

## Student Support Services (SSS) Program

### Prior Experience (PE) Criteria

#### Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

#### **General**

Q1. For the upcoming competition to be held in FY 2015, which project years will be used for PE purposes?

A1. For the FY 2015 competition, the following project years will be used to calculate PE: 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014.

#### **Funded Number to Serve**

Q1. Will an institution be penalized if they serve more than the approved student service number negotiated by the Department?

A1. An institution serving more than the approved student service number will not be penalized for serving additional students. However, please note that the PE points for the Persistence and Good Academic Standing objectives will be based on the greater of the number of participant funded to serve or the number of participants served.

Q2. Will an institution be penalized if the approved student service number does not break down into the correct eligibility proportions (e.g., two thirds low-income and first generation college students and/or individuals with disabilities)?

A2. Although the PE criteria no longer address the proportional status of the students served by the project, grantees are required to meet the “two-thirds” requirement and should keep in mind that this is an integral part of the selection of eligible participants. (See 34 CFR 646.11(a)(1)). In addition, the selection of the correct proportions of eligible students has been assured by officials at the grantee institutions through the signature of an authorized certifying official on the approved application.

Q3. Can an institution continue to serve project participants beyond the point of measurement for the attainment objectives (e.g., bachelor’s degree in six years; associate’s degree or certificate in four years)?

A3. Yes, a project can continue to serve a participant for as long as the student is enrolled at the grantee institution; however, the student would not count towards the project’s attainment objective if the student has not earned a degree/certificate by the established point of measurement.

Q4. Will an institution be penalized if they obtain their funded number to serve but do not meet the minimum requirement of three (3) program services per participant?

A4. There is no required minimum number of program services that a participant must receive to be considered a project participant. (See definition of participant in 34 CFR 646. 7.) However, an SSS project must offer, and provide as appropriate, all required services to program participants. (See 34 CFR 646.4)

Q5. Will a SSS project that serves less than 90 percent of its approved student service number during a project year be eligible to earn PE points for that year?

A5. No. To be eligible to earn PE points for a specific project year, a grantee must serve at least 90 percent of its approved student service number. (See 34 CFR 646.22(b)).

Q6. Are new participants served for the first time in the summer prior to the academic year counted toward the funded number to serve and other objectives?

A6. New summer participants who earned college credits are included in the calculation of the funded number, persistence, and good academic standing criteria. New summer participants who did not earn college credits are included in the calculation of the funded number and persistence criteria. However, these participants are not included in either the denominator or numerator for the good academic standing criterion.

### **Persistence**

Q1. If a student does not return in the fall semester (i.e., fall 2012) following the reporting year (i.e., 2011-12) but returns in the spring semester (i.e., 2013), will that student be counted toward the persistence rate for the reporting year?

A1. No. The persistence rate for the reporting year (i.e., 2011-12) is based on the greater of the number of participants funded to serve or the number of participants served in the project year being assessed (denominator). The following information specifies who would be counted in the numerator and the corresponding option code for each group (see field #34 of the Record Structure):

- 2-Year Institutions

1 = Enrolled at grantee institution

2 = Has graduated from the grantee institution with an associate's degree or received a certificate **and** transferred from a 2 to a 4-year institution

3 = Has transferred from the grantee institution (i.e., 2-year) to a 4-year institution without receiving an associate's degree or certificate

4 = Has graduated from the grantee institution with an associate's degree or received a certificate **but did not transfer** to a 4-year institution.

- 4-Year Institutions

The following information specifies who would be counted and the corresponding option code for each group (see field #34 of the Record Structure):

1 = Enrolled at grantee institution

5 = Has graduated from the grantee institution with a bachelor's degree or equivalent

### **Good Academic Standing**

Q1. What grade point average must a student maintain to be considered in good academic standing for purposes of PE assessment?

A1. The Department recognizes the grantee institution's standards relative to the grade point average required of the student to be in good standing. Often the grade point average a student must maintain to be in good academic standing is tied to the student's grade level. For example, the grantee institution may require juniors to have a higher grade point average than freshmen to be in good academic standing.

### **Graduation (4-Year)**

Q1. Can students who transferred and then graduated from another institution be counted in the respective grantee's graduation rate?

A1. No. The project's graduation objective used to award PE points is based only on those participants who graduate from the grantee institution.

Q2. How do students who enter the program as transfers count as far as graduation rates?

A2. The graduation rate for PE is calculated using a participant's cohort year. The cohort year is determined by the year the participant was first served by the SSS project, not by the year and grade level of the student when first served by the project. For example, if a transfer student is first served by the grantee as a junior in the 2008-09 reporting year, the student would be counted towards the project's graduation rate if the student attained a bachelor's degree by 2013-14. Please note, however, that the Department uses different criteria to calculate the graduation rate of SSS participants for PE than for assessing program performance for GPRA reporting. For 4-year institutions, the graduation rate for GPRA reporting is the percentage of full-time freshman SSS participants who graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years.

Q3. What does the term “equivalent to a bachelor’s degree” mean?

A3. The term “equivalent to a bachelor’s degree” is only to be used for an SSS participant enrolled in a dual degree program who has completed the minimum institutional requirements for receipt of a bachelor’s degree but will not receive a degree until the participant has also completed the requirements of a graduate degree. This provision allows a project to receive credit for a student under the graduation objective once the “equivalent” threshold is met even though the student will not be awarded a degree until he/she has completed all of the requirements for the graduate degree.

Q4. Can a grantee provide services to a participant who is working toward their second bachelor’s degree?

A4. Although there is no regulatory citation that prohibits a grantee from providing services to a participant who is working toward a second bachelor’s degree, it is not the intent of the SSS program to serve participants once they have earned a bachelor’s degree. Should a project choose to serve such a participant, the participant’s second bachelor’s degree would not be counted in the degree attainment objective.

### **Graduation (2-year Institutions)**

Q1. Is the dual-enrollment option available for 2-year institutions if a participant is enrolled at a 2-year institution and a 4-year institution?

A1. SSS does not speak to enrollment at more than one institution of higher education at the same time. Instead we address dual-degree programs where a participant is enrolled at the grantee institution in a combination of two approved degree program. For the purpose of PE, if the grantee is a 2-year institution, the students served by the project would only count towards the graduation objective if the student received a certificate or earned an associate’s degree within four years.

Q2. When calculating the PE points for graduate and graduate/transfer, what cohort will be assessed at the four-year point of measurement?

A2. Graduation and transfer rates are based on a participant’s cohort year (reporting year in which participant was first served by the SSS project). The following information is offered for clarification:

Two-year institutions have two objectives related to the PE criterion for degree or certificate attainment and transfer.

For the first objective (C1), PE points are awarded based on the percentage of new participants served in the applicable cohort years that graduate with an associate’s degree or receive a certificate within four reporting years of first entering the project. The cohort years for objective C1 are as follows:

PE Assessment Year	APR Years Used	Cohort Year Field #21/Option:
2011-12	2011-12	10 = 2008-09
2012-13	2012-13	11 = 2009-10
2013-14	2013-14	12 = 2010-11

The second objective has two options based on the project's interpretations as to what constitutes the cohort (denominator). In submitting the 2011-12 APR, each SSS project must indicate which of the following interpretations of the cohort (denominator) will be used to calculate its PE points for the 2010-15 grant cycle.

The cohort years for objective C2, Option 1 are as follows:

PE Assessment Year	APR Years Used	Cohort Year Field #21/Option:
2011-12	2011-12	10 = 2008-09
2012-13	2012-13	11 = 2009-10
2013-14	2013-14	12 = 2010-11

The cohort years for objective C2, Option 1 are as follows:

PE Assessment Year	APR Years Used	Cohort Year (Field #21) and Degree (Field #31)
2011-12	2011-12	Field #21, option 10 AND Field #31, Option 1, 2, 10, 11 & 12
2012-13	2012-13	Field #21, option 11 AND Field #31, Option 1, 2, 10, 11 & 12
2013-14	2013-14	Field #21, option 12 AND Field #31, Option 1, 2, 10, 11 & 12

Q3. For a 2-year institution awarded a grant for the first time in the FY 2010 competition, what would be the cohort (numerator) for the graduation/transfer objectives?

A3. To be eligible to earn PE points for the graduation/transfer criteria, a project must have submitted an APR for the year in which the cohort was established. Therefore, a project first funded in 2010-11 is not eligible to earn PE points for these criteria in the 2011-12 and 2012-13 assessment years but is eligible to earn PE points in the 2013-14 assessment year.

Q4. For a 2-year institution that has gained approval from their state to also grant bachelor's degrees, how should SSS report on the graduation/transfer status of the students who have graduated with an associate's degree and then transfer to the bachelor's degree program at the institution?

A4. Any student who receives a certificate or graduates with an associate's degree and transfers to a bachelor's degree program should be reported as graduated and transferred (see Field 31, options 11 or 12 of the Record Structure).

Q5: For a 2-year institution using alternative objective language from that contained in the SSS application booklet, which standard will be applied when calculations are made regarding graduation/transfer?

A5. All grantees will be held to the standardized objectives contained in the FY 2010 Student Support Services Application booklet. Applicants were instructed that they could not change or alter the standardized objectives. Discrepancies in regard to the standardized objectives should have been discussed during the program negotiations between a project and the assigned program specialist held at the beginning of the grant award cycle. No further changes (except for the choice of option for the graduation/transfer objective for 2-year institutions) will be allowed at this time.

Q6. Regarding the graduation/transfer objective for 2-year institutions, if a student graduates and then does not transfer until the next academic year but within the four-year time period, are they only counted toward the degree attainment objective and not the degree and transfer objective?

A6. Yes, the participant would only count towards the degree attainment objective. To count towards the PE degree and transfer objective, the participant must transfer to a 4-year institution in the academic year in which the participant received the associate's degree or certificate or by the beginning of the next academic year (see Field #31, options 11 and 12 of the Record Structure).

Q7. In some large community college districts, it is a common practice for students to take classes across the district to graduate on time. If a student applies for their associate's degree at another institution within the same college district but has been enrolled in the SSS project at the grantee institution, can the grantee institution report them as "graduated"?

A7. No, an institution will only receive credit for students who actually receive their associate's degree or certificate from the grantee institution.

Q8. Why must a project be evaluated on the new degree/transfer objective for the cohort group that was admitted into a SSS project when the project's transfer objective did not require the students to receive a degree or certificate prior to transferring to a 4-year institution?

A8. During the FY 2010 competition, applicants were informed that they would have to conform to the new standardized objectives developed in response to the changes in the PE criteria resulting from the Higher Education Opportunity Act. Applicants were alerted to changes in the standardized objectives and advised to set objectives based on the new outcome criteria.

## **Transfer (2-year Institutions)**

Q1. Would a student who graduated with an associate's degree after two years, but did not transfer to a 4-year institution until two years later be counted under the graduation/transfer objective?

A1. No. The participant would be counted toward the graduation portion of the objective only since the student did not transfer to a 4-year institution in the academic year in which the participant received the associate's degree or by the beginning of the next academic year. (See Field #31, option12 of the Record Structure.)

Q2. If a student received a certificate, then continued on and received their associate's degree and transferred to a 4-year institution, does the APR calculation take the first report or will the graduation/transfer code override that previous submission?

A2. The graduation/transfer would be counted provided the project updated the information in field #31 (Undergraduate Degree/Certificate) and the student earned the degree by the four-year point of measurement and transferred by the beginning of the next academic year following receipt of the associate's degree.

Q3. What documentation is needed to validate the transfer of a student from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution?

A3. The project should keep records verifying transfer information reported to the Department, consistent with any processes included in the approved application. These processes may include the use of the National Student Clearinghouse, other national or state databases, student self-reports and any other verifiable and reliable tracking mechanisms which may be available to verify the enrollment status of students once they have left the grantee institution.

Q4. When will a 2-year institution have the opportunity to select which option most closely coincides with the intent of the institution with regard the graduation/transfer objective when the application was submitted for consideration under the FY 2010 competition for new awards?

A4. A 2-year institution will have the opportunity to select the most appropriate option for their project when submitting the 2011-12 APR. This **one-time** selection will determine how the second objective will be assessed for the entire 2010-15 grant cycle. Further details are provided in the Dear SSS Project Director letter as well as in the Standardized Objectives Report of the SSS web application and the Appendix to the PE Report which describes in detail the formulae used to calculate PE points.

Q5. Is the option under the graduation/transfer objective to count students who receive either an associate's degree OR certificate new? If so, does that mean that a student who earns a certificate and transfers will meet the graduation and transfer objective?

A5. Yes, this is a new option (Field 31, option 12). A student who earns a certificate and transfers to a 4-year institution will be included in the calculation of the graduation/transfer objective.

Q6. Will a 2-year institution that chooses to submit alternative language regarding the graduation/transfer objective during the FY 2010 competition have the opportunity to rewrite the objective?

A6. No. All applicants were instructed to use the standardized objectives as published in the FY 2010 Application for Grants Under the Student Support Services Program provided by the Department during the application process. No changes to the wording of the objectives were allowed.

Q7. For 2-year institutions, do students who transfer from the grantee institution to another community college count toward the persistence rate?

A7. No. Only students earning a degree or certificate or continuing at the grantee institution from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year will count toward the persistence objective. The following information specifies who would be counted and the corresponding option code for each group (see field #34 of the Record Structure):

1 = Enrolled at grantee institution

2 = Has graduated from the grantee institution with an associate's degree or received a certificate **and** transferred from a 2 to a 4-year institution

3 = Has transferred from the grantee institution (i.e., 2-year) to a 4-year institution without receiving an associate's degree or certificate

4 = Has graduated from the grantee institution with an associate's degree or received a certificate **but did not transfer** to a 4-year institution.

Q8. Would an institution receive credit under the graduation/transfer objective for a student who graduates with an associate's degree but continues at the institution because he/she has transfer requirements to complete?

A8. If the student attained an associate's degree or certificate within the four-year time frame but did not transfer, the student would count towards the first part of the objective (graduation) but not the second part (graduation and transfer).

Q9. Would a 2-year institution receive credit under the graduation/transfer objective for a student who has transferred to a 4-year institution but is still also enrolled at the grantee 2-year institution (simultaneously) to take courses?

A9. No. A student must receive a certificate or associate's degree and transfer to a 4-year institution for a grantee to receive full credit under the graduation/transfer objectives. Since the student did not complete the requirements for part one of the objective prior to transferring to a 4-year institution, no credit would be given.