

2019

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Recommended Citation

Lloyd, C. (2021). Special-Admit Students' Perceptions of Academic Success. *Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/jarihe/vol2/iss1/5>

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Special-Admit Students' Perceptions of Academic Success

Courtney Lloyd, *West Chester University*

ABSTRACT

Research has shown many high school students enter college with weak academic skills and experience a culture shock when trying to make the transition from high school to college. In this quantitative research study at a regional, comprehensive four-year institution in the Northeast, 57 special-admit students completed an online survey to provide insight on how students perceive their final grades in courses as it relates with their definition of being academically successful. Students who participated in the academic support programs provided valuable insight into how students viewed success in college courses after one semester. Each academic program encompassed different academic requirements, and results of the study revealed there was not a significant relationship between the special-admit populations and how they defined being academically successful.

Introduction

Previous research has shown many students enter college with weak academic skills and experience a culture shock when trying to make the transition from high school to college. Low graduation rates are partially due to students not recognizing high school behaviors will not always translate into performing well at the college level (Moore, 2006). High school students entering college need to have an open-mind, be able to ask for assistance, dedicate additional time to their studies, and put forth the effort to succeed in their courses. Students receiving unsatisfactory grades need to adjust their time management and study skills early into their academic career. Students are often unaware of the amount of work and dedication it will take to be a successful college student, and the term “academic success” can be defined in various forms, as students do not always define it by grades alone.

A study was conducted at a regional, comprehensive four-year institution in the Northeast, with a population of almost 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students, and with more than 100 undergraduate and over 80 graduate programs. This study was conducted to determine how students perceived their final grades after one semester and how it correlates to their definition of academic success. In 2016, over 2,000 first-year students were admitted to the university, of which, approximately 500 were accepted under special admittance (admit) terms. A major limitation of this study was the low response rate of students completing the online survey. The data collected and analyzed was very limited, as a higher response rate would have provided the researcher with a lower risk of a non-response bias (Stat Trek, 2018). The response rate, 13 percent, had an 87 percent nonresponse bias, which directly impacted the reliability and validity of the research findings. The researcher continued with the study, as to lay the groundwork for a more complete research study in the future.

Under the special-admit terms, two separate cohorts of students had specific admissions criteria, and each program included mandatory requirements before and/or during the first academic semester. Students who require extra attention and support have often been referred to as developmental, preparatory, or remedial (Mulvey, 2008). For the purpose of this study, the two special-admit programs include students who participated in a Provisional Admission Program (PAP) or a Special Admissions Program (SAP). First-year students, especially special-admits, require different levels of assistance to support the students with making the transition in to college. The special-admit students need to know they are being supported throughout their academic career and feel comfortable seeking the assistance.

When students are accepted to college, it becomes the responsibility of the university to provide academic and personal support services, especially to the students who have a weaker academic background. Students who participated in the PAP and SAP were asked to complete an online survey to provide insight to their experiences in a special-admit program and to assist the researcher in determining what grade range they felt represented doing well in their courses. The following research question and hypothesis was used in this study:

- Research Question: What grade range represents doing well in college-level courses?
 - o Hypothesis: Students who participated in the PAP and SAP will define academic success by achieving a grade in the range of 93-100%.

The special-admit students' responses to the online survey were analyzed to show if there was a correlation between how students define success and their academic performance after one semester.

Background

At this university where the study was conducted, the Office of Admissions uses a coding system to differentiate the regular admits to their peers in special-admit programs. This allows the administration to track students' retention and graduation rates. The four admit types used to code students include the following: FY1, FY2, FY3, and FY4. This study only focused on students who were coded with the FY2, FY3 and FY4 codes. The criteria for the admit types includes:

- FY1: Regular Admit (RA) – Students who met admission criteria. This includes a strong academic record, including GPA, standardized test scores, and requested program of study.
- FY2/FY3: Provisional Admission Program (PAP) - Both admit types are students in the PAP program who are provisionally accepted into the University. Students must successfully complete a summer bridge program before being matriculated. FY2 students are funded by the Act 101 program, which allocates state funds to provide services to academically and financially disadvantaged students (“Act 101”, 2017). FY3 students are also PAP students, but are not supported by the Act 101 funds. State and federal funds are distributed according to students' socioeconomic status. When discussing students in the PAP, both admit types will be discussed collectively.
- FY4: Special Admissions Program (SAP) - This cohort of students is accepted into the university, but had lower SAT score and/or high school grades as compared to their regularly admitted peers.

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The first special-admit program, PAP, included 180 students who were provisionally accepted into the university. Students were required to successfully complete a five-week summer bridge program before being matriculated. This short summer session is designed to build academic skills and to prepare students for their introductory 100-level college coursework (McCurrie, 2009). During the summer, students were enrolled in a total of six credits (credit and non-credit bearing) and were required to complete several academic program requirements. Academic support structures were created to assist the students during this transitional period, as students were required to live on campus and participate in mandatory tutoring, coaching, workshops, and social events. By allowing students to enter during a summer session, they began to build the academic skills and confidence that would be necessary to perform as well as, or better than, their peers who were regularly admitted. During the fall semester, PAP students were restricted to 12 credits and were required to participate in mandatory tutoring in certain math and writing courses.

The second special-admit program, SAP, included 290 students who had the option to enroll in 12 or 15 credits during their first academic semester ("University Fact Books", n.d.). Students who enrolled in 12 credits were not required to participate in the mandatory program, but were encouraged to participate. Students who enrolled in 15 credits were required to meet with an academic coach and attend various academic workshops. Graduate consultants, who served as academic coaches, were assigned to assist students in navigating the university system and to make referrals to campus resources.

The university recognized the need for additional support based on high school grades and/or SAT scores. The SAP was designed to provide academic support while assisting students in making the transition into the university. SAP students were not offered the same level of academic support as their peers in the PAP, but students were given academic tools and resources to assist in making the transition. Table 1 is an overview of the academic support and program requirements for the two special-admit programs during the fall 2016 semester.

TABLE 1

PAP and SAP Support and Program Requirements

Program Support	PAP	SAP
Provisionally Accepted	Yes	No
Summer Bridge Program	Yes	No
Mandatory Tutoring	Yes	No
Graduate Consultant Assigned	No	Yes
Restricted Credits	Yes	No
Mandatory Workshops	Yes	Yes
Restricted Credits	Yes – 12 credits in fall	No – 12 or 15 credits in fall
Developmental Courses	Per placement results	Per placement results

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study included topics on developmental education, motivation and performance, and academic success to provide a comprehensive understanding of

the special-admit populations, how students can be motivated, and how students can be successful if provided the critical support. For the purpose of this study, developmental education is under the purview of students who have low SAT scores, poor high school grades, and/or the need to complete developmental courses. Students who participated in the PAP were considered developmental at the time this study was conducted.

Developmental Education

Developmental education is a broad term that is often related to remedial courses and services that are organized and delivered to help retain and graduate students (Boylan & Bonham, 2007). Support programs, including mandatory tutoring, workshops, and one-on-one meetings, are designed to assist the special-admit students in completing coursework while learning how to navigate the college system. It is important for students to obtain the necessary academic skills early in their academic careers to be retained from semester to semester. For special-admit students to become acclimated to campus life, academic support services need to be provided during this important transitional period and beyond (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Special-admit programs offer a variety of services to students during their first academic year and make many support services a requirement of the program. Services typically include assessments, orientation, tutoring, advising, counseling, peer support, early alert programs, and study skills workshops.

A study conducted by Vick, Robles-Piña, Martirosyan, and Kite (2015) determined students who were tutored were more likely to persist in their coursework and be successful in future courses if they continued to utilize tutorial services. Students may not appreciate the mandatory, intrusive support, but those who are willing to seek the assistance are often the students who will be more likely to be academically successful and will continue to ask for support throughout their college careers. Special-admit students are not always equipped with the necessary skills to be successful in college right after high school. Research has shown that when students are able to be successful in remedial courses, they are empowered to continue their college-level coursework (Boylan, 2010). This university recognized the academic differences between the special and regular admits; therefore, programs and services need to be created and provided to support the students.

Motivation and Performance

Students tend to believe happiness and satisfaction are the true measures of success, and academic achievement plays a less substantial role in defining their college career (McCurrie, 2009). Students may view their academic success differently than the administration, as it is not always about receiving the highest grade possible. For students to be both happy and able to meet high academic standards, they should begin building these necessary skills as early as middle and high school to be ready to put in the amount of work, time, and dedication needed to be successful in college. When students are given the tools and skills needed before attending college, the transition from high school to college might not be a transition at all.

The quality of study skills, academic ability, and how students learn affects how they study for courses. According to Plant, Ericsson, Hill, and Asberg (2005), the amount of study time students utilize is a very weak predictor of how well they will perform in college-level courses (as cited in Marrs, Sigler, & Hayes, 2009). The total number of hours students claimed to have studied, no matter how many, will not always result in an excellent grade if the quality of studying is weak. When students receive feedback and grades on assignments, they need to

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reflect on the methods utilized to prepare for the assignment and not assume the same level of work or methods will increase the grade on the next assignment.

It is equally important to look at what motivates a student to try to do well academically. Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation, personality, and development. The theory proposes that “intrinsic motivation, or motivation derived purely from the satisfaction inherent in the activity itself, is more conducive to learning than extrinsic motivation, or motivation to achieve an external reward or to avoid a punishment” (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, and Abel, 2013). Students with intrinsic motivation have lower anxiety, feel good, and perform well in school. Students who have a sense of personal control are self-determined and take ownership over the activities they engage with and choices they make (Brooks & Young, 2011). Highly intrinsically motivated learners delay gratification because they are invested in the activities taking place in the classroom. Academic delay of gratification is positively related to students’ rating of their professors’ effectiveness in the classroom, as well as a partial correlation between final grades and other variables. Students who can delay gratification will often be more academically successful if they are willing to push away distractions (Bembunty, 2009).

Academic Success

Special-admit students may have a difficult time making the transition from high school to college because of the skills and behaviors learned in high school. College is an unfamiliar system with different terminology and processes. Learning to navigate can be a daunting task for any student, especially the special-admit population. Students who lack study or time management skills also have difficulties in their courses and struggle when trying to make this transition (Gofen, 2009). Selecting key faculty and staff to work with the special-admit population is a key component in helping to motivate and empower students.

College is new, exciting, different, and unfamiliar. Each student will experience college differently, and some may end up with academic difficulty as they encounter a culture shock. Students realize that the academic behaviors and choices that were insignificant in high school are now penalized in college (Moore, 2006). Special-admit students are particularly in danger of having this “culture shock”, as students face many challenges in their academic and often in their personal lives. Literature on special-admit students has shown students can have a hard time learning how to manage it all, while trying to be a successful college student. Students often do not realize they are doing poorly or not adjusting well until it is too late.

Cognitive, affective, and personal factors influence how students perform and the likelihood of college success (Boylan, 2009, p. 14). Research grounded in the theoretical work of several scholars of adult development and learning, most notably Arthur Chickering and Erik Erikson, have driven innovative models for using a combination of cognitive, affective, and personal information to target a variety of course-based and learning assistance-based interventions for special-admit students (Boylan, 2009). For example, placement exam scores could be inaccurate and the need to assist special-admit populations through alternative interventions is necessary. By determining available resources on campus and paying attention to students’ high school profiles, creating a learning plan for each student can provide individual experiences that assist students on a personal level. When programs spend the time investing in their students, relationships are created and students feel more comfortable seeking assistance when appropriate.

Problem Statement

As of fall 2016, PAP students had a four-year graduation rate of 34.3 percent and a six-year graduation rate of 59.3 percent, both about twenty percentage points below their RA peers (“University Fact Books”, n.d.). The SAP program was a pilot program created to address the graduation gap. SAP students who enrolled in 15 credits agreed to participate in this support program, which students were required to participate in mandatory workshops and meetings throughout the fall semester. The goal of the pilot program was to allow students to enroll in 15 credits like their RA peers, while being provided assistance as the students transitioned into college. PAP students were restricted to 12 credits during the fall semester; however, some of the students earned three to six college-level credits during the summer bridge program. This allowed students to begin their college career with credits and a GPA. Students can feel discouraged if they are not completing credits towards graduation, and remedial courses can delay graduation if students need to complete or repeat multiple remedial courses in order to advance into college-level courses.

The data collected from the survey was analyzed by grouping the special-admit students together to determine if what grade range they felt represented doing well in their courses. This discussion only analyzed one aspect of the survey that the students completed, as the researcher wanted to focus on how students viewed their final grades in courses and how that was related to their definition of academic success.

Methods

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted PAP and SAP students, via email, asking them to complete an online survey regarding their experiences as students who participated in a special-admissions program. A total of 484 first-year, special-admit students were invited to participate, and a total of 22 PAP and 35 SAP students (N = 57) completed the survey. The instrument used to conduct this study included a survey that was created in Qualtrics by using a five-point Likert scale. When students agreed to participate in the study, they were directed to electronically sign a consent form in Qualtrics. The survey asked students various questions related to their experiences in the special-admit programs and asked students to define what “doing well” meant in college by selecting a grade range. A quasi-experimental research design was used to determine if a cause-effect relationship existed among the independent and dependent variables. The dependent variable included final grades and the independent variable included the special-admit populations. By collecting the above information, a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to identify the relationships between the variables.

The results of the survey provided valuable insight into how students viewed their success in college courses after one semester. Student responses were analyzed by conducting a chi-square test for association in SPSS (statistical software). There are two assumptions that must be met in order to run this analysis. Two variables should be measured at an ordinal and nominal level and the two variables should consist of two or more categorical, independent groups (Laerd Statistics, 2018). The chi-square test was performed to examine whether one variable was independent from another one, and whether its results would reveal if there was a statistically significant relationship between the special-admit populations and the grade range they felt represented doing well in college courses.

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The age range for the special-admit populations fell between 17 and 19 years of age, as each program only recruits recent high school graduates. When students apply to the university, they self-report ethnicity, and since students voluntarily shared their student ID numbers, survey responses were matched to the students' demographic information. To provide a profile of the students who completed the survey, demographic information and term grade point average (TGPA) was requested from the program coordinators to assist in the data collection process. Demographic information of the students who participated in the survey is displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Special-Admit Population by Ethnicity and Sex

Sex by Population	Ethnicity				Total
	White	Black	Hispanic	Multi-racial	
SAP	20	6	6	3	35
Female	16	5	3	3	27
Male	4	1	3	0	8
PAP	9	11	2	0	22
Female	8	8	1	0	17
Male	1	3	1	0	5
Total	29	17	8	3	57

As the table shows above, the TGPA for SAP students at the end of the fall term was 3.07 and 2.82 for PAP students. Table 3 illustrates the breakdown of the special-admit populations by ethnicity and average TGPA, as to build a profile of the students who participated in this study. At the end of one semester, the average TGPA for SAP students was slightly higher than their peers in PAP.

TABLE 3

Average Term GPA

Population	White	Black	Hispanic	Multi-racial	Total
SAP	3.09	3.19	2.84	3.13	3.07
PAP	2.74	2.90	2.75	-	2.82
Total	2.99	3.00	2.82	3.13	2.98

Results

Table 4 presents the chi-square results testing to see if there was a statistically significant relationship between the special-admit populations and the grade range that represented doing well in courses. The results revealed there was not a statistically significant relationship ($p = .153$) as the p-value was greater than .05. Since the chi-square test revealed no significant relationship, and since the study is flawed due to the limitation of the sample size, the average term grade point average (TGPA) was analyzed to have a better understanding of the grade range students received after one semester.

TABLE 4*Results of the Chi-Square Test*

	Value	df	Asymptotic
Pearson Chi-Square	6.699a	4	.153
Likelihood Ratio	9.431	4	.051
N of Valid Cases	57		

a. 6 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .39.

Another report from the chi-square test showed the cross-tabulation results between the special-admit programs and the responses to “what grade range represents doing well in courses.” The cross-tabulation showed students in both programs had a higher response rate for the 83–89% grade range (Table 5).

TABLE 5*Cross-tabulation (Program * “Doing Well”)*

Program		70– 72%	73– 79%	80– 82%	83– 89%	90– 100%	Total
SAP	Count	1	1	6	15	12	35
	% within	2.9%	2.9%	17.1%	42.9%	34.3%	100%
	% within	100%	100%	100%	50.0%	63.2%	61.4%
	% of Total	1.8%	1.8%	10.5%	26.3%	21.1%	61.4%
PAP	Count	0	0	0	15	7	22
	% within	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	68.2%	31.8%	100%
	% within	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	36.8%	38.6%
	% of Total	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	26.3%	12.3%	38.6%
Total	Count	1	1	6	30	19	57
	% within	1.8%	1.8%	10.5%	52.6%	33.3%	100%
	% within	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	% of Total	1.8%	1.8%	10.5%	52.6%	33.3%	100%

Table 6 presents the Phi and Cramer’s V results for the chi-square test. Phi is a chi-square-based measure of association. The chi-square coefficient depends on the strength of the relationship and sample size. Phi eliminates sample size by dividing chi-square by n , the sample size, and taking the square root. The Cramer’s V is the most popular of the chi-square-based measures of nominal association because it gives good norming from 0 to 1 regardless of table size (Nominal

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Association, n.d.). The strength of association between the variables was not significant ($p = .153$).

TABLE 6

Nominal Association: Phi and Cramer's V

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by	Phi	.343	.153
	Cramer's V	.343	.153
N of Valid Cases		57	

Discussion

Through the comparison of the two special-admit populations, new knowledge was gained from understanding how students' experiences helped define academic success. The special-admit students shared their experiences as students who were required to fulfill mandatory program requirements, and the quantitative results of the study indicated students do not need always need to receive a grade of an A to feel they were academically successful. Each special-admit program had different mandatory requirements, and as a result, the findings revealed there was not a significant difference between the special-admit populations and the grade range they felt represented doing well in college-level courses.

Many states' funding formulas are being tied to student retention and graduation rates, and new strategies to support students and to help improve student success are necessary to secure funding (Zhang, Fei, Quddus, & Davis, 2014). If universities accept and label students with having weak academic backgrounds, how can students be expected to perform as well as, or better than, their regularly admitted peers if support is not offered? It becomes the responsibility of the university to ensure a solid support system and a care team is available and ready to assist this population.

Additionally, universities must have adequate information to make good admission decisions. In place of traditional assessment measures such as high school ACT and GPA, schools of higher education need to include writing samples, in-house assessment tools, interviews, and portfolio data in the student evaluation process. (p. 40) By taking a different admissions approach, students can be profiled differently, which can lead to providing the necessary support for each special-admit student. Furthermore, predictors of academic achievement can be identified by a students' experience in leadership positions, high school GPA, and gender (Mattson, 2007).

Future Research

This study could be duplicated at this university as an attempt to reach more students. By having a larger sample size, the results of the study could be validated. Retention and graduate rates influence the administration when decisions need to be made regarding the admission process, support services, and the number of faculty to hire. Data is what will drive their decision-making process, so it is important for program coordinators to prove what services are working well and what areas needs to be enhanced. This is just one of the ways this study could be altered to help provide the data and to tell the story of what is helping the students achieve academic success.

Another future research idea could include conducting a similar study on special-admit students at other similarly sized institutions. Even though special-admit admission profiles would not be the same, students who are categorized as special-admit would have similar academic backgrounds, skills, and characteristics. Conducting more studies on special-admit populations could help administrators provide necessary resources to students they are accepting into their universities, as well as provide additional literature on support services and special-admit populations. By conducting focus groups, a qualitative study could be conducted to compare feedback from special-admit populations between different institutions. Revisions of policies could begin and new academic support initiatives could be implemented.

The future of admitting special-admit students is evolving as our student population is always changing. First-year students are coming in each year with different strengths and weaknesses, and this study provides a glimpse of what students are feeling regarding their academic success, and universities at large can play a greater role in students' lives by providing better assistance and support during this crucial time in their academic career.

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Appendix A
Student Survey

- Q1. Enter your ID number.
- Q2. In the fall semester, which academic support group were associated with?
- Provisional Admission Program (PAP)
 - Special Admissions Program (SAP)
- Q3. Please select courses you were enrolled in during the summer/fall semesters:
- Math 2
 - Math 3
 - Writing/English
 - None of the above
- Q4. The assistance, support, and motivation I received from the PAP faculty, staff, and tutors OR from the SAP program was...
- Extremely good
 - Somewhat good
 - Neither good nor bad
 - Somewhat bad
 - Extremely bad
- Q5. How satisfied are you with your overall academic performance during the fall semester?
- Extremely satisfied
 - Somewhat satisfied
 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 - Extremely dissatisfied
- Q6. What grade range represents “doing well” in courses?
- 90-100%
 - 83-89%
 - 80-82%
 - 73-79%
 - 70-72%

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Q7. How important was receiving professor feedback on your overall class performance?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q8. I felt more connected to campus as a result of my interactions with peers, faculty, and staff because of my participation in DP or MP.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q9. With one semester completed, how important would you rank the following activities as it pertained to your academic success.

	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important
Academic performance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Class attendance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Campus involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Setting and meeting academic goals	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Visiting professors in office hours	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Seeking assistance outside of the classroom	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Receiving family support towards your academic goals	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Q10. Based on your high school academic performance, how optimistic were you regarding how well you would perform academically in your first semester?

- Much better
- Somewhat better
- About the same
- Somewhat worse
- Much worse

Q11. How do you define success in college and what factors help contribute to that success?

Biography

Dr. Courtney A. Lloyd – For the past twelve years, Dr. Lloyd has worked with students at West Chester University. Her background in higher education includes advising exploratory undergraduate students and coordinating tutorial services for the past twelve years. Dr. Lloyd received her Doctoral degree in Public Administration from West Chester University.