 1998-2003*. That document reported an increase by 2007 for the FCCS of 51,000 credit students and an additional 26,000 non-credit students for a total of 77,000 additional students. Those projections indicated that the System would be serving 330,000 credit students by Fall 1999. Instead, preliminary Fall 1999 data indicate the number of students will be closer to 310,000. This paper provides a brief look at some possible factors in the unanticipated decline in community college enrollment. The State population has been steadily increasing as projected during this time, so that is not a factor in the reduced enrollments. A second type of projection produced by the System is of Full-time Equivalents (FTE's). The FCCS has also experienced modest declines in FTE enrollment over the past several years.

Potential Factors Influencing Enrollment Projections

It is important to recognize that the modest enrollment declines experienced by the FCCS are, in many respects, related to policy decisions, e.g. time-to-degree, and outside influences beyond the System's complete control. Many of these policy decisions have been very positive for students, but they have had the effect of reducing enrollments. These actions and influences include:

¹ Postsecondary Education Planning Commission (February, 1999). "Evaluation of Florida's Two-Plus-Two Articulation System." Tallahassee.

High School Graduates - The number of high school graduates receiving a regular diploma has not increased as quickly as earlier anticipated. While the children of the baby boomers, often called the baby boom echo, are indeed making their way through the high schools and into colleges and universities, the number of students receiving a standard high school diploma has not increased as quickly as originally projected. In spite of fewer students graduating than was originally expected, a larger percentage appears to be going on to postsecondary institutions. The *Readiness for College Report* indicates that in 1996-97 the FCCS enrolled 27,615 prior year high school graduates or 31.2% of the class in degree programs. The SUS enrolled 16,004 or 18.1%. In 1998-99, the FCCS enrolled 28,572 or 29.8% of the prior year high school class in degree programs, while the SUS enrolled 19,008 or 19.8% of the class. Thus, the percentage of prior year high school graduates attending the SUS has increased, while the percentage attending the FCCS has decreased.

SUS FTE Changes - The SUS has experienced major increases in lower division FTE over the past several years. In 1992-93, the SUS lower level Educational and General (E&G) FTE was 28,989. By 1998-99 that number had increased to 48,276, or by two-thirds. While part of this increase can be attributed to the opening of Florida Gulf Coast University and the Bright Futures Scholarship program, the major increases were due to the increases in First-Time-In-College (FTIC) FTE granted by the Legislature to the SUS. The recently enacted 2000-2001 General Appropriations Act increased the lower division FTE authorized in the SUS by 3,663 to 51,375.

Bright Futures Scholarships - The Bright Futures Scholarship program has had the effect of removing the financial differential between the FCCS and the SUS. The impact has been a shift in students from the community colleges to the state universities.

Performance-Based Funding - In order to qualify for performance-based funding dollars, colleges have eliminated many less-productive programs and streamlined other programs which have negatively impacted FTE enrollment while increasing student outputs (graduates) and outcomes (placements).

Time-to-Degree Legislation and Efficiency Measures - Through the enactment of State program standards which shortened the length of many certificate and degree programs, and through improved student advising, students now take fewer courses to meet graduation requirements.

Economy - The State and nation are experiencing the lowest unemployment rates in 30 years. For those students whose only reason to attend the FCCS was to obtain the specific skills necessary to find a job, the economy has made job hunting less skill dependent. In addition, employers are spending billions providing on-the-job training.

Part-time Students - A comparison of the demographics of the Fall 1996 and Fall 1999 credit students shows a major percentage decline in part-time white females. Overall, part-time students have decreased by slightly over 14,000 during this time. In contrast, full-time students have increased by slightly over 7,000. This lends credence to the theory that the economy is playing a major role in the enrollment decline.

Credentials versus Degrees – In several workforce areas, more emphasis is being placed on credentials and less on formal degrees. Because of this, students are able to consider not only the FCCS and District area technical schools, but also private, proprietary, and corporate institutions. Corporate certificates in areas such as computer network administrator are becoming as valuable as a community college certificate. The number of students attending these various institutions is steadily increasing. Although these institutions do not have centralized data systems comparable to those of the SUS and FCCS, some enrollment information is available from state level boards or groups. Examples include the State Board of Independent Colleges and Universities and the State Board of Nonpublic Career Education. The State Board of Independent Colleges and Universities shows about 125,000 students for Fall 1998, including 85,500 enrolled in the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF) and the University of Miami. The State Board of Nonpublic Career Education staff said the current enrollment was approximately 80,000; but the area is changing so rapidly, even they are hard pressed to maintain up-to-date records.

Solutions

Maintain the Integrity of the “2+2” System – Florida’s higher education system was built upon the idea of having students take the first two years of an undergraduate degree at a community college and the last two at a university. When the FTIC and other FTE’s allowed for the SUS by the Legislature are increased faster than population, this relationship is compromised.

Prepare more High School Students for College – Enrollment of prior year high school graduates can be increased by either enrolling a larger percentage of that group or by retaining the same percentage, but increasing the number of potential students. The FCCS has chosen the latter approach. The colleges and universities send out a letter to the parents of all eighth grade students telling them the courses they need to take in order to be ready for college. These courses are the same for both the SUS and the FCCS. Colleges have also set up programs with their area districts, such as the College Reach Out Program (CROP), that help students understand they can attend college if they plan ahead and that identify specific weaknesses in time to provide remediation prior to graduation (remedial reduction efforts).

Attract more Younger Students – Colleges must provide training and education that is relevant to students. In the past eight years, the FCCS has closed over 350 programs that were not viable based upon the employment needs of the State and opened over 500 that match the job needs as determined by the Occupational Forecasting process. Colleges must also let individuals know what they offer and when.

Attract more Older Students – Older students tend to be more time and place bound than younger students. These are the students that need courses available at times and places that fit into an already crowded lifestyle. The FCCS has addressed this need in many ways. If the student is seeking technical courses, colleges have expanded their offerings to include early morning, late afternoon and night courses. Many institutions are open from seven in the morning to ten at night, five days a week, and Saturday and Sunday classes are becoming more common.

If the student's desire is to complete a bachelor's degree, that need is being addressed in two ways. The first is concurrent-use programs with state universities and independent colleges and universities. The underlying principle is that there is a physical presence by a state university or an independent college on a community college campus. This principle has been expanded recently to allow for less costly means of implementation. At concurrent-use sites, a state university or independent institution contracts for the use of space at a community college without having to incur the cost of building a building.

In-house research has shown that the upper division enrollments of concurrent-use programs is more heavily former community college students and/or AA transfers than the SUS upper division enrollment as a whole. Thus, these facilities appear to be attracting the type student they were designed to attract.

The second major way of addressing the needs of these students is via distance learning courses. The State Board of Community Colleges (SBCC) has established a Distance Learning Consortium to provide support to individual colleges as they offer this type course. In addition, the State is providing support to students taking distance learning courses via the Distance Learning Library Initiative (DLLI) and the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS). The student services on-line program for all students is FACTS which allows for academic advising, admissions, institutional and degree program information, records and registration, fees and payments and information about distance learning courses, career resources and library services. Both the number of and enrollment in on-line courses continues to increase. Many institutions have reached the point of having 25% of a program available on-line.

Areas Needing Additional Research

The AA degree has undergone an interesting phenomenon in the past several years. The number of degrees awarded increased from 22,372 in 1994-95 to 28,368 in 1997-98. There was a decline in 1998-99 to 25,720. The number of AA's applying to the SUS has increased slightly during this same time, from 18,400 in 1995-96 to 19,946 in 1998-99. The number actually attending has also increased from 7,831 in Fall 1995 to 8,663 in Fall 1998. However, the increase in students attending has fluctuated rather substantially, reaching a high of 9,026 in Fall 1997. This lack of consistency in applying to and attending the SUS during this time frame warrants further investigation.

More data are needed from current and former students as to why they have left and/or have not transferred on to four-year institutions. The PEPC survey previously mentioned provides a good starting point. However, in order to obtain more in depth information, the Division of Community Colleges is planning to conduct focus group interviews of 1999-2000 students who received the AA degree. That project will include a broad range of former students to obtain their input related to why they either transferred to a university or were unable to continue their education.

As more students attend non-public institutions, there is an increasing need for information from that sector. Centralized systems need to be established that would provide basic data on such

items as enrollments and graduates. Steps are being made in that direction via state boards and other groups already in place. These initial attempts to collect data should be expanded in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the educational attainment of Florida's citizens.

Conclusion

The wide range of both students served and programs offered by the Florida Community College System makes the System vulnerable to a wide range of factors. Serving different age groups means the FCCS is susceptible to events influencing everyone from high school age to retirement. This discussion has attempted to list the major factors that appear to be influencing FCCS enrollments. It has also listed some potential solutions or programs that can counter those factors. The System is aware of the need to continue monitoring enrollments and designing programs that meet the needs of the community. In addition, as Florida's workforce training leader, the colleges must be in a position to respond quickly to changes in the economy.

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