

First Term and First Year Crucial to Student Success

Introduction

The College of Marin (COM) Office of Planning, Research, and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE) is conducting research to identify students at risk of dropping out and to aid in developing programs and interventions to improve 6-year completion rates. This brief, part of a larger student success and completion study, focuses on the academic performance and unit load of COM students during their first term and first year of enrollment.

Previous research indicates that student progress during the first year of enrollment is strongly related to retention and completion/graduation. According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the second year of college. Further, students who perform poorly in their first term are unlikely to return for a second term.¹ Other research has shown that students with a first-year GPA lower than 3.0 should be considered at-risk of not graduating or dropping out.² This research examines whether similar patterns are reflected among COM students.

For this study, we analyzed six cohorts of COM students defined as first-time degree and/or transfer-seeking by the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CO). The CO tracks each student cohort for 6 years from the first term of enrollment. For each cohort the CO calculates Student Success Scorecard milestones, including 6-year completion.³ The CO uses these milestones to measure all California community colleges' performance. The most recent 6-year completion data available is for the cohort entering COM in the 2008-09 academic year. Cohort years included in this study are 2004-05 through 2008-09.

Findings

We examined the term-by-term data on GPA and unit load over the first 3 years of enrollment at COM, comparing students who did and did not complete within 6 years. Both groups of students started out in their first term by taking a similar average unit load (Figure 1). However, their first-term mean GPAs differed substantially, with non-completers averaging .39 grade points lower (Figure 2).

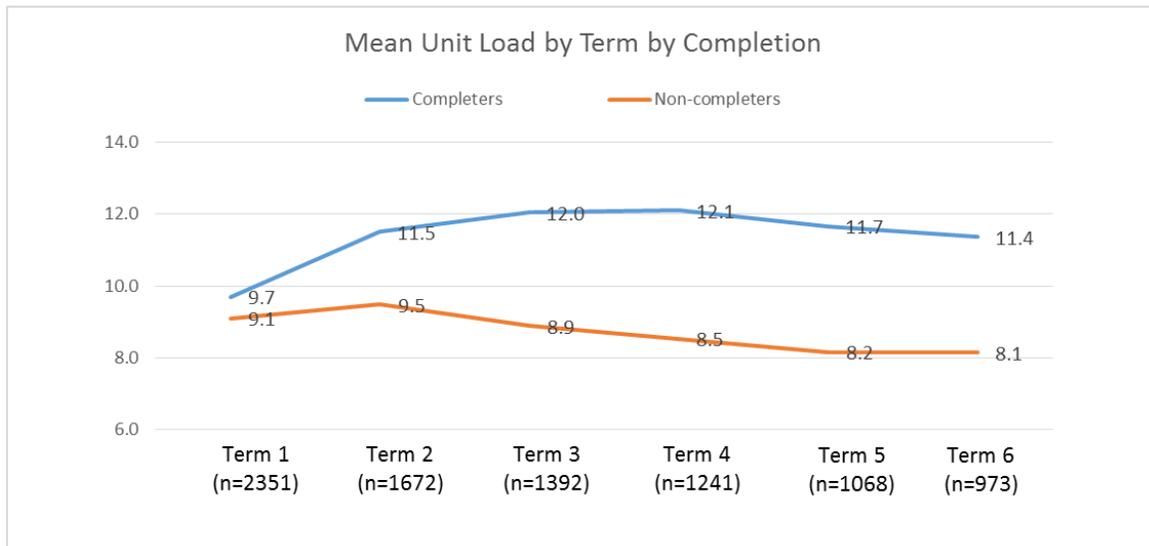
In the second term, the two groups diverged in average unit load: completers' mean unit load increased by nearly 2 units, while non-completers' increased by less than half a unit (Figure 1). Completers' GPA remained steady while non-completers' GPA dropped an average of .16 points (Figure 2).

¹ Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2008). *Imagine Success: Engaging Entering Students (2008 SENSE Field Test Findings)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program. <https://www.ccsse.org/center/resources/docs/publications/SENSE_2008_National_Report.pdf>

² Educational Advisory Board, April 2014. "What can we learn from first year GPA?" <<https://www.eab.com/technology/student-success-collaborative/student-success-insights/2014/04/what-can-we-learn-from-first-year-gpa>>

³ The CO definition of completion is: First-time students with a minimum of 6 units earned who attempted any math or English in the first three years and achieved any of the following outcomes within 6 years of entry: 1) earned AA/AS or CO approved credit certificate; 2) transferred to a 4-year institution (students shown to have enrolled in any 4-year institution of higher education after enrolling at a California Community College); and/or 3) achieved "transfer-prepared"—student successfully completed 60 UC/CSU transferable units with a GPA \geq 2.0.

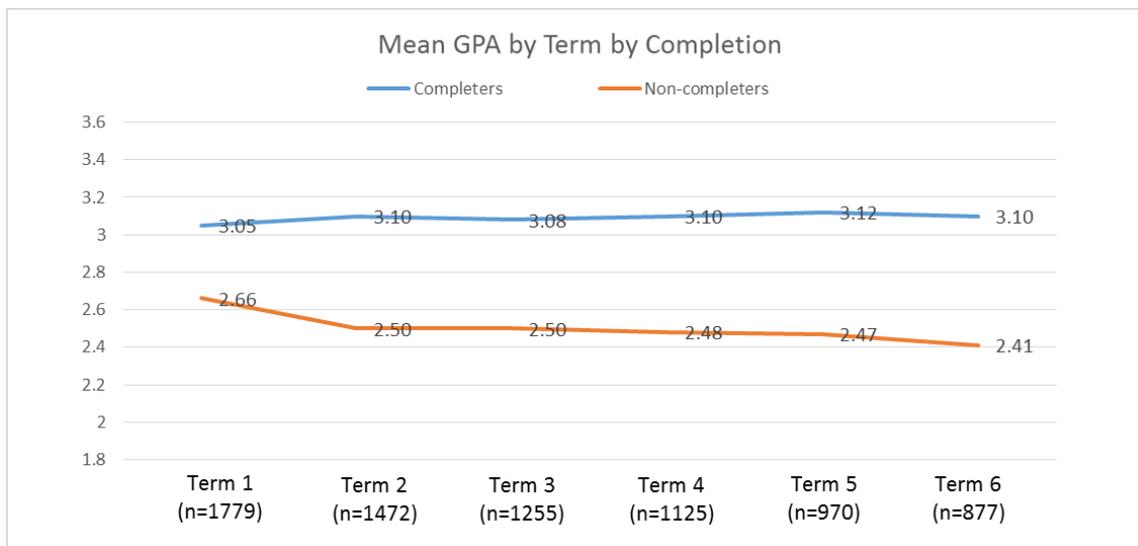
Figure 1. Mean Unit Load by Term by Completion, 6 Terms from First Term of Enrollment at COM



Terms 1-6 represent the first 3 years (6 consecutive terms) starting with Term 1 as the first semester a student enrolled, regardless of the cohort year in which they enrolled. All students are included in Term 1, but may or may not have enrolled in one or more subsequent terms. N represents the number of students enrolled in that specific term in credit courses (or in the case of GPA, graded credit courses) so that any student may be included in some term counts and not others.

Independent sample t-tests show statistically significant differences in GPA and mean unit load between completers and non-completers for all terms.

Figure 2. Mean GPA by Term by Completion, 6 Terms from First Term of Enrollment at COM



Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings confirm that students' unit load and GPA in the first year of enrollment have a statistically significant impact on long-term success. Students with a GPA below 3.0 in the first semester and a subsequent decline in the second semester were less likely to complete. This pattern could be used to trigger intervention. Though on average these students' GPAs are not low enough to warrant academic probation, they are at risk of dropping out. A systematic early alert system that tracks mid-term grades would improve our ability to find these students and intervene.