

Credits Earned in First Year and Persistence

Oakton’s Office of Research is beginning to do extensive research on student success at the College. Using the model of Achieving the Dream, a national initiative to improve student achievement at community colleges, we look at students who first came to Oakton in the Fall terms 2002 through 2006 and did not report having an associate degree or higher when they first enrolled. There were 11,995 students in total, with little variation in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, age or placement test results among the five cohorts (students entering in the same Fall term are considered a cohort).

One of the intriguing findings about students beginning to emerge from national research is the association between students successfully earning a substantial number of credits in college-level courses during their first year at the community college, and their subsequent success as measured by persistence to the next year and, ultimately, graduation or transfer. “Successful” credits are those in which a student earned a grade of A, B or C.

In this *In the Abstract* we focus on one indicator of success: persistence to the following Fall semester; i.e., the Fall term following the student’s first Fall term at Oakton. We look first at the number of credits successfully earned in college-level courses during students’ first Fall and Spring semesters (we tabulated credits from both semesters or, if the student did not return in the Spring, the Fall credits only). Table 1 presents results. Several findings are apparent: 22 percent of the 11,995 students did not successfully earn any credits in college-level courses during their first one or two terms at Oakton; another 26 percent earned between just 1 and 8 credits; and, at the other end of the spectrum, fewer than 2 percent of students earned 30 or more credits—the number needed if a student is to earn a 60-credit associate degree in four semesters. While some students entered Oakton with credits earned elsewhere (but not as many as needed for an associate degree or higher), data still demonstrate that few students are accumulating credits at a rate that would enable them to earn an associate degree in two or even three years.

Table 1: Credits of A, B, C in College-Level Courses During First Fall and Spring Term

Credits	N Students	Credits	N Students	Credits	N Students	Credits	N Students	Credits	N Students
0	3100	9	560	18	259	27	100	36	2
1	159	10	290	19	254	28	100	37	1
2	75	11	134	20	158	29	68	38	0
3	1469	12	502	21	220	30	56	39	2
4	573	13	264	22	205	31	30	40	0
5	146	14	139	23	160	32	25	41	1
6	922	15	364	24	160	33	22	42	0
7	454	16	259	25	188	34	7	43	1
8	238	17	154	26	170	35	4		

We then looked at persistence to the Fall semester following the students’ first Fall terms at Oakton. We eliminated students earning 31 or more credits because there were so few of them and their persistence patterns were highly variable (some returned, some did not, but the low numbers provide no pattern). Figure 1 presents our findings.

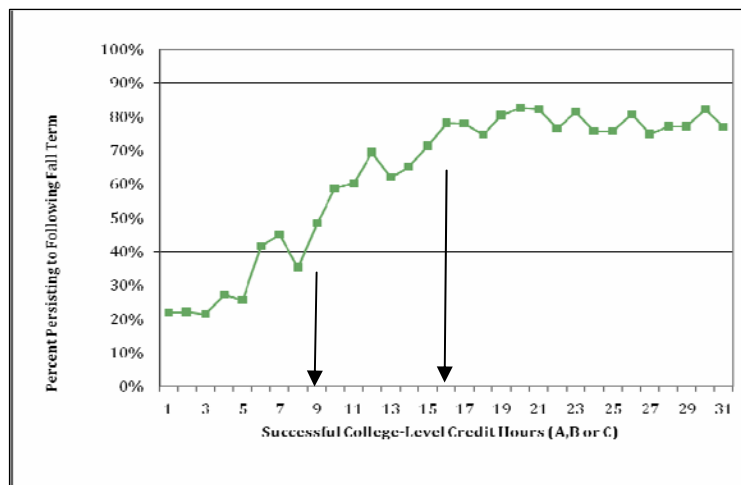


Figure 1: Persistence to Following Fall Term by Successful Credit Hours in First Fall & Spring Terms

Data show a clear pattern: the likelihood of students persisting to the next Fall term is related to their successful accumulation of credits in college-level courses during their first Fall and Spring terms at Oakton. Earning nine and 16 credits seems especially critical. Once students successfully earn nine or more credits their persistence rates are higher, and those who successfully earn 16 or more credits have basically the same persistence rate—between 75 and 80 percent.

What do these findings suggest? It may be that providing support to help students successfully earn at least nine credits, and better yet, 16 credits, will move them past a critical threshold and foster higher rates of persistence.