

Research Briefs

Attempted Semester Credit Hours to Associate Degree

For the past three years, South Texas College effectively decreased its “average semester credit hours (SCH) to associate degree,” a completion measure in the Texas Higher Education Board Almanac. In efforts to continue striving toward student success, this study examines average attempted SCH to associate degree based on four categories: number of awards received, degree type, prior dual-enrollment classification, and Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment status.

At South Texas College, the widest gap occurred in the number of awards received, an indication that students may be attaining non-stackable certifications or degrees. Students earning an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) attempted more SCH than their counterparts, possibly because of the grade point average requirements for certain AAS programs. Students with prior dual-enrollment classification attempted fewer SCH than students with no dual-enrollment experience. Students who met TSI status averaged fewer hours than those that did not meet this criteria.

Background

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While two-year degrees may be a misnomer when applied to a growingly diverse student population, this expected time range functions as a vital and beneficial completion measure to track and improve on student progress and achievement. These two-year degrees mean that a student will require typically 60 semester credit hours (SCH) to fulfill the requirements for an Associate’s degree. Aside from providing a measurable length until completion, this timeframe also affects students in regards to financial aid requirements because students who receive financial aid need to maintain a certain standing in terms of SCH to qualify for and receive financial aid assistance. In addition to these tangible and quantifiable effects, a two-year window may also impact students psychologically and emotionally as they measure their own achievements against this expectation. Because of awareness to these and many more consequences, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) has begun to track and report “average SCH to associate degree” as a completion measure in their Almanac.

Purpose of Study

This study identifies what factors contribute to students attempting more SCH than needed before attaining an associate degree at South Texas College (STC). The findings extrapolated from this data will help STC understand this situation so as to augment student achievement.

Methodology

Using data from academic years 2013-2015, this analysis compares the average attempted SCH for STC students receiving an associate degree (n = 8,142). The researcher compares the data through four categories:

number of awards received, degree type, dual-enrollment classification, and Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment status. (The researcher does not filter out credits for developmental or dual-credit courses, creating a higher average of attempted SCH, 96, than what the THECB Almanac reports, 84.)

Findings

Multiple Awards

Students under the category of “Number of Awards Received” saw the largest difference in attempted SCH. While a majority of students averaged 92 attempted SCH for their first award, 20% of students averaged 127 attempted SCH and earned more than one award, producing a disparity of 35 SCH between these two groups. This difference suggests that some students are attaining multiple, non-stackable degrees. In other words, students ventured into multiple degree programs—certifications or associate degree paths—before earning their associate degree. The certification or degrees that they received did not build off one another.

Degree Type

Considering all categories, students who pursued an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) ranked second in average attempted SCH. They differed by 29 attempted SCH against students receiving an Associate of Arts degree, the degree with the fewest attempted SCH. This gap may emerge because of students retaking courses to raise their grade point average given the competitive entry into some of the programs in the AAS. For example, in these three years, 557 students who pursued an Associate Degree in Nursing averaged a total of 140 attempted SCH. Similarly, the AAS in Respiratory Therapy had 58 students average an at-

tempted 130 SCH. A notable figure came from the AAS in American Sign Language and Interpretive Studies with a specialization in Deaf Support Specialist as they had 9 students average 149 attempted SCH.

Dual-Enrollment Classification

Dual-enrollment students are high school students who enroll in courses that provide them with high school and college credit simultaneously. These students need to have met the same admission requirements as students enrolling in college for the first time. The researcher found that students who participated in the dual-enrollment program averaged 89 attempted SCH. Students with no prior dual-enrollment status attempted 104 SCH, a difference of 15 SCH between these two groups. The lower average is expected for dual-enrollment students because courses offered at the high schools typically comprise of various required courses for an associate's degree.

TSI Assessment Status

Students who were college-ready based on the TSI Assessment had fewer attempted SCH than students who did not meet this requirement. The former attempted 92 SCH while the latter attempted 104 SCH, a difference of 12 SCH. This difference emerges because failure to meet TSI requirements means enrollment in developmental courses. These developmental courses prepare students for college-level courses that will count toward an award, so developmental courses add to

the attempted SCH but not toward degree completion.

Implications for Future Research

The total number of graduates has increased in each of the academic years studied from 2,396 in 2013 to 3,015 in 2015. While the increase of student population occurred, the total average attempted SCH steadily decreased. These figures depict progress in reducing time until graduation for students at STC. However, more work needs to occur in this area as it poses a critical component in student success. Because the most disparate difference occurred between students receiving multiple awards, future research should focus on what certifications or degrees students attain and why they attain them, so a more effective method of completion can flourish. Similarly, a deeper exploration of the reasons behind the excessive amount of courses for students pursuing an AAS needs to be conducted to gain an understanding of how to facilitate or implement a process that will make these students succeed on their first attempt at these courses, which they seem to be retaking to increase their GPA. Because students with prior dual-enrollment classification tend to outscore their counterparts on multiple measures, more work needs to happen to graduate these students in less time. DegreeWorks, an online and readily accessible tool, can assuage the problem of excess hours. With this tool, students can educate themselves on how many more SCH they need until degree completion, so they can plan accordingly, execute effectively, and graduate punctually.

Average Attempted Semester Credit Hours by Associate Degree Graduates: AY 2013 - AY 2015

By Academic Year	Total Number of Graduates	Average Attempted Semester Credit Hours
AY 2013	2,396	99
AY 2014	2,731	98
AY 2015	3,015	96
By Degree Type		
Associate of Arts	4,423	92
Associate of Applied Science	1,845	117
Associate of Arts in Teaching	896	95
Associate of Science	978	88
By TSI Status		
Started Remedial	3,680	104
Started College Level	4,462	92
By Number of Awards Received		
First Award	6,803	92
More than One Award	1,339	127
By Student Type		
Prior Dual-Enrollment	3,769	89
No Prior Dual-Enrollment	4,373	104
Grand Total	8,142	97

Notes: "Started Remedial" = any student who took at least one developmental course prior to receiving a degree; "More than One Award" = any student who had previously received a certificate or Associate-level degree; "Prior Dual-Enrollment Student" = any student who was enrolled at STC as a dual-enrollment