

# Concerns about and Proposed Solutions Related to Some of the Students with a Documented Low Chance of Retention

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## 1. Introduction

A growing population of students being admitted to Stockton seem to lack the ability to be successful in our curriculum regardless of the supports in place or the time these students spend on getting help.

We are very imperfectly defining these students as having met two conditions:

Scored below 215 on at least one Accuplacer test

Scored below 235 on the Math Accuplacer test

Of the 18 students admitted, registered, and attended in the Fall 2022 cohort who met these two conditions, only 3 (16%) were retained and able to achieve good standing after their third semester at the University.

The University admitted more students who met these two conditions for fall 2023. Of those, 38 students registered and attended. Although it is too early to tell how many will be retained past their third semester, ten did not return for spring 2024, so we have already lost 26% of this group, including three we collectively counseled into other options. Eleven others are repeating at least one FRST 1000-level course. Fifteen were doing well (returned, not repeating a FRST-1000-level course, and GPA 2.5 or higher) after their first term. Two have fully completed the university competency requirements. Some are continuing to seriously struggle regardless of supports utilized. If we assume the same percentage of students from Fall 2022 will be retained, only about 6 of these 38 students will be retained in good standing after their third term. While

the Accuplacer scores to define this cohort were chosen somewhat arbitrarily and should be examined to determine if these criteria can be further refined, we believe that this data provides a good indication that this population of students has a disproportionately low retention rate and is unlikely to succeed in our curriculum. For reasons set forth below, the currently proposed solutions offered by Admissions will not be sufficient to address this issue.

## 2. Defining the Student Population

The Appendix includes composite portraits that might help report readers better picture why we in FRST (First Year Studies) are worried that the university is doing emotional, social, and financial harm to some students. Details have changed and been combined across students to protect the identities of actual individuals, but each portrait is representative of real students who we and other systems of support at the university have tried, and failed, to serve.

**Our data shows that the 18 students entering in fall 2022 who scored under 215 on at least one Accuplacer test and under 235 on the math Accuplacer test had a 16% chance of retaining past their third semester in good academic standing.** Three students continue in good standing at this time.

A few of the 15 students in that group who did not retain in good standing, and other students going back several years, might be more precisely described with language which we often avoid.

We are talking, in a few cases, about students who we know have, or who present as possibly having, an intellectual disability, cognitive impairment, or challenges related to cognitive functioning. The American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities defines intellectual disability as a “a condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that originates before the age of 22.”

More of these students are in a band of functionality above the diagnostic criteria for an intellectual disability, but **many in this small group of students who are rarely being retained can be described as having received in the past and/or currently requiring one or a combination of the following:**

- **a largely modified educational environment**
- **a largely modified curriculum**
- **individual support and attention within and beyond the classroom**

**Stockton is not able to provide any of those three modifications/supports at the same level as students received in K-12.** Stockton cannot provide a largely modified curriculum at all. We cannot provide educational environments modified to the same degree as in K-12. Stockton also does not at this point, and potentially cannot, offer individual support to the same degree

that students may have received in K-12. As a result, the students cannot meet minimum college level course objectives despite best efforts from students, faculty, and support programs.

We think many of these students would not retain/graduate even if Stockton had new, lower levels of courses in the curriculum or at a community college, although they may and do at times succeed in individual courses at appropriate levels. More of the students might succeed given a combination of lower-level courses appropriate to their current knowledge AND increased support. That support might look, at minimum, like weekly meetings with an Academic Coach and a mandated, supported study hall. It might be like the weekly or twice-weekly support once offered by the Skills for Success/Goals program. Perhaps students would be conditionally admitted and required (as one of the conditions) to participate in these programs and not allowed to attend in their first term if they did not agree to these conditions nor allowed to continue if not meeting those conditions.

## Students Who are NOT Our Primary Focus

In discussion with some participants at a Senate-led meeting, after that meeting, we believe at least some attendees did not fully understand the group of students with whom we are primarily concerned. Here are two groups of students who were NOT our primary focus at the Senate-hosted meeting:

- 1) Students who are under-prepared for college work, perhaps impacted by education-disruption whether from trauma, personal/family events, moving, immigrating, the pandemic, under-resourced schools, war, learning disabilities, or some combination/something else. A student a) capable of learning at a reasonable pace for a system with 16-week terms and b) willing to learn, who c) has some knowledge gaps, is a student with academic needs with which we are likely to be familiar. We typically can help such students succeed with supports we have in place, including tutorial sections connected to courses, cohorts, peer mentors, tutoring, curriculum, and pedagogy.
- 2) ELL learners with extremely low English proficiency. We are familiar with their needs and have no truly appropriate resources to offer to them, but they are a separate population with unique needs.

## 3. Our Concerns

We are concerned

1. **that there is a misalignment/ misunderstanding in the admissions process of the academic needs (supports) a subset of our students require.** Despite the best efforts of staff members in support programs at Stockton, faculty, the students, and/or student family members, the students have been unable to meet minimum college course requirements, and therefore are not retained beyond a third semester.

2. **that the number of students in this subset has increased. From Fall 2022 to fall 2023, this number has increased by over 110%, going from 18 to 38 students.**
3. **about the emotional toll or harm that can be done to students** in attending one or several semesters, receiving frequently poor grades and a high ratio of constructive criticism to full praise and sometimes describing challenging interactions with roommates, classmates, or other peers and/or challenges navigating the university environment or sadness at being away from their family support.
4. **about the financial burden for students/families paying for one or several semesters of college** (whether that is tuition, fees, housing, and food or just some of those) for students/families who then do not see the financial benefits of a bachelor's degree.
5. **that the increasing number of students who need extra support further commits current support program and faculty resources, with larger implications for retention.**

Dr. Christine Gayda has indicated that she is willing to advise, from her expert position as a clinical neuropsychologist, related to the challenges the students and university face.

Numerous colleagues have noted that before teaching such a student they believed that all our students can succeed in college if they have appropriate support and work hard. Once having experienced a student with intellectual disabilities or used to having a modified environment and/or curriculum trying hard, but not retaining new information or succeeding at tasks requiring college-level reading comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and other college-required skills, we recognize that is not true. Stockton has students applying now and being admitted who either would not have applied or would not have been admitted in the past. Given our interactions with them, and, in some cases, their families, we do not think they realize that having As and Bs with a modified curriculum in high school does not mean college-readiness, at least not now, or they have other reasons to apply.

We might make analogies—Heather McGovern suggested that at 18 she could have said she wanted to play college softball, but there are no accommodations, there is no training plan, and there is no level of diligence that would have led to her successfully making and contributing to a team. Lauren Fonseca noted that she cannot, now, participate in traditional ballet. In fact, all paths are NOT possible for all people.

To be sure, people at Stockton might not want to tell any student or family that a bachelor's degree is forever impossible, and it may not be. However, we know that the students are usually not succeeding in the context in which we have so many currently trying: a full-time schedule at a four-year college with 16-week semesters, without course work at an appropriate starting level, and without the modified curriculum/environment or high levels of support (sometimes one-on-one) which some students are used to getting in school.

From what they say to us in our interactions with them, some families seem to understand that long-term college academic success is not likely, but they want their young adult offspring to have a college experience or college athletic experience. Others have indicated that they

trusted that acceptance into the University means the University thinks their young person can succeed—they are not educational experts, but they trust that those admitting them are, and that acceptance means a reasonable chance of success. Others may not understand that in K-12 the curriculum can be modified, but that the University curriculum is not modified. Adult students may not be aware of what they will need to do, or the ways in which the curriculum cannot be modified. The advocacy group Think College has a [helpful guide to differences between high school and college](#). Students and families might benefit from being able to make informed decisions based on a more complete understanding of these differences.

## Why We Think Summer Meetings with Accepted Students Will Result in Most Continuing into Fall Term

We are concerned with what was, at that meeting, the primary stated plan to keep us from doing financial and emotional harm to such students: summer intervention meetings:

1. For the last two years, this has been the plan. Yet,
  - A. Few meetings have occurred.
  - B. Most meetings that have occurred have been with students in EOF (EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FUND), meeting with EOF staff and/or faculty.
  - C. To our knowledge, no acceptances have been revoked.
  - D. Students have proceeded into fall, including students who were flagged by LAP (Learning Access Program), EOF, and/or FRST and about whom staff and/or faculty members raised serious concerns related to their readiness to be full-time college students at Stockton.
  - E. There are logistical issues with scheduling meetings at an incredibly busy time for the staff and faculty involved AND with students.
  - F. It is challenging to communicate with students: they may not check Stockton email, they may not understand email messages, and/or they may not choose to/be able to take action to respond.
  - G. Even when Stockton successfully contacts them, often via a phone call or text message, they have no obligation to respond to requests to meet.
  - H. Being forthright at the meeting is counter to our customer-service orientation, to keep people feeling positive, and counter to what has been the university's strong goal, to enroll as many students as possible. Most humans also do not like telling other humans they may not be capable of something or may need a high level of assistance.
  - I. Families and students are under no obligation to reveal intellectual disabilities or that students experienced a modified curriculum, modified environment, or high levels of support.

- J. Students and families sometimes are not aware of their diagnoses or able to report accurately about their past educational experiences. Some do not appear to be aware that they experienced a modified curriculum, for example.
  - K. None of us can (legally) or wants to discriminate against students with a disability.
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- 2. Before/during/at meetings there has been a reluctance to revoke acceptance and instead more typically meetings end with those attending encouraging students to use University resources like LAP and the Tutoring Center, despite our knowing that those are unlikely to make any difference. (Again, as an example, students can work with LAP to obtain accommodations, but LAP cannot change the curriculum or requirements of classes for them. Typically, the tutors that a first-semester student will encounter are undergraduate students who have limited training and experience in providing specialized support to students in this subset.)
  - 3. It seems unlikely that families will opt out of being at Stockton once accepted. We have rarely been able to get students to consider leaving in fall terms even when they are failing multiple courses, struggling socially, overwhelmed, and unhappy. Therefore, it seems unlikely to us that students/families will consider a different path after acceptance but before or especially after registration. Even if they do, they are likely to be upset, and that is not the experience Stockton wants them to have.

## Possible Solutions

We urge the University to consider solutions that seem more likely to work.

- 1) Revisions to the admissions process itself:
  - a. In some cases, students have been accepted who clearly did not take college-preparatory versions of courses required for graduation from New Jersey high schools. Such students can be identified by careful reading of high school transcripts and not accepted as they do not meet our currently stated (in the bulletin) criteria for acceptance.
  - b. Admissions might replace essay submissions with short interviews with students without the presence of their parents. Interviewers could pay attention to a student's ability to understand questions and respond with college-level critical thinking skills. That would not identify all the students who might struggle to succeed. It would potentially identify some of them. We also understand that interviewers would need competency to look for and not misread social behaviors, dispositions, or personalities and so this may not be practical or might introduce a new host of problems and thus not be desirable.
  - c. Reinstating standardized test scores as part of the admissions process

- d. Creating an alternative for students not submitting standardized test scores that provides more information about student readiness—perhaps students responding in writing to a few questions in a proctored setting or with technology guiderails which prevent use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) or human assistance.

B or D might replace the essay which seems to 1) not actually be required for admission and 2) be a fairly useless and inequitable measure of student readiness given AI and the widespread and inequitable availability of writing assistance. Stockton might, like other universities recently have announced, stop using any essay provided as a measure of student readiness or writing ability but instead see them as place to learn a bit about who the student is—and be forthright about that in the application process. Heather McGovern, Eddie Horan, and others are happy to work with Admissions on inviting/valuing multi-lingualism and non-standard academic English in the admission process.

Many FRST faculty and Tutoring staff members are happy to assist in any way we can/that would be appropriate in developing new plans and recommend input from colleagues with particular and relevant expertise, such as some of our colleagues in LAP and/or psychology.

We also think the entire University community, and ideally also the community of potential applicants, would be interested in more transparency about the admissions process—are things rated and numerically calculated? Is it a holistic process? What does it take to be accepted? Or, what does it take to be rejected? What determines being on a waitlist or being conditionally accepted?

- 2) Another option for a few of the students might be to create and staff a program appropriate for students with intellectual disabilities or direct them towards such programs where they already exist in New Jersey. These might include Bergen Community College's Kach program or Brookdale Community College's Turning Point program, non-degree programs with appropriate staffing and structure for small numbers of students with intellectual disabilities. Maybe students who are academically successful in courses they take in such a program, if they chose not to have a modified curriculum, could later be accepted as degree-seeking students if the program recommends them and they are interested. These programs are [growing in number, and many have proven successful](#).
- 3) Stockton could revoke admissions for students who fit this (or a refined) Accuplacer profile and with a similar Accuplacer Math and ACT or SAT profile.
- 4) Stockton could conditionally admit students with this testing profile and offer them more appropriate support structures that do not currently exist including, potentially, the following: newly created, very small, courses at more appropriate levels better matching current student knowledge and skill, weekly meetings with an Academic Coach, and a mandated, supported study hall. Alternatively, students might get something like the weekly or twice-weekly support once offered by the Skills for Success/Goals program. Perhaps students would be conditionally admitted and

required (as one of the conditions) to participate in these programs and not allowed to attend in their first term if they did not agree to these conditions nor allowed to continue if not meeting those conditions.

We remind readers that, thus far, there has been no appetite at the University, either from administration or the FRST program, for creating and staffing a program for students with intellectual disability, a new curriculum appropriate for students in the groups defined in this report, or new intensive support structures for such students.

New courses might teach how to write a sentence, complete basic computation problems, or read with middle school level reading comprehension.

A new program or new support staff members might work with students on life skills, like how to turn on a computer, complete a simple Google search, check one's email, count how many days it has been from Feb. 18 to 22, know their mother's name, know their home address, download or complete a voter registration form, or find their classroom. **All of these are examples of things FRST faculty or others have observed admitted students not being able to do.** Not being able to do any one of these things might be ok, and a human moment, but start stacking them, and it is hard to imagine success in a full course load in 16 weeks.

We understand that many of these solutions could not be implemented for the fall 2024 class and so we acknowledge we would need to, for this admission cycle, hope for more success than in the past two years of the plan for identification of, meetings with, and revoked admission for students over the summer.

## Appendix: Composite Portraits

**Student A** is a 19-year-old female student. She reveals having had a personal assistant and pull-out courses in high school. She expresses that her Developmental Math (cap 20), College Writing (cap 20) and Critical Thinking (cap 25) courses are big compared to her high school courses, and so she feels lost. She is not getting the constant one-on-one help interpreting and completing assignments that she got in high school. She spends at least 10 hours a week in the Tutoring Center trying to get help. She is registered with the Learning Access Program and has a page-long list of accommodations, including things like twice as much time on tests, using a calculator, and using a screen reader. She does not use a screen reader, and it is unclear if she does not find it helpful or does not know how. LAP invited her to make an appointment for help using a screen reader, but she did not make one. LAP then made an appointment for her, but she did not show. LAP then trained a student helper to assist the student. Tutors report that they are not sure how to help her as she cannot seem to move into independent application of the concepts they cover with her. She reveals to several faculty members and Cares that she is stressed because she is working so hard yet failing her courses. She also thinks other students on campus may be mocking her on social media, something that also happened to her in high school.



**Student B** is an 18-year-old male student. He is not sure if he had extra help in high school. He does not want to register with LAP. He gets agitated when people talk to him about his grades and says he is going to do better. He is currently failing Developmental Math, College Writing, and Critical Thinking. He thinks Intro to Crim is going well so far but they have not yet taken the first exam. He seems to have trouble reading and following the directions on his math quizzes. His submitted assignments in Critical Thinking and College Writing are extremely short—like 1-3 sentences when the assignment asked for 500 words or a page or two—and seem to be unrelated or barely related to the assignment prompts. He participates in class, but his contributions are usually not relevant. His peers snickered at his responses on day one, but now seem kind and patient. He picks at his skin and potentially is not eating or sleeping well.

**Student C** is a 20-year-old student who prefers they/them pronouns. They are social with their peers in class, so much so that initially their faculty members thought their academic problems were a lack of effort/focus. However, when they started meeting their faculty and a tutoring center staff member for one-on-one assistance, the faculty and staff reported that the student retained little of what they did in one session to the next session. They would make progress, but in the next session they would have to mostly start over. They also did not appear to use a planner or calendar and regularly missed meetings. They expressed that college is fun but that the academic work is hard, and teachers do not grade fairly. They say they never had homework and are used to doing much shorter math homework assignments. They do not remember ever authoring a paper over a page long. Their parents want them to play soccer, but their team members complain to the coach that they act like a middle school student. They are not sure whether they are registered with LAP and have not provided their teachers with letters, but when their teachers reach out to LAP, they learn that they are registered.

## Signing on to this document as a statement of shared concern,

Heather McGovern

Geoffrey Gust

Emari DiGiorgio

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