

**POLICY BRIEF**

# How Students Make Course Enrollment Decisions in an Era of Increased Choice:

## Results From a Survey of Enrollment Patterns and Choice Factors

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### **BACKGROUND**

In 2013, the state of Florida passed Senate Bill 1720 (SB 1720) which dramatically restructured developmental education (DE) placement and instruction. Whereas DE was previously required for students testing below established levels on standardized tests, *exempt* students (students who entered a traditional Florida public high school in 2003-2004 and graduated with a standard diploma in 2007 or later and active-duty military personnel) now have the opportunity to opt out of these courses and enroll directly into college-level work. In addition, colleges must now provide all students with a wider array of delivery methods for DE courses, including modularized, compressed, contextualized, and co-requisite.

In light of this environment of increased student choice, we sought to investigate the enrollment patterns of students and how students are making their enrollment decisions using data from a Student Response Survey. The survey was distributed in the fall 2014 semester to all first-time-in-college students at two Florida College System (FCS) institutions. In the survey, students were asked questions regarding their enrollment decisions in reading, writing and math, separately. In addition, we also explored the DE enrollment decision factors, or influences that exempt students found important in deciding whether to enroll in a DE course.

### **Key findings include:**

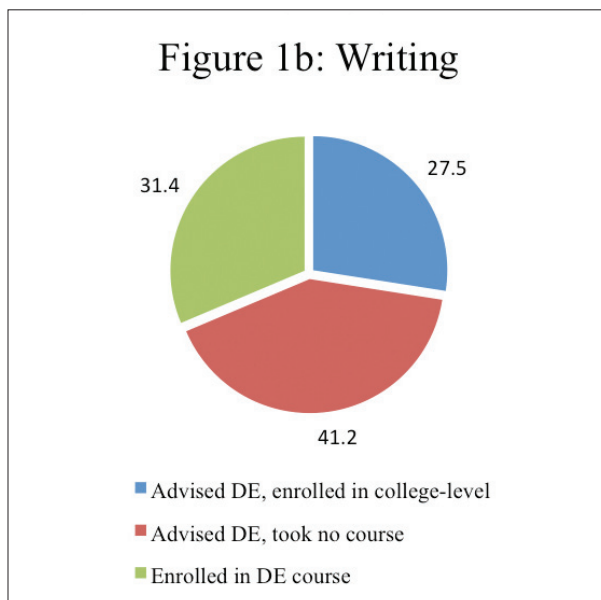
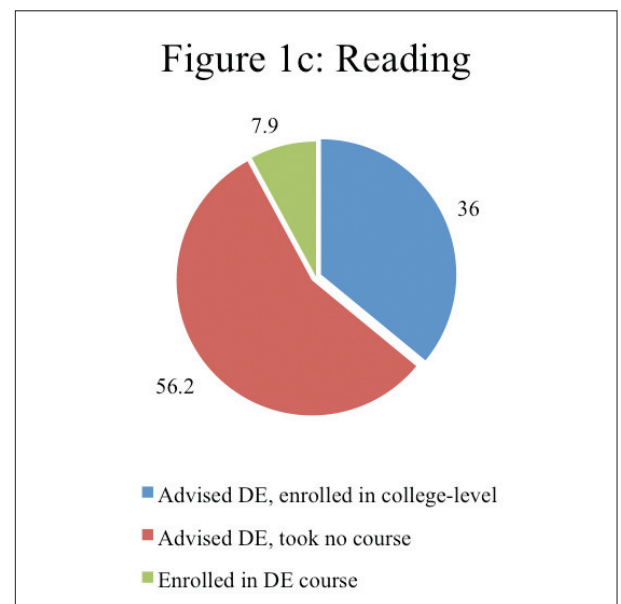
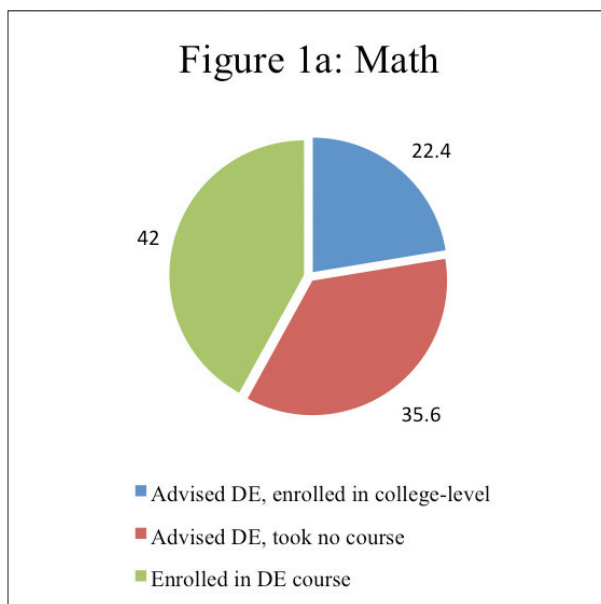
1. Many students bypass DE when it is optional, particularly in reading and writing.
2. Among students who bypass DE, some take college-level courses instead, but others put off taking any core subject courses whatsoever.
3. Enrollment patterns vary by student characteristics, such as race and income.
4. Future career goals was the most important factor students considered when making their enrollment decisions, particularly for students who took DE.
5. Both students who took DE and students who took college-level courses cite prior academic achievement as important in their enrollment decisions.
6. Students who do not take any core subject courses show the least amount of consideration of many of the decision factors.

### **ENROLLMENT PATTERNS FROM STUDENT RESPONSES**

Our analysis focused on those students who were recommended to take DE. Overall, *students bypass DE when it is optional, particularly in reading and writing.* In addition, *among students who bypass DE, some take college-level courses instead, but others put off taking any core subject courses whatsoever.* In *math*, 41.9% enrolled in a developmental course, 22.5% enrolled in a college-level course instead, while 35.7%

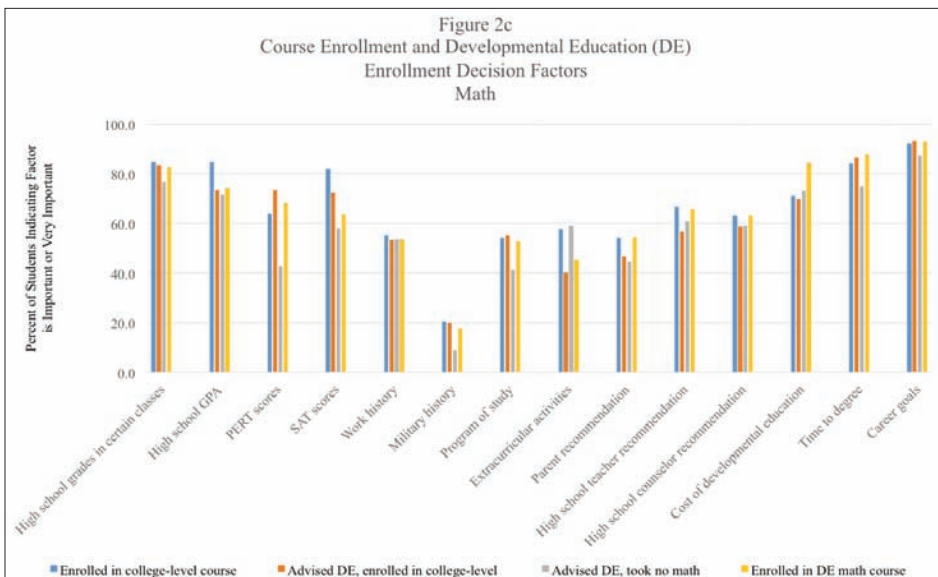
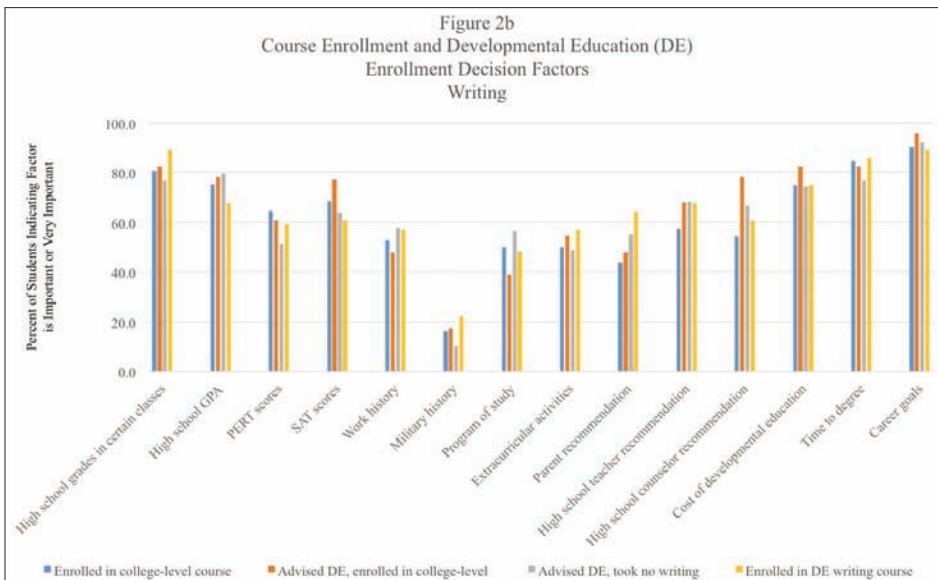
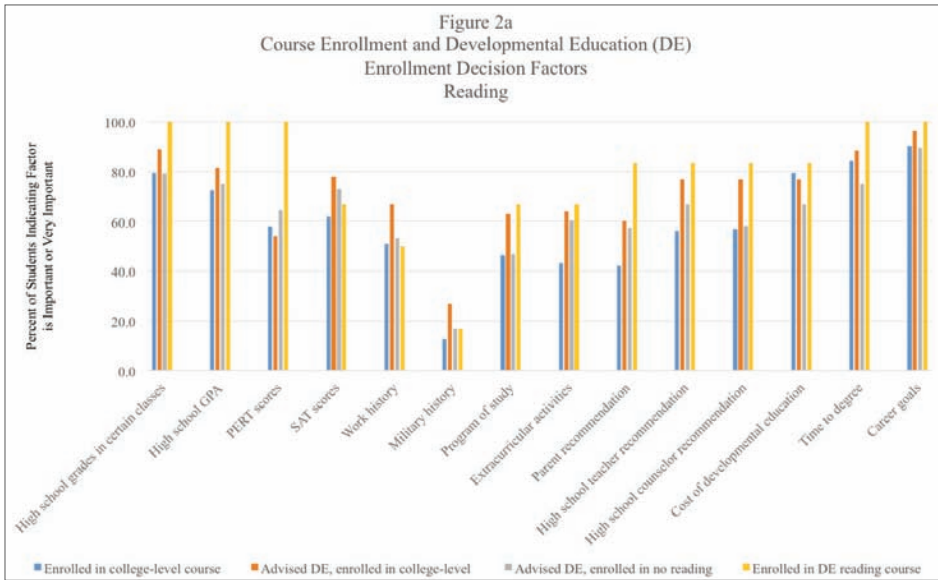
took no math course at all (Figure 1a). In *writing*, 32.5% enrolled in a developmental course, 27.4% enrolled in a college-level English course instead, while 41.3% enrolled in no writing or English course (Figure 1b). Finally, in *reading*, a mere 8% enrolled in a developmental course, 36.1% enrolled in a college-level English course instead, and 56.2% enrolled in no reading or English course (Figure 1c).

In addition to these overall patterns, *enrollment patterns vary by student characteristics, such as race and income*. Black students were more likely to enroll in DE math and writing courses than other racial groups. Also, Latino students, as well as low-income students, were less likely to enroll in any math course at all.



**FACTORS STUDENTS CONSIDERED WHEN MAKING COURSE ENROLLMENT DECISIONS**

Overall, *the factor of future career goals was the most important factor students considered when making their enrollment decisions, particularly for students who took DE*. Between 90% and 100% of all reading students indicated that career goals were important or very important (Figure 2a). Similarly, between 89% and 92% of all writing students (Figure 2b) and between 88% and 93% of all math students (Figure 2c) indicated the primary role of career goals in their decisions.



In addition to career goals, time to degree, high school grades, and high school GPA were also important decision factors for many students, particularly for those who took DE and those who bypassed DE and took college-level courses. Indeed, all students in DE reading courses indicated that grades in high school courses, high school GPA, their PERT scores, and time to degree impacted their decision to enroll in a DE reading course. Thus, *both students who took DE and students who took college-level courses also cite prior academic achievement as important in their enrollment decisions.*

However, *students who do not take any core subject courses show the least amount of consideration of the majority of the decision factors.* For example, in some cases up to a quarter of the students do not use time to degree as part of their decision-making process and some students, particularly those not enrolling in any subject area courses, tend not to consider prior academic preparation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through the passage of SB 1720, the institutions of the FCS are now providing more choices to their students when it comes to DE and course selection. Overall, we found that students are resistant to enroll in DE courses, particularly in the subjects of reading and writing. In math, however, some students enrolled in DE when advised to do so. Further, students who enrolled in DE show very high levels of consideration over the decision factors related to academic preparation: high school grades, GPA, and test scores, with an additional emphasis on career goals and time to degree. In other words, this group of students had been given and utilized the information necessary to decide that DE is both appropriate and necessary for their academic success, whereas others may lack this information or may have ignored it or put little value on these factors.

Among the students who enrolled in college-level courses, it is encouraging to see that most of these students considered their current academic ability (high school grades, GPA, and test scores). Interestingly, these students tended to place greater weight on the cost of DE, overall time to degree, and career goals. Taken together, these students are those who had a sharp focus on their future and believed that they would be able to be successful in college-level work despite their academic preparation.

Sizeable proportions of students, particularly in reading, opt not to take any subject area course at all. In addition, low-income students have the highest rates of opting not to enroll in any reading, writing, or math courses when advised to enter a DE course.

In addition, these students identify fewer factors as important or very important in making their enrollment decisions. This is concerning, given that the most vulnerable students may not be aware of or take into consideration all of the information available to them when selecting their courses.

At this point, however, we do not yet know the outcomes of any of these students, including those who decided not to take any core subject area course. Thus, continued observation should determine whether students are able to make decisions that will promote success, particularly when students advised to take DE enroll directly into gateway courses or fail to take core academic courses in writing or math. The next phase of our work will address this very topic: how do the course enrollment decisions made by students relate to their academic success?