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Summer School Enrollment and Time-to-Degree

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## Summer School Enrollment and Time-to-Degree

### Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between summer school enrollment and time-to-degree across the University of North Carolina's (UNC) sixteen campuses. Factors examined for their effect on graduation include institutional characteristics, student demographics, academic preparedness and performance, and summer school attendance. Initial results indicate that summer school participation significantly increases the four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation. Investigators furthermore examined the effects of student and institutional characteristics on summer school enrollment and its impact on graduation rates.

### Summer School Enrollment and Time-to-Degree

The reality that college students take longer than four years to complete baccalaureate degree has become common knowledge. Longitudinal studies of National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) show that a five-year bachelor's degree has been the norm since the 1970s. The study of the *NCES High School and Beyond (1982-1993)* indicated that the mean elapsed time to degree was 57 months, an increase from the 54.5 months shown in the *NCES National Longitudinal Study (1972-1984)* (Adelman, 1999). Other studies illustrate that college students' four-year completion rates have declined while five-year, six-year, or longer completion rates have increased (Woodhams, 1998; Illinois State Board of Higher Education, 1999; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996).

Studies have been conducted to develop an understanding of this phenomenon. A longer average time-to-degree causes accountability pressure and has financial implications; increasing the financial burden on students, parents, institutions, states, and tax-payers. In an effort to shorten time-to-degree to the financial benefit of all parties involved, one means, i.e., summer school, is being looked at and considered as an important component in an initiative to improve University of North Carolina (UNC) students' retention and graduation rates (Sadler, 2006).

Few studies have focused specifically on the effects of summer school on college students' time-to-degree, and none were conducted at the state system level. This study intends to use UNC system-wide data to explain the role of summer school in students' time-to-degree.

## Background

Many studies have investigated the issues related to time-to-degree; the factors that relate negatively include part-time enrollment, a lighter course load, changing majors, transferring between institutions, stop-out, etc. (Garcia, 1994; Volkwein & Lorang, 1996; Hall, 1999). Positive elements include full-time enrollment, not being employed, changing majors fewer times, a full course load at each term, greater student institutional commitment, etc. (Knight, 1994; Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 1996; Lam, 1999; Noxel & Katunich, 1998).

Researchers and policy makers have labored to develop effective strategies and policies to counter the tendency of longer time-to-degree. The NCES National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2000) cited five factors affecting college students' time-to-degree. They are:

- 1) Ensuring that students end their first calendar year of enrollment with 20 or more credits;
  - 2) Avoiding excessive no-penalty withdrawals and no-credit repeats;
  - 3) Use of summer terms;
  - 4) No delay of entry after high school graduation; and
  - 5) Adequacy of the high school curriculum in preparing the student
- (Adelman, 2006).

Students need to have at least 6 postsecondary course credits from high school when they enter college to ensure that they end their first calendar year with 20 credits; otherwise, summer school participation should be considered. In fact, Adelman (2006) points out that the “use of summer terms has proved to be a degree completion lever with a

convincing fulcrum. It's part of the calendar-year frame in which students are increasingly participating" (p.109). In 1996, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board developed ten strategies to address longer time-to-degree, one of which was to increase summer school opportunities. Though Knight's (2000) study showed a negative relationship between number of summer semesters enrolled and time-to-degree, Taylor et al. (2001) found that summer session participation played an important role in providing opportunities for students to graduate in four years or less. Dainow's (2001) study also indicated that summer session programs increasingly made sense for students who desired to graduate early, as well as for institutions with growing enrollments. Furthermore, a report for the National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) found that students who attended one or more summer terms were more likely to complete a four-year degree (82 versus 67 percent) compared to students who did not.

### Methodology and Research Design

#### *Data Source and Population*

The study examined the summer school enrollment patterns and time-to-degree of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students in the 1998, 1999, and 2000 fall cohorts from all sixteen constituent institutions in the University of North Carolina system (N=72,214). The data set for the analysis was constructed using data collected from each of the sixteen campuses' enrolled student data files, graduated data files, financial aid data files, and student course files which were merged by Social Security Number and expanded from 1998 till 2006. The merging of files over the three cohorts revealed that some students had met the reporting criteria more than once; the elimination

of these duplicated students means that the N reported for various descriptive measures will not come back to the 72,214 total for the three cohorts.

The population of students for this cohort was predominately female (56.5%) and predominantly white (70.2%). The majority of students:

- attended a doctoral/research university (64.7%), while 28.9% attended a master's comprehensive institution, and 6.3% attended a baccalaureate/special focus institution;
- received some type of financial aid (63.8%), with only 22% receiving a Pell Grant;
- attended at least one summer school class (63.7%); and
- possessed a high school GPA 3.0 and above (60.9%).

A minority (39.4%) of the students had a combined SAT score above 1100.

#### *Measurements and Variables*

*Time-to-degree* is defined as the number of academic years between the time of entering the university and degree completion. *Graduation within original institution* is defined as graduation from the institution a student first enters as a first-time full-time, degree-seeking student within the University of North Carolina system. *Graduation within UNC* is defined as a student who enters the University of North Carolina system and graduates from either the original institution or any other UNC constituent institution.

*Summer attendance* is defined as attending at least one class during any summer term.

The terms freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior are defined by the number of credit hours completed for each level.

### Design and Procedure

The study used longitudinal data to examine UNC students' summer school enrollment patterns in relation to their graduation rates and time-to-degree. The analysis of the fall 1998, fall 1999, and fall 2000 first-time, full-time, freshmen cohorts included two steps: 1) the examination of the effect of summer school enrollment patterns on the students' average time-to-degree; and 2) the pattern of summer school enrollment from 1998 to 2006.

The initial study examined the summer school enrollment patterns in relation to UNC students' average time-to-degree. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to examine the four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates in relation to their summer school participation. The results of the initial study led to logistic regression analysis looking at summer school participation as one of the independent variables. The data used in the analysis comes from the merging of data files received from each of the campuses including enrolled and graduated student data files, student course load files, and student financial aid files.

The second part of the study was descriptive statistical analysis examining the enrollment pattern of students in summer school. The study examined students' characteristics, such as gender, race, financial aid, and academic preparedness for each freshmen cohort. Institutional elements, such as Carnegie classification, were also included in the analysis. Following the 1998, 1999, and 2000 first-time, full-time, freshmen cohorts, the investigators examined the link between these characteristics and summer school enrollment patterns.

## Results

The results of the initial analysis of UNC 16 campuses' fall 1998, 1999, and 2000 first-time, full-time, degree-seeking cohorts showed that the percentage of students graduating in four years who had taken summer classes (42.2% within original institution, 43.9% within UNC) was substantially higher than the percentage of those graduating in four years without summer school attendance (24.5% within original institution and 25% within UNC), and this gap widened each successive year. By the sixth year, students who had taken four or more summer classes were more than twice as likely to have graduated as those who had no summer school credits (see Tables 1 and 2). When the four-year graduation rate of the combined three-year cohort was studied, we found that a higher percentage of students with 1-3 summer classes graduated than students with 4 or more summer classes (42.2% versus 36.8% when comparing graduation rates within original institution). This may be related to Knight's (2000) study that negative relationship between number of summer semesters enrolled and time-to-degree. It may also be related to NCES National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2000) that withdrawing and re-taking courses are negatively associated with degree completion. The initial results led investigators to examine the effects of summer school attendance on graduation using logistic regression analysis. The model used several predictor variables which have been associated with successful completion of a degree, including academic preparedness (SAT scores and high school GPA), gender, race, retention, academic achievement (maintaining a cumulative GPA above 2.0), and financial aid.

The model first examined the effects of the predictor variables on graduation within UNC system. Six of the eight predictors had highly significant effects on



predicting six-year graduation ( $P < 0.0001$ ) including summer school attendance, gender (equal to female), first-year retention at institution of origin, high school GPA, academic achievement, and financial aid (see Table 3). The results of the logistic regression model indicated that attending at least one summer school session increased the probability of a student graduating in six years within the UNC system almost five-fold (odds ratio = 4.797, see Table 3). The effect of retention, however, is 2.3 times greater, with an odds ratio of 10.959. In terms of the effects on six-year graduation at the original institution, retention has an effect on graduation that is 17.6 times greater than that of summer school attendance (odds ratio of 51.636 versus 2.940).

Investigators began to examine the effects on predicting graduation at four, five, and six years within the UNC system and within the original institution. The results of the logistic regression analysis showed summer school attendance had little effect on four-year graduation rates, while the five-year graduation rate was increased (odds ratio of 2.2 within original institution and 3.12 within UNC, see Table 4).

Investigators also examined the effects of student and institutional characteristics affecting summer school enrollment. An analysis of the combined three-year cohort over six academic years showed that the majority of the cohort took summer school classes after their second and third years of enrollment. The analysis indicated that the majority of the students were at the appropriate class level (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, investigators examined the characteristics of summer school attendance of the cohort. While the majority of the combined students attended summer school, 72.5% of students at very high research universities took summer school classes, compared to only 51.5% of baccalaureate and special focus institutions (see Table 5).

The six-year graduation rate at very high research institutions is 18.6% for students who took no summer classes, versus 57.3% for those who did attend summer school. At baccalaureate and special focus institutions, the comparable numbers are 18.0% and 31.2% (see Table 6).

Sixty nine percent of students who did not receive financial aid took summer school compared to 64.2% who received aid (see Table 5). Similar results were noted for Pell Grant students versus those with no Pell Grant funds. Six-year graduation rates differed for both those who received and those who did not receive financial aid when comparing those attending summer school (43.9% versus 48.5%, respectively). More detailed statistics are shown in Table 6.

When examining student academic preparedness, there was no pattern of summer school attendance seen for combined SAT scores; however, graduation rates increased as SAT score increased. As with previous characteristics, a gap was seen between students attending summer school versus not attending summer school (see Table 6). An increase in high school GPA results in an increase in summer school attendance (41.3% for GPA <1.00 versus 67.1% for those with 3.5 or higher, see Table 5). When we turn to graduation rates, the interplay between high school GPA and summer school attendance becomes more intricate (Table 6). Students with the lowest grade point averages in high school actually graduated at a greater rate if they did not attend summer school. For all other high school GPA levels, the pattern is consistent with our expectations – summer school attendees graduated at a greater rate than non-attendees.

Both in gender and race we see differences in summer school attendance and with graduation. Females are more likely to attend summer school, and summer school

attendance has a stronger impact on their graduation rates compared to the impact on male attendees. If we look at racial and ethnic differences, Asians and American Indians attend summer school at the highest rates, while Hispanics and Others (multi-racial or no race specified) have the lowest rates. Again, a disparity is seen in graduation rates between those attending summer school versus no summer school, with Asians having the largest gap while Hispanics and Others have the smallest (see Tables 5 and 6).

### Discussion and Implications

As seen with Taylor et. al (2001), summer school attendance can play an important role in increasing chances to graduate and in less time. This study clearly shows an increase in graduation rates of the 1998, 1999, and 2000 cohort who attended summer school compared to those who did not. The logistic regression analysis indicates that summer school attendance can increase the probability of graduation within the UNC system almost five-fold at the six-year mark. The study also provides the insight that the majority of students are taking summer school when they are upper-division, but they are taking lower-division courses (Sadler 2006). This provides indirect evidence for results seen in Lytle & Mann (2004), which indicated that the main reason students took summer school was to complete degree requirements.

The University of North Carolina system is currently undergoing a review of accountability measures and setting targets to improve graduation rates. The UNC Summer School Task Force (Sadler 2006) has already recommended that the University look at summer school to improve access and student success, as measured by retention and graduation rates. From this study, it is clear that summer school increases those rates and improves time-to-degree. For the institutions that make up the UNC system,

increasing summer school opportunities provides them a route to meet their targets and improve their rankings vis-à-vis peer institutions. For the students that attend those institutions, summer school represents a path to improving their chances of graduating, and graduating on time.

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**Table 1. Effect of Summer School Attendance on Graduation Rates for 1998-2000 First-time Full-time Undergraduate Cohort Within Original Institution**

	Summer School Attendance	Entering Cohort	Cohort Retained after 1st Year	Cohort Retained after 1st & 2nd Years
Cohort	No Summer Classes	24,219	15,537	11,511
	1-3 Summer Classes	22,933	21,330	19,314
	4+ Summer Classes	25,062	23,771	22,303
	Total	72,214	60,638	53,128
3 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	0.3	0.5	0.7
	1-3 Summer Classes	0.6	0.7	0.7
	4+ Summer Classes	1.4	1.5	1.6
	Total	0.8	1	1.1
4 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	24.5	38.1	51.2
	1-3 Summer Classes	42.2	45.3	49.8
	4+ Summer Classes	36.8	38.5	40.8
	Total	34.4	40.8	46.3
5 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	35.7	55.3	73.9
	1-3 Summer Classes	65.3	69.7	76.3
	4+ Summer Classes	63	65.6	68.9
	Total	54.6	64.4	72.7
6 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	37.1	57.3	76.3
	1-3 Summer Classes	69.1	73.6	80.4
	4+ Summer Classes	70.2	72.7	75.9
	Total	58.8	69.1	77.6



**Table 2. Effect of Summer School Attendance on Graduation Rates for 1998-2000 First-time Full-time Undergraduate Cohort Within Any UNC Institution**

	Summer School Attendance	Entering Cohort	Cohort Retained after 1st Year	Cohort Retained after 1st & 2nd Years
Cohort	No Summer Classes	24,234	15,548	11,520
	1-3 Summer Classes	22,924	21,321	19,306
	4+ Summer Classes	25,056	23,765	22,297
	Total	72,214	60,634	53,123
3 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	0.3	0.5	0.7
	1-3 Summer Classes	0.6	0.7	0.7
	4+ Summer Classes	1.5	1.6	1.6
	Total	0.8	1	1.1
4 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	25	38.9	52.2
	1-3 Summer Classes	43.9	47	51.7
	4+ Summer Classes	39	40.8	43.2
	Total	35.9	42.5	48.2
5 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	37.1	57.4	76.7
	1-3 Summer Classes	69.7	74	81
	4+ Summer Classes	68.7	71	74.3
	Total	58.4	68.6	77.3
6 Year Graduation Rate	No Summer Classes	38.3	59.1	78.6
	1-3 Summer Classes	72.8	77.1	84.1
	4+ Summer Classes	74.7	76.8	79.9
	Total	61.9	72.4	81.2

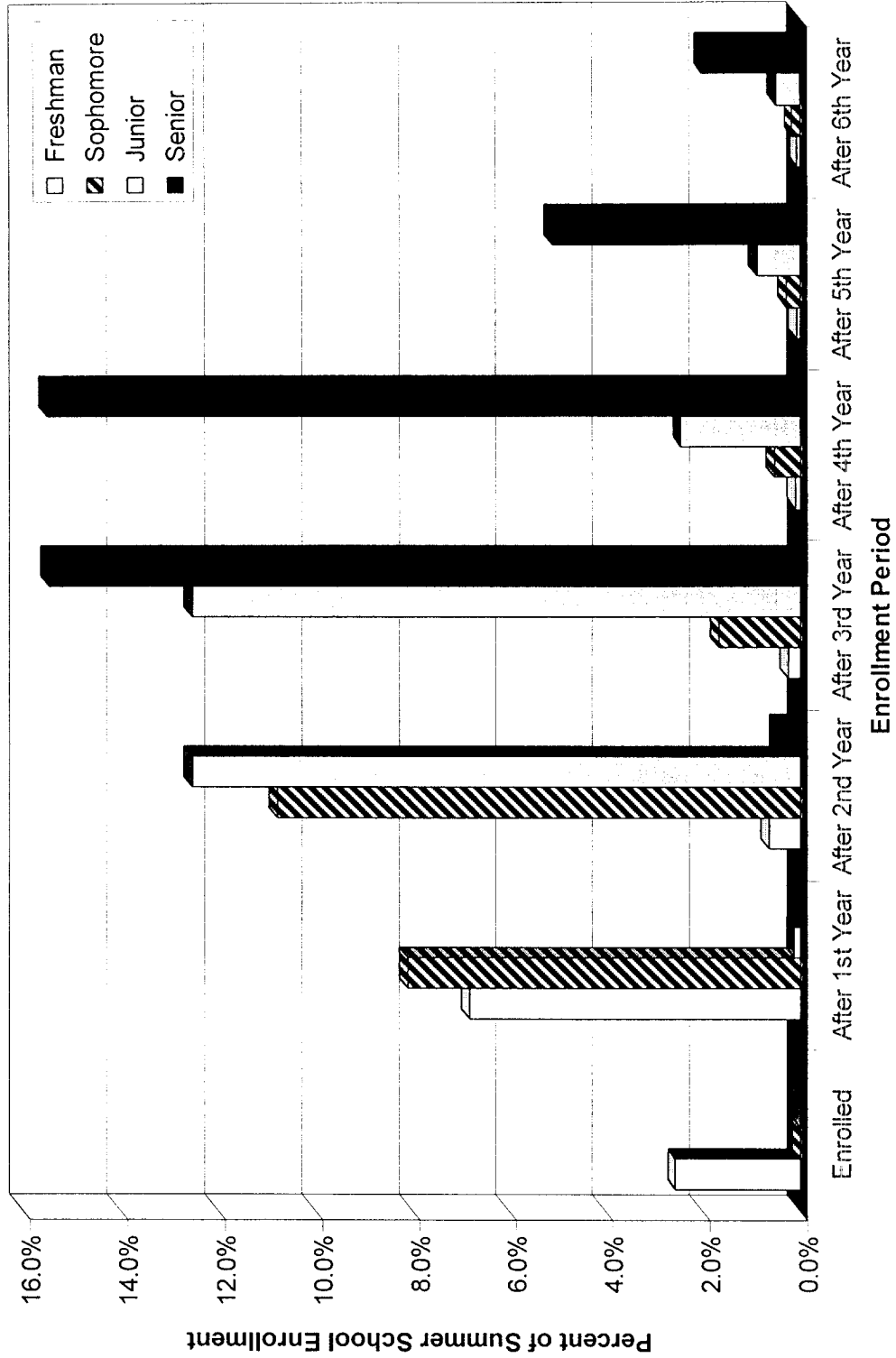
Table 3. Logistic Regression Model for Graduation with Summer School Predictor Variable

Variable	Graduation Within UNC System				Graduation Within Original Institution			
	B	S.E.	Pr>Chi Square	Odds Ratio	B	S.E.	Pr>Chi Square	Odds Ratio
Summer Attendance	1.5680	0.0222	<.0001	4.7970	1.0783	0.0223	<.0001	2.9400
SAT >= Institution Mean	0.0153	0.0212	0.4695	1.0150	0.0490	0.0214	0.0223	1.0500
Female	0.2243	0.0203	<.0001	1.2510	0.1832	0.0205	<.0001	1.2010
Retention at Original Institution	2.3942	0.0276	<.0001	10.9590	3.9442	0.0442	<.0001	51.6360
White	0.0362	0.0240	0.1315	1.0370	-0.1679	0.0245	<.0001	0.8450
High School GPA	0.2191	0.0105	<.0001	1.2450	0.2885	0.0104	<.0001	1.3340
<2.00 Cumulative GPA at anytime	-1.9954	0.0228	<.0001	0.1360	-1.8542	0.0223	<.0001	0.1570
Pell Grant (Per \$500 Amount)	-0.1346	0.0110	<.0001	0.8740	-0.1403	0.0112	<.0001	0.8690
CONSTANT	-2.3599	0.0462	<.0001		-3.9156	0.0588	<.0001	
Max-rescaled R-Square		0.4841				0.5279		

**Table 4. Odds Ratios for Graduation**

<b>Graduation Within UNC System</b>						
<b>Variable</b>	<b>4 Year Graduation Rate</b>		<b>5 Year Graduation Rate</b>		<b>6 Year Graduation Rate</b>	
	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>
Summer Attendance	1.4280	1.3720 1.4860	3.2010	3.0710 3.3370	4.7970	4.5930 5.0100
SA T >= Institution Mean	1.2100	1.1660 1.2560	1.0190	0.9790 1.0600	1.0150	0.9740 1.0590
Female	1.8860	1.8190 1.9560	1.4060	1.3530 1.4600	1.2510	1.2030 1.3020
Retention at Original Institution	10.7600	9.9630 11.6200	11.5700	10.9330 12.2440	10.9590	10.3820 11.5690
White	0.8020	0.7670 0.8390	0.9610	0.9180 1.0060	1.0370	0.9890 1.0870
High School GPA	1.2290	1.2060 1.2530	1.2480	1.2240 1.2730	1.2450	1.2200 1.2710
<2.00 Cumulative GPA at anytime	0.1590	0.1520 0.1670	0.1380	0.1320 0.1440	0.1360	0.1300 0.1420
Pell Grant (Per \$500 Amount)	0.8410	0.8220 0.8600	0.8580	0.8400 0.8770	0.8740	0.8550 0.8930
<b>Graduation Within Original Institution</b>						
<b>Variable</b>	<b>4 Year Graduation Rate</b>		<b>5 Year Graduation Rate</b>		<b>6 Year Graduation Rate</b>	
	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95 % Confidence Limits</b>
Summer Attendance	1.1740	1.1270 1.2240	2.2000	2.1080 2.2970	2.9400	2.8140 3.0710
SA T >= Institution Mean	1.2140	1.1690 1.2610	1.0430	1.0020 1.0870	1.0500	1.0070 1.0950
Female	1.8410	1.7730 1.9110	1.3610	1.3090 1.4150	1.2010	1.1540 1.2500
Retention at Original Institution	81.5920	67.5370 98.5720	65.6970	59.2320 72.8680	51.6360	47.3470 56.3130
White	0.7060	0.6740 0.7400	0.8270	0.7890 0.8670	0.8450	0.8060 0.8870
High School GPA	1.5370	1.4970 1.5780	1.3140	1.2880 1.3400	1.3340	1.3070 1.3620
<2.00 Cumulative GPA at anytime	0.1770	0.1680 0.1850	0.1510	0.1450 0.1580	0.1570	0.1500 0.1640
Pell Grant (Per \$500 Amount)	1.0000	1.0000 1.0000	0.8550	0.8370 0.8740	0.8690	0.8500 0.8880

Figure 1: Enrollment Patterns of Summer School Attendees: Class Level and Time of Attendance\*



\*The attendance of the three cohorts was examined based on years after entry and the class level obtained at that term of the year.

Table 5. Summer School Enrollment Patterns

<b>Category</b>	<b>No Summer Classes (%)</b>	<b>Summer Classes (%)</b>	<b>Cohort (N)</b>
<b><i>Carnegie Classification</i></b>			
<i>RU/VH</i>	27.5%	72.5%	21,101
<i>RU/H &amp; DRU</i>	36.9%	63.1%	25,621
<i>Master's (LMS)</i>	34.2%	65.8%	20,871
<i>Bacc &amp; Special Focus</i>	48.5%	51.5%	4,565
<b><i>Received Pell Grant</i></b>			
<i>Aid Received</i>	36.3%	63.7%	16,229
<i>No Aid Received</i>	33.5%	66.5%	55,929
<b><i>Received Any Financial Aid</i></b>			
<i>Aid Received</i>	35.8%	64.2%	46,064
<i>No Aid Received</i>	31.0%	69.0%	26,094
<b><i>SAT</i></b>			
<i>&lt;=900</i>	33.8%	66.2%	12,178
<i>901-1100</i>	33.4%	66.6%	28,850
<i>1101+</i>	34.2%	65.8%	28,418
<i>Missing</i>	41.3%	58.7%	2,712
<b><i>High School GPA</i></b>			
<i>&lt;1.00</i>	58.7%	41.3%	341
<i>1.00-1.99</i>	36.3%	63.7%	507
<i>2.00-2.99</i>	36.8%	63.2%	16,163
<i>3.00-3.49</i>	35.2%	64.8%	18,465
<i>3.50-4.00</i>	32.6%	67.4%	25,505
<i>Missing</i>	30.9%	69.1%	11,177
<b><i>Gender</i></b>			
<i>Female</i>	32.7%	67.3%	40,778
<i>Male</i>	35.9%	64.1%	31,380
<b><i>Race/Ethnicity</i></b>			
<i>White</i>	35.1%	64.9%	50,666
<i>Black</i>	31.9%	68.1%	17,057
<i>American Indian</i>	31.0%	69.0%	780
<i>Asian</i>	24.1%	75.9%	2,099
<i>Hispanic</i>	38.6%	61.4%	1,012
<i>Other</i>	40.1%	59.9%	544
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>34.1%</b>	<b>65.9%</b>	<b>72,158</b>