



Headcount versus Full-Time-Equivalent Enrollment: What's the Difference?

One of the most common questions asked about the State University System (SUS) is “What is enrollment within the SUS?” The answer to the question will depend on how and when enrollment is counted. This Information Brief is an effort to provide an easily accessible, written explanation of the principal methods of measuring enrollment and how they fundamentally differ.

Headcount Enrollment

Fall Headcount

Most casual interest is “headcount” enrollment, with the most common measure being “fall headcount.” This is a measure of how many students are actually signed up and attending classes in the fall term of an academic year. The fall term is used since it complies with historical reporting requirements of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which allows for national comparisons with other universities. It is also the peak time for enrollment during the year.

Headcount enrollment information allows for a snapshot view of a university. Various demographic information is collected on each student, including: date of birth, racial/ethnic group, gender, county of residence, high school code, residency status, previous degrees held, entry test scores, high school or college grade point average, and type of student. Type of student refers to whether the student is first-time-in-college, community college transfer, or an associate of arts transfer.

Annual Headcount

Annual Headcount is an unduplicated count of students attending an institution for a 12-month period. Headcount enrollment by term cannot be summed to obtain an annual count since a student could be enrolled in multiple terms. The annual headcount provides a count of the total number of students who attend an institution at some point during a year. The same information available for fall headcount is available for annual headcount. Annual headcounts of different institutions or systems cannot be added together since many students may enroll in more than one institution over the course of a year.

Headcount enrollment (see table 1) provides a picture of what the student population is like and is used for myriad state and federal reporting requirements and analyses. While annual headcount enrollment is available through NCES, fall headcount enrollment is still most frequently reported by institutions, mostly through its historic significance, but also because other higher education surveys, such as Common Data Set, only collect fall enrollment.

Table 1

State University System Fall Headcount Enrollment

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Unclassified	21,185	20,873	20,942	19,393	19,479	17,367	15,304	14,800	13,279
Undergraduate	160,101	165,418	172,370	180,643	190,161	199,603	208,173	213,551	221,463
Graduate	37,004	37,631	39,482	40,717	42,344	45,384	47,860	49,231	47,392
Total	218,290	223,922	232,794	240,753	251,984	262,354	271,337	277,582	282,134

Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment

Full-time-equivalent (FTE), by definition, is a count of one student attending full-time for a full academic year. FTE, in reality, is a measure of instructional effort, the total credit hours taken by students.

The methodology used by NCES and most institutions to calculate FTE differs depending on whether the institution is on the quarter or semester system. For institutions on a semester system, total undergraduate credit hours are divided by 30 and total graduate credit hours by 24. These credit hours are considered to be full-time for an academic year.

In many reports and documents, including the annual state budget, the SUS uses a different methodology from that used nationally, even though it is on a standard

semester system. Undergraduate FTE, for the SUS, is calculated by dividing total undergraduate credit hours by 40. Forty is used since 15 credit hours in each fall and spring term designates a full-time student and 10 for summer term. Graduate FTE, in Florida, is graduate credit hours divided by 32, 12 credit hours each for fall and spring and eight for summer.

Because of these differences, care must be taken when comparing Florida FTE to other states. From these calculations, it would appear as though the SUS has fewer FTE students when compared to other institutions when the only real difference is in the calculation. This is also true for Florida Community Colleges which also use 30 as the divisor to calculate undergraduate FTE.

Policy and Budget Implications

The use of FTE in Florida is primarily for funding. Each year, the Legislative Budget Request (LBR) is prepared using a funding model that incorporates FTE planned for the following year, as required by statute. The Legislature then takes the LBR into consideration for preparing the budget bill and FTE may be adjusted based on the Governor's and legislators' priorities. The funded FTE is then published in the General Appropriations Act (GAA).

The primary credit hour levels used historically have been: lower level undergraduate, upper level undergraduate, graduate classroom, and thesis/dissertation. Graduate classroom referred to direct instruction in a classroom while thesis/dissertation referred to graduate hours taken to write the master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. These levels are determined by the course numbering. In the 1998-99 academic year, the graduate level was changed to graduate I and graduate II. Undergraduate levels were unaffected. Graduate I includes all graduate credit hours pursued by those students not in a doctoral program while graduate II includes all graduate credit hours by those students in a doctoral program. The purpose was to more closely delineate between masters degree students and doctoral degree students. Because of the change in definition, care must be taken when comparing current graduate FTE with pre-1998 graduate FTE (see table 2).

Florida Statutes also specify that university FTE enrollment must remain within a corridor of funded enrollment. If actual enrollment is five percent less than funded enrollment for two years, the planned FTE for the university in the subsequent year is reduced, meaning decreased dollars. If actual enrollment exceeds funded enrollment by five percent for two years, the university must explain the over-enrollment and include the explanation in the next LBR. Proviso language in the budget allows universities to shift enrollment as long as the shift is revenue neutral and does not increase lower level enrollment.

Actual FTE enrollment can fluctuate from planned enrollment for multiple reasons. Each year as the university sifts through applications (after removing students who do not meet entry requirements), they must decide how many students to admit. This is always done with an eye toward funded enrollment. Suppose that each year an average of 50 percent of those students admitted actually enroll. If, for some unknown reason, 65 percent decide to enroll, then the university will be over the funded level of enrollment. This means that the university would not have received state funding for these students, yet would need to provide instructional and support services to them. A high level of over-enrollment should be minimized with the recent introduction of a commitment fee for students who are admitted and want to enroll. Students must pay a fee if they intend to enroll, which should give the university a better idea of how many students will actually enroll. In previous years, many students who applied and were admitted would fail to show up for classes.

Another factor that can affect enrollments is retention rates, the rate at which students re-enroll in the following term. As retention increases, more students take classes, credit hours of instructional effort increase, and, hence, FTE enrollments increase. In addition, if more students become full-time, rather than part-time, they are taking more classes which results in FTE enrollment going up.

Other factors, such as hurricanes and changes in the economy, could also affect enrollment. For example, after a severe hurricane, students may leave the area and not return, effectively lowering enrollment. Alternatively, a severe hurricane in another area could increase the number of students enrolling in Florida's universities.

Universities have expressed concerns about the difficulty of making projections due to the factors described above. Each university attempts to project enrollments to best meet its needs, seeking an appropriate balance between population growth, anticipated demand, and historical trends. The projections are then used for institutions and system planning and funding requests. Challenges occur when the enrollment models under-project or over-project enrollments resulting in universities needing to adjust budgets, academic offerings, and support services.

Table 2

**State University System
Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment
Calculated Using the Florida Methodology**

	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Lower				48,308	50,526	53,729	57,143	59,794	62,566	65,084
Upper				66,200	67,283	69,758	73,775	76,293	79,615	81,949
Grad I				18,474	19,346	20,843	22,092	22,925	23,503	23,858
Grad II				4,124	5,033	4,781	5,258	5,673	6,014	6,327
Total				137,107	142,188	149,111	158,268	164,685	171,698	177,218

Lower	34,412	36,075	44,112	48,308	50,526	53,729	57,156	59,795	62,565	65,084
Upper	70,515	70,200	66,458	66,200	67,283	69,757	73,800	76,293	79,616	81,950
Grad Class	18,907	19,515	19,709	20,395	21,168	23,161	24,838	25,993	26,856	27,475
Thesis/Diss	2,127	2,134	2,165	2,203	3,211	2,458	2,508	2,608	2,662	2,713
Total	125,961	127,923	132,443	137,107	142,188	149,105	158,302	164,689	171,699	177,222

Totals may differ due to rounding.

Funded versus Unfunded

The FTE reported in the LBR and GAA are “state-fundable,” meaning that the Legislature provides funds for those FTE. A course may not be funded for a myriad of reasons. If all of the direct costs are covered by a student, non-SUS agency, or other source, the state will not provide funding. Another reason for not funding credit hours is if the credit hours are not part of the university mission. Remedial courses that are below college level are the purview of community colleges. University missions preclude them, with the exception of FAMU, from offering remediation. SUS or state employee enrollments with fee waivers are also unfunded, since they can only get fee waivers to take a class on a space-available basis. Another category of unfunded student is a non-resident “profile assessment” student—a student who fails to meet one or more of the system’s normal minimum entry requirements

Where can I learn more?

Data on State University System institutions, including headcount and FTE enrollments, are available through the Fact Book and Quick Facts links at: <http://www.fldcu.org/>

National Center for Education Statistics “College Opportunities On-Line” has individual institution data:

<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/>

National Center for Education Statistics documentation for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) surveys:

<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>

The Common Data set is a set of guidelines for universities to respond to the various surveys submitted to them, including Thomson Peterson’s and U.S. News and World Report. As such the data are not available from a central location but are usually available from each institution:

<http://commondataset.org/>

STUDENT HEADCOUNT BY PART-TIME/FULL-TIME, GENDER, RACE, AND LEVEL, FALL 2005

SUS SUMMARY

Educational and General

	Unclassified	Lower Division	Upper Division	Beginning Graduate	Advanced Graduate	Total Graduate	Total
PART-TIME							
Gender:							
Female	6357	6,108	22,648	9,783	2,169	11,952	47,245
Male	4051	5,155	16,433	6,065	1,654	7,719	33,358
Not Reported	62	6	20	5	3	8	96
Part-time by Gender Total	10,650	11,269	39,101	15,853	3,826	19,679	80,699
Race:							
Asian	433	477	1,696	692	119	811	3,417
African-American	1,362	2,151	4,790	1,448	420	1,868	10,171
Hispanic	1,973	3,036	8,423	2,054	333	2,387	15,819
American Indian/Alaskan Native	30	31	163	49	18	67	291
White	6,033	5,230	22,329	10,552	2,487	13,039	46,631
Other	341	191	878	784	407	1,191	2,601
Not Reported	478	153	822	274	42	316	1,769
Part-time by Race Total	10,650	11,269	39,101	15,853	3,826	19,679	80,699
FULL-TIME							
Gender:							
Female	1,382	47,412	49,717	11,683	3,431	15,114	113,625
Male	1,239	37,776	36,152	8,551	4,047	12,598	87,765
Not Reported	8	10	26	1	0	1	45
Full-time by Gender Total	2,629	85,198	85,895	20,235	7,478	27,713	201,435
Race:							
Asian	87	3,865	4,220	929	217	1,146	9,318
African-American	419	15,669	10,639	2,282	407	2,689	29,416
Hispanic	482	13,965	13,145	2,259	367	2,626	30,218
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11	256	350	61	20	81	698
White	995	48,881	53,441	12,028	3,366	15,394	118,711
Other	510	1,253	2,647	2,298	3,003	5,301	9,711
Not Reported	125	1,309	1,453	378	98	479	3,363
Full-time by Race Total	2,629	85,198	85,895	20,235	7,478	27,713	201,435

**Calculating Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment for 2004-05
Based on Florida Methodology**

2004-05 Undergraduate Credit Hours	= 5,853,790
Credit Hours for One Full-Time Undergraduate Student	= 40
Undergraduate FTE = 5,853,790 / 40	= 146,345
2004-05 Graduate Credit Hours	= 945,781
Credit Hours for One Full-Time Graduate Student	= 32
Graduate FTE = 5,853,790 / 32	= 29,556
Total SUS Full-Time Equivalent for 2004-05	= 175,901

Note: Excludes Health Science Center

**Calculating Semester System,
Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment
For 2004-05**

Based on the National Standard Methodology

2004-05 Undergraduate Credit Hours	= 5,853,790
Credit Hours for One Full-Time Undergraduate Student	= 30
Undergraduate FTE = 5,853,790 / 30	= 195,126
2004-05 Graduate Credit Hours	= 945,781
Credit Hours for One Full-Time Graduate Student	= 24
Graduate FTE = 5,853,790 / 324	= 39,408
Total SUS Full-Time Equivalent for 2004-05	= 234,534

Note: Excludes Health Science Center

*Planning and Institutional Research
Florida Board of Governors
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399
850-245-0470
chancellor@fbog.org*