Factors Related to Academic Achievement: An Analysis of First-Term Community College Students

Neil Austin, M.A., Rhonda Brown, M.Ed., Lawrence Gage, Ed.D. Caitlin Hawkins, M.A., Research Associate

> Research, Evaluation, and Development Committee Counseling Department Oakland Community College - Orchard Ridge Campus

> > March, 1997

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Acknowledgement

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INTRODUCTION

In the Fall 1994 semester, a series of discussions occurred within the Counseling Department at the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College which focused on academically at-risk students enrolled at the Campus for their first term. These were students who appeared to be academically unmotivated, had developmental educational needs, or exhibited other characteristics which threatened their academic success. The Counseling Department concluded that if these students could be identified prior to enrollment, at the beginning of, or during their first term, intervention strategies might be designed to assist them to be more successful academically. With this purpose in mind, the counseling department's Research Committee analyzed the Fall 1995 academic performance of all new students enrolled at the Orchard Ridge campus. The objective was to determine the specific characteristics that could differentiate students earning above 2.0 and below 2.0 first-term grade point averages.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A substantial amount of research in higher education for the past three decades has focused on factors influencing academic achievement in college. High school achievement as measured by grade point average continues to be a consistently reliable predictor of college success. However, because community colleges have non-selective admission criteria, it is essential to note that research indicates a number of non-cognitive factors might also be predictors of potential academic success. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have emphasized that studies by Astin (1971, 1975); Capella, Wagner, and Kusmierz (1982); as well as Lenning, Munday, Johnson, Vander Well, and Brue (1974) provide evidence that motivation, quality of effort, and study habits and organization are significant influences on academic achievement. Wilkie and Kuckuck (1989) investigated the relationship between specific institutional interventions and academic achievement. They found that high-risk college freshmen who participated in an orientation program achieved higher grade point averages over a three-year period than non-participants and were less likely to drop out. In addition, other studies have noted that students who participated in study skills courses and academic tutoring opportunities achieved higher grades than those who did not (Martin and Arendale, Lipsky and Ender, 1990; Kenney, 1989; Behrman, Dark, and Paul, 1984).

Non-intellective factors are also important in student academic success. The American College Personnel Association, in its recently published document "The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Students Affairs," maintains that "[t]he concepts of 'learning,' 'personal development,' and 'student development' are inextricably intertwined and inseparable . . ." and that collaborative efforts of both classroom and student development (counseling) faculty are necessary for student success. While it has been long noted that community colleges have the lowest retention rates of all postsecondary institutions (Brooks and Leonard, 1991; Gates and Creamer, 1984; Rowe and Smith, 1992; and Tinto,1987), current economic conditions, demographic changes, and accountability issues are forcing community college policy makers to concentrate more on retention. Further contributing to the challenge are community college admission policies which result in the enrollment of students who have a wide range of abilities, aspirations, and personal characteristics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature indicates that a variety of non-cognitive and cognitive factors are potential predictors of academic success in college. There also is supportive evidence of the effectiveness of specific institutional interventions with identified at-risk college freshmen. Community colleges face the challenges resulting from a population of students who have a wide range of academic preparation; therefore, identification of factors supportive of academic success is critical to the educational mission of

the College. The research questions which frame this study are as follows;

- Are there demographic factors related to academic achievement?
- What pre-enrollment characteristics relate to academic achievement?
- Do specific in-college behaviors support academic achievement?

METHOD

A research study was designed to describe the characteristics of 1686 new students who were enrolling for at least one course at the Orchard Ridge Campus in the Fall 1995 semester. This group consisted of students who were either attending OCC as first time in any college (FTIAC) or students who had previously attended other colleges and had transferred to OCC (TS). Twenty-five percent (484 students) completed their first semester with a grade point average (gpa) below 2.0 (<2.0). Comparative data was analyzed for their cohorts (1262 students) who earned above a 2.0 (>2.0). The groups were compared on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, ASSET scores, credits attempted and earned, enrollment status, residency, and successive enrollments.

In addition, a statistically significant sample of 517 students from both groups was selected for a comprehensive telephone survey. This survey yielded data on orientation attendance, registration methods, counselor contact, educational and career goals, expectations and attitudes in regard to the College, and academic and non-academic activity during the semester. (The complete Phone Survey Questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A.) Of the 517 students randomly selected from the Fall 1995 population of 1686 students for the telephone survey, 197 (38%) had <2.0 gpa, and 230 (62%) completed their first term with >2.0 gpa.

Further analysis of both groups of these 517 students was done by comparing information given by them on their applications for admission to OCC.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Are there demographic factors related to academic achievement? (This section focuses on the entire population which includes 484 students who earned less than a 2.0 gpa and 1262 students who earned more than a 2.0 gpa.)

Table 1 gives a graphic comparison of the two populations. We can see that the <2.0 group is younger and contains more males than the >2.0 students. Many more of this group attended OCC right after graduation from high school. Students who transferred to OCC from other colleges had higher gpa's than FTIACs. We could speculate that this was a function of more maturity, previous experience in a collegiate environment, and more focused goal orientation. The >2.0 group had more full-time and fewer part-time students, and more of them returned the next semester (72% vs 54%). It is also notable that, while 8% of the students at the Orchard Ridge campus identify themselves as African-American, 19% of the students in the <2.0 group were African-American.

There appeared to be no substantial differences between the two groups in terms of ASSET and MTELP scores, residency or citizenship status, or certainty as to a major. Both groups registered for approximately the same number of credits (7.4 for >2 versus 7 for <2), but those who earned >2.0 gpa earned nearly two times the number of credits than those who earned <2.0 (7.3 versus 3.85).

Table 1.

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	<2	>2
Gender Age	M=56% / F=44% M=22 / F=21	M=40% / F=60% M=23 / F=26
Grad H.S. w/in last 2 yrs	66%	47%
FTIAC/TS	71% / 27%	57% / 42%
Race	Cauc=72% / Af-AM=19%	Cauc=81% / Af-Am=8%
Full-/Part-time	13% / 87%	21% / 79%
Mean attempted	7	7.4
credits		
Mean earned	3.85	7.3
Return W'96	54%	72%

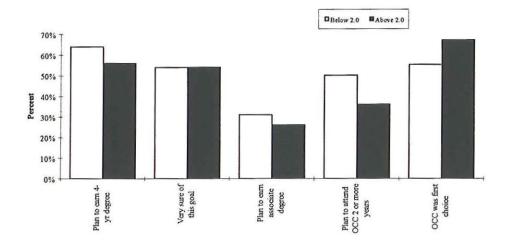
 What pre-enrollment characteristics relate to academic achievement? (Data for this section of the report was taken from the 517 students who responded to the telephone survey.)

Because the application for admission to Oakland Community College includes a questionnaire, it is possible to compare the pre-enrollment educational plans of both groups of students involved in the study (see Appendix B for a copy of the application). Table 2 summarizes student goals regarding their attendance at OCC.

Table 2 (n=517)

Educational Plans

	Below 2.0	Above 2.0
Plan to earn 4-yr degree	64%	56%
Very sure of this goal	54%	54%
Plan to earn associate degree	31%	26%
Plan to attend OCC 2 or more years	50%	36%
OCC was first choice	55%	67%



Those who earned <2.0 had higher degree aspirations: more of the <2.0 students planned to earn a bachelor's degree. Both groups were equally sure of this goal. Fewer of the >2.0 group were interested in earning an OCC degree as part of their purpose for attending OCC. Another comparison of the groups seems to confirm this: more of the <2.0 students planned to stay at OCC longer than the >2.0 students. This is further supported by the fact that 20% of the >2.0 group planned to take classes only, with no intention of earning a degree. This raises a number of interesting questions about students' goals and their confidence about achieving these goals.

More of the >2.0 group said that OCC was their first choice than those who earned <2.0, suggesting that students here by choice are likely to be more motivated.

Regarding previous family experience with college, it is interesting to note that more of the >2.0 students were first-generation college attenders. 65% of them had parents who went to college, while more (79%) of the <2.0 students' parents had attended

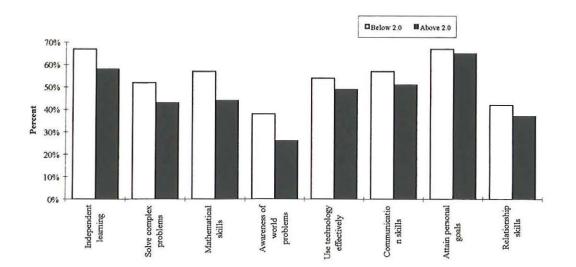
college. It is worth noting that this is opposite what the literature reports (Terenzini, et. al., 1996; Zwerling and London, 1992).

At the time of application, more of the <2.0 students were working full-time (42% vs 39%). When asked on the application to indicate the extent to which they expected improvement in selected skill areas as a result of their OCC enrollment, more of the <2.0 students said they expected to significantly improve in math skills, as independent learners, in their awareness of world problems, and as complext problem-solvers (Table 3). There was little difference in the expectations of both groups regarding improvement in communication skills and relationship skills, and to increase their ability to attain personal goals and to use technology effectively.

Skill Area	Below 2.0	Above 2.0
Independent learning	67%	58%
Solve complex problems	52%	43%
Mathematical skills	57%	44%
Awareness of world problems	38%	26%
Use technology effectively	54%	49%
Communication skills	57%	51%
Attain personal goals	67%	65%
Relationship skills	42%	37%

Table 3 (n=517)

Expectations of Significant Improvement in Selected Skill Areas



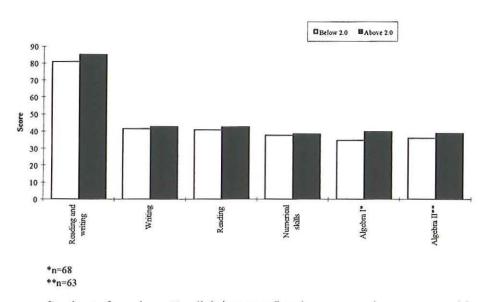
On the application, more of the <2.0 students indicated that they would need assistance with choosing courses (66% vs 57%), and more (94% vs 90%) sought preregistration assistance from counselors. However, in a follow-up interview, regardless of whether they sought the advice of counselors, 66% of the <2.0 students and 63% of the >2.0 students saw themselves as self-advised. This might indicate that even though they had counselor assistance, both groups chose the courses they wanted to take regardless of counselor advice.

Prior to their first registration, all new students and transfer students who enroll in more than 12 credits or who want to register for an English composition class must take ASSET, a placement test. Because there are some exemptions from the assessment, not all of the 517 students in the research population were tested. 70% of the <2.0 students and 58% of the >2.0 students took the assessment. Mean ASSET scores (Table 4) for the two groups were not substantially different.

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ASSET Scores

Test Area	Below 2.0	Above 2.0	
Reading and writing	81	85	
Writing	41.4	42.6	
Reading	40.7	42.4	
Numerical skills	37.6	38.3	
Algebra I*	34.6	39.7	
Algebra II**	35.8	38.7	



Students for whom English is not a first language take a comparable assessment instrucment, the MTELP. For this group, the <2.0 students' mean score was 48.9, and >2.0 students' mean score was 51.3.

In addition to taking ASSET, FTIACs are encouraged to attend an orientation in which they learn about the college environment, various student services available to them, the registration process, student success skills, and college regulations. More of the >2.0 FTIAC students attended orientation (44% vs 39%). This could indicate that either the information presented at orientation enhances likelihood of students' success, or that the >2.0 students were more planful and conscientious.

Regarding the registration patterns for both groups, more of the >2.0 students registered from home by Touch*Tone (62% vs 42%). Research on academic success in college reports that those students who decide late to enter college and register late do

less well (Astin, 1971). Because Touch*Tone is an earlier registration, the >2.0 students were more likely to select their classes earlier and may have been more committed to their educational endeavors.

Do specific in-college behaviors support academic achievement? (Data for this section of the report was taken from the 517 students who responded to the telephone survey.)

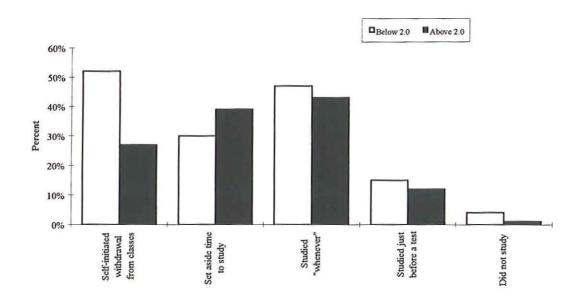
During their first term of enrollment, these two groups of students differed in some relevant academic and non-academic behaviors. In particular there were differences in the areas of attempted and completed credits, approaches to study, perceptions of the amount of homework and required reading, and outside employment.

As noted earlier, both groups registered for approximately the same number of credits (<2.0 = 7, >2.0 = 7.4), but the <2.0 students completed fewer credits than the >2.0 students (3.85 vs 7.3). Table 5 shows that the <2.0 students were nearly twice as likely to initiate withdrawal form courses during the semester than the >2.0 students. One interesting speculation related to this data is that if the students were withdrawal form classes, they might have been experiencing difficulty and chose withdrawal rather than failure in those classes, thereby protecting their gpa's. Had they not withdrawn the mean gpa of the <2.0 group could well have been lower than 0.83.

Table 5 (n=517)

Academic Behavior

Behavior	Below 2.0	Above 2.0	
Self-initiated withdrawal from classes	52%	27%	
Set aside time to study	30%	39%	
Studied "whenever"	47%	43%	
Studied just before a test	15%	12%	
Did not study	4%	1%	

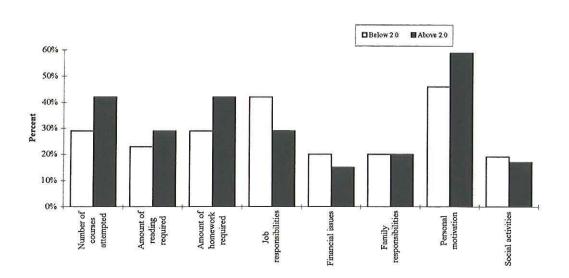


In addition to group differences in the number of attempted and earned credits and the percentage of course withdrawals, there were differences between the two groups in their approaches to study. Table 5 shows that the >2.0 students were more planful in scheduling time to study, while the <2 students were more likely to study "whenever" or "just before a test". Unfortunately we do not know how much time each group set aside to study each week.

As part of the telephone survey, students were also asked to identify the extent to which additional factors impacted their performance in the fall semester. Their responses are summarized in Table 6. Unfortunately students were not asked to identify whether the impact was positive or negative, so there could be a variety of interpretations either by students who were asked to respond or researchers who are dealing with the data. However, for both groups, the factor most perceived as having a major impact on their fall semester academic performance was personal motivation. Although we do not know whether the students believed personal motivation was a positive or negative factor in the semester's outcome, perhaps we could interpret their responses in this manner: the >2 students did better because they were motivated to do so; the <2 students did less well because they saw themselves as unmotivated. It is also possible that the >2 students recognized the causal relationship between motivation and success.

Table 6 (n=517) Major Impacts on Grades

Impact	Below 2.0	Above 2.0	
Number of courses attempted	29%	42%	
Amount of reading required	23%	29%	
Amount of homework required	29%	42%	
Job responsibilities	42%	29%	
Financial issues	20%	15%	
Family responsibilities	20%	20%	
Personal motivation	46%	59%	
Social activities	19%	17%	



Certainly, employment can have a major impact on a student's academic performance, and it is noteworthy that more of the <2.0 students were employed full- and part-time combined than the >2.0 students (87% vs 79%) as noted in Table 1. In Table 6 we see that more of the <2.0 students indicated that job responsibilities /had a major impact on their grades. On the other hand, since the employment difference was only 8%, one wonders whether motivation or lack of motivation played a greater part in the determination of students semester grades.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The single largest limitation to this study is the lack of accurate and complete high school data, most importantly the high school grade point average. Because admission to Oakland Community College does not require a high school transcript, high school grade information is missing for many students. The authors of the study plan to address this limitation in the future by working with high school counselors to obtain some of the missing data. See Appendix C for a list of major feeder high schools.

Because the study was conducted at one campus only, findings may not be applicable college-wide. Past research suggests that the average student profile may vary by campus, and for this reason, these findings should not be generalized across campuses without first determining that the student populations are comparable. In addition, because the study focused only on first-time students, results should not be generalized to other groups.

Finally, our ability to interpret the factors influencing student academic performance is limited by the way in which some survey questions were asked. Respondents were asked to assess the level of impact a variety of factors had on their academic performance, but were not asked to state whether they considered impacts positive or negative. For example, we found that both personal motivation and employment status had a major impact on academic performance , but we do not know whether the student viewed these factors as aid or impediment to academic performance.

A better understanding of these complex issues might be gained through a focus group or series of personal interviews.

SUMMARY

In the Fall term of 1995, the academic performance of 1,686 new students at the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College was analyzed to determine if differences existed between those who earned above 2.0 and below 2.0 first-term grade point averages. Both groups were evaluated to determine if differences existed between them in relation to three specific areas:

- 1. Demographic characteristics
- 2. Pre-enrollment college objectives
- 3. Academic behaviors during first-term enrollment

The entire population of 1, 686 students was compared for differences in demographic characteristics (factor one), and a statistically significant sample of 517 students was surveyed by telephone to assess differences on factors two and three. Demographically, the <2.0 group was younger and included more males, more recent high school graduates, and a higher percentage of African-American males. More of the >2.0 students had transferred to OCC, enrolled full-time, and re-enrolled the next term. While both groups registered for approximately the same number of credits, the <2.0 students completed only half of the credits for which they had enrolled.

No substantial differences between groups existed in regard to ASSET or MTELP scores, residency or citizenship, or certainty of educational major.

The pre-enrollment objectives of both groups, based on application date and telephone survey responses, indicated that <2.0 students planned to stay at OCC longer and more planned to eventually earn four-year degrees. Fewer of the >2.0 students intended to earn an OCC degree, although more indicated that OCC was their first college choice and a greater number were first-generation college students.

A greater number of the<2.0 students expected OCC enrollment to result in improved math, independent learning, and complex problem-solving skills, as well as in

greater awareness of world problems. Each group had similar expectations regarding developing communication and relationships skills, personal goal attainment, and technology use.

Before enrolling, more <2.0 students expressed a need for advisement assistance and slightly more sought pre-registration counseling advice. However, approximately twothirds of both groups indicated their eventual course choices were based on selfadvisement.

More >2.0 students participated in new student orientation sessions and a greater number registered by Touch*Tone. A comparison of other academic and non-academic behaviors indicates the >2.0 students withdrew from fewer courses, earned more credits, scheduled study time, and believed personal motivation had more of an impact on grades than did students earning <2.0.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Survey the courses in which students completed credits and the courses from which they withdrew to determine if there is a first-term course selection pattern of success.

 Compare English placement level, first-term English enrollments, and grades earned to assess relationship of written language skill and college success.

 Correlate high school grade point average with first-term OCC performance to justify requiring high school transcripts prior to enrollment for early identification of atrisk students.

4. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of the Fall 1995 research cohort were graduates of ten area high schools and significant numbers of these students earned <2.0 averages. The Fall 1996 enrollment from these high schools should be evaluated to determine if specific high schools can be targeted for early intervention with future at-risk OCC enrollees.

5. The Fall 1995 research should be replicated with Fall 1996 students to compare characteristics and academic performance.

6. A longitudinal study of the Fall 1995 cohort should be initiated through the termination of their enrollment at OCC.

7. Students in the research study who did not enroll Winter term 1996 should be surveyed to identify implications for student retention and whether differences exist between the <2.0 and >2.0 groups.

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APPENDIX C

High School of Origin

Fall 1995 Orchard Ridge Campus New Students

No. of Students

West Bloomfield	81
Walled Lake Western	78
Farmington	76
Novi	71
Harrison	65
Southfield	62
North Farmington	61
Groves	58
Southfield Lathrup	58
Berkley	33

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Total

APPENDIX A

Under Achieving Student Survey

PHONE LABEL

- To begin, I would like for you to think back to the time just prior to the start of the Fall 1995 term. Before the term started did you participate in an <u>orientation</u> <u>session</u> at any OCC campus?
 - 0 _____ No (ask question #2)
 - 1 _____ Yes (skip to question #3)
- 2. Were there any specific reasons why you did not attend an orientation session before the Fall term started?

- 3. When you registered for classes last Fall did you:
 - 1 _____ register from home using the Touch*Tone system
 - 2 _____ register on campus using the Touch*Tone system
 - 3 register on campus with the help of an OCC registration staff member
 - 4 _____ or did you use a combination of these methods?
- 4. Now I would like to focus your attention to your experiences during the Fall 1995 term. In your best estimate, approximately how many times did you meet with an <u>OCC counselor</u> during the Fall 1995 term?

00 _____ never met with an OCC counselor (skip to question #6)

_____ approximate number of meetings

5. Concerning the reasons why you met with a counselor, was it:

	Yes	No
a. to determine which courses to take	1	0
b. discuss career opportunities	1	0
c. discuss personal matters	1	0

d. was there any other reason why you met with a counselor (PROBE)

In your opinion, who would you say had the greatest influence on your decision to 6. enroll in the course(s) you took during the Fall 1995 term? Was it:

1 _____ another student

2 _____ your parents

3 _____ a high school counselor

4 _____ an OCC counselor

5 _____ a personal friend 6 _____ or was it yourself?

- 7. What is (was) your major field of study?
- 8. When you complete your studies at OCC, what career or occupation do you expect to enter? (record response)
- 9. Before starting the Fall 1995 term, what grade point average did you expect to attain?

expected GPA (on a 4 point scale: example 3.25 or 2.50)

- 10. During the Fall 1995 term did you withdraw from any of your courses? IF YES, did you initiate the withdrawal or did the instructor?
 - 0 _____ No, did not withdrawal (skip to question #12)
 - 1 _____ Yes, instructor initiated
 - 2 Yes, self initiated

- 11. During the Fall 1995 term were you aware of the withdrawal deadline dates?
 - 0_____*No*____Yes
- 12. Concerning your study habits, which of the following best describes how you studied during the Fall 1995 term:
 - 1 _____ did you typically set aside time each week just for studying
 - 2 _____ did you study whenever you could find the time
 - 3 _____ did you study just before a test

4 or did you have a different way of studying (PROBE)

0 did not study

13. In your best estimate, approximately how many hours per week did you spend doing coursework outside of class?

hours per week, not daily

- 14. During the Fall 1995 term were you:
 - 1 _____ employed full-time
 - 2 _____ employed part-time
 - 3 unemployed, but actively looking for work (skip to question #16)
 - 4 _____ or were you unemployed and not looking for work? (skip to question #16)
- 15. On average, how many hours per week did you work during the Fall 1995 term?

hours per week

- 16. In general, would you say that you frequently, occasionally, seldom or never met with your instructors outside of class?
 - 4 _____ frequently

3 _____ occasionally

- 2 _____ seldom
- 1 never

17. Now I am going to read you a list of <u>services</u> available to students at the Orchard Ridge campus. Please tell me approximately how many times during the Fall 1995 term you used each of the services.

	Number of Times
a. Tutoring	
b. Student Success Seminars	
c. College Success Skills Course (IIC 057)	
d. Computers in the IIC for self-paced learning	
e. Computers in the IIC for general course work	
f. Program for Academic Success Services (PASS)	

18. For each of the following items, please tell me if they had a **major impact**, **minor impact** or **no impact** on your <u>academic performance</u> during the Fall 1995 term.

		Major Impact	Minor Impact	No Impact
a.	number of courses you	3	2	1
	attempted	3	2	1
b.	amount of reading required	3	2	1
	and the second second second second			

- c. amount of homework required
- Using the same scale of major impact, minor impact or no impact to what extent did each of the following affect your <u>academic performance</u> during the Fall 1995 term.

		Major Impact	Minor Impact	No Impact
a.	job responsibilities	3	2	1
b.	financial issues	3	2	1
C.	family responsibilities	3	2	1
d.	personal motivation	3	2	1
e.	social activities	3	2	1

20. Finally, were there any other <u>academic or personal</u> issues that impacted you during the Fall 1995 term? *(PROBE)*

This concludes my questions. I appreciate your willingness to help in this study. Thank you.

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Date:

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Interviewer Signature:

APPENDIX B



OAKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Auburn Hills Campus

2900 Featherstone Road Auburn Hills, MI 48326-2845 (810) 340-6500

Highland Lakes Campus

7350 Cooley Lake Road Waterford, MI 48327-4187 (810) 360-3000

Orchard Ridge Campus

27055 Orchard Lake Road Farmington Hills, MI 48334-4579 (810) 471-7500

Royal Oak Campus

739 S. Washington Royal Oak, MI 48067-3898 (810) 544-4900

Southfield Campus

22322 Rutland Drive Southfield, MI 48075-4793 (810) 552-2600

Application for Admission



OAKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Oakland Community College Application for Admission

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APPENDIX C

High School of Origin

Fall 1995 Orchard Ridge Campus New Students

	No. of Students
West Bloomfield	81
Walled Lake Western	78
Farmington	76
Novi	71
Harrison	65
Southfield	62
North Farmington	61
Groves	58
Southfield Lathrup	58
Berkley	33

Total