

**Frequently Asked Questions about  
Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC)  
(Updated 1/27/09)**

**Note: For archived FAQ's, go to:**

[http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/ARCC/ab1417\\_faq\\_archive.doc](http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/ARCC/ab1417_faq_archive.doc)

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**General**

**What happened to the previous ARCC FAQ document?**

The previous FAQ document can be found at:  
[http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/ARCC/ab1417\\_faq\\_archive.doc](http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/ARCC/ab1417_faq_archive.doc). The latest ARCC data and report generated new questions that made the document much too long for easy reference. As a result, we developed the current “second edition” for 2009 to provide people a relatively brief package.

**Analysis of ARCC Data at the College Level**

**How is the Chancellor’s Office helping local researchers “drill down” in the ARCC data to perform more insightful research and analysis?**

To help colleges perform more insightful local research and analysis, the Chancellor’s Office created the Data on Demand site, which provides a breakdown of ARCC outcomes in addition to other MIS data. For example, the SPAR data are broken down by each of the outcomes, as well as by demographic variables.

The ARCC data files available on Data on Demand are:

- Student Progress and Achievement Rate
- At Least 30 Units Rate
- Persistence Rate
- Annual Basic Skills Course Completion data (2007-08 only)
- Annual Vocational Course Completion data (2007-08 only)

- Basic Skills Improvement data for English, Math and ESL (which will be available in February 2009 )

Because the ARCC report is a public document, we needed to make this level of data available to researchers through a separate source (i.e., the Data on Demand website) to maintain the confidentiality of student data. The tight work schedule for the development of the ARCC report necessitates that these breakdowns and relevant updates occur after the System Office completes the legislatively mandated components of the report.

**I understand that the ARCC Data on Demand Website has the Student Progress and Achievement Rate (SPAR) data. Can you suggest ways that colleges can analyze data on this measure? Also, can you suggest ways that colleges can analyze student achievement and/or supplement ARCC data with analyses of their local MIS data?**

The Student Progress and Achievement Rate (SPAR) dataset was released to the colleges so that researchers can analyze the various outcomes of the SPAR. For example, a researcher can determine the number or percentage of students receiving a certificate of 18 units or more. Students also achieve multiple awards, so there is always an interest in such analysis. For example, a researcher could study the proportion of students that transferred and were also “transfer prepared” or received a certificate. Another question that the local researcher could explore may be the link between local assessment practice and student progress. This exploration would address a topic that system level researchers have difficulty in studying, and it concerns an area where the individual college or district has the ability to make changes.

We also released this dataset because colleges wanted to analyze the SPAR, and its various component outcomes, by the demographic variables (race/ethnicity, gender, age). The unitary data include student identifiers so that colleges can match the ARCC SPAR data with their local MIS data to “drill down” and learn/explain more about the students and courses that led to the ARCC results. For example, for those students that transferred: What courses did they take and in what sequence? What were their GPAs? What support services did they receive at the college? The potential research questions and subsequent studies at the local level can inform and guide program improvements at the college.

At this point, we have not provided the colleges with a framework (or suggestions) on how to use their unitary data. Colleges are unique, with different priorities and needs. In the near future, we would like to get feedback about, and report out, how colleges are using the data to improve student success.

**What academic terms constitute an Academic Year?**

For purposes of COMIS and ARCC, an Academic Year refers to all the terms in one year beginning with the Summer term and ending with the Spring term (Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring).

## **Career Development and College Preparation**

### **How will the ARCC report address Career Development and College Preparation (CDCP) Instruction - Enhanced Funding, also known as “Enhanced Noncredit”?**

The 2009 ARCC report includes college level data for CDCP courses that receive enhanced funding, as implemented in 2007 under SB 361 (Scott, Chapter 631, Statutes of 2006). In response to requirements from oversight agencies (Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst’s Office), we also produced a supplementary system level report to analyze CDCP data in more depth. We published the first CDCP report in June 2008 and it can be found at the ARCC Website (see link below).

Enhanced funding is available for noncredit programs that create opportunities for career development and college preparation through career-technical education (short-term vocational), educational development (basic skills, ESL and VESL) and workforce preparation. For noncredit courses to be eligible for enhanced funding they must be part of a sequence of courses that lead to either a certificate of completion or a certificate of competency with the intended result of improving student progress towards college or a career path. (Title 5, Section 55151).

Website link to 2008 Career Development and College Preparation Report:

[http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/reports/cdcp\\_report\\_june\\_08.pdf](http://www.cccco.edu/Portals/4/TRIS/research/reports/cdcp_report_june_08.pdf)

### **How are Career Development and College Preparation (CDCP) awards being captured in COMIS?**

CDCP awards are currently not captured in COMIS. MIS is working with Academic Affairs to create 5-digit codes that identify those awards. We expect to implement those codes in Summer 2009. For now, colleges can continue to submit their data for noncredit awards, but these do not show up as CDCP awards.

## **Wage Data**

### **Does the ARCC 2009 report contain updated wage data?**

Yes. The wage data presented in the 2009 ARCC report have now been updated.

## **Changes to Cohorts and Predictors in the 2009 Report**

**Why are the rates for some of the indicators for the same cohort different in the 2009 report when we compare them to the 2008 report?**

The changes could occur in a college's denominator, the college's numerator, or both. The changes in the data relate to the following factors:

1. The data for all three cohorts were pulled from COMIS again, before being reanalyzed. Therefore, any resubmissions since the data pull for the final 2008 report could change the rates.
2. Although the Curriculum Reporting for the Community Colleges (CRCC) project was completed in October 2007, colleges/districts continue to clean up their course data by making changes to the Master Course File (MCF). The changes to the MCF not only affect the current term, but all course data in the system back to 1992. MCF clean up is continuous.
3. Several times a year colleges/districts have an opportunity to clean up data element SB00 Student-Identifier. The system can have multiple student identifiers for a single student and this clean-up process provides an opportunity for COMIS to unduplicate them, or make them whole. The result might be a change in counts (denominators and/or numerators) for some of the indicators that could affect rates.
4. Last year we started submitting all students with SSNs to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to determine their transfer status. In prior years, we only matched students previously not submitted. By giving NSC all students, we go back in time and rematch all students. For example, transfer institutions previously not part of NSC might now be members, and therefore create additional transfers.

**Why were different predictors used for the regression models in the 2009 ARCC report than were used for the 2008 ARCC report's regression models?**

There were several reasons why we used different predictors in the 2009 regression models. These reasons include data availability and data revisions or updates that altered the relationship between predictors and the ARCC performance indicators (outcomes).

For example, with regard to data availability, the lack of data for a predictor (e.g., the Student Average Academic Preparedness Index) at two newer colleges in the system (Copper Mountain and Santiago Canyon) compelled the System Office to substitute the next best predictor (the percent of students enrolled in a Basic Skills course) into the statistical model.

In terms of data revisions that altered predictor/outcome relationships, the most prominent changes in predictors occurred for the basic skills regression models. The CRCC/MCF project led to major revisions in the way colleges coded their basic skills courses which, in turn, affected the outcomes, thus affecting the relationship between outcomes and predictors in the regression models for basic skills indicators.

Finally, as time passes, the ARCC staff may test newly created variables as predictors. For example, we developed a new index as a potential predictor in the ESL Improvement Rate model – the “English Not Spoken Well” index. We tested the new index in several other regression models, but it achieved statistical significance only in the ESL regression model. This year we also added CCC Selectivity, the selectivity of community college transfers to four-year institutions, as a potential predictor variable. The variable did not reach statistical significance in any of the regression models.

### **Why do the denominator (cohort) definitions for Vocational Course and Basic Skills Course Completion Rates now include “DR” as a value for SX04 Enrollment-Grade?**

The DR value was added to the SX04 Enrollment-Grade data element starting with Summer 2007 reporting and is applied to students dropping between the first census date and the first withdraw date, if a W has not been applied yet. For some colleges the W occurs after the first census date, so those institutions do not use a DR. Training sessions were provided when the DR value was introduced to the data element. Adding DR cleaned up the many “XX” codes (None of the above/Unknown) populating the SX04 field. If colleges can document that the introduction of the DR code decreased their rates (e.g., by increasing the denominator/cohort numbers), that reason could be used in their self-assessments. This issue affects two ARCC rates, the Annual Successful Course Completion Rate for Credit Vocational Courses and the Successful Course Completion Rate for Credit Basic Skills Courses.

Note that the addition of DR to the SX04 data element was not specifically for ARCC purposes, but was included as part of the CRCC project to help answer many questions about student activity.

## **The Basic Skills Initiative**

### **How does the ARCC project interact with the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI)?**

As required by AB 194 [Chapter 489, Statutes of 2007], which specifies the details of the Basic Skills Initiative:

“The Office of the Chancellor shall work jointly with the Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst to develop annual accountability measures for this program. It is the intent of the Legislature that annual performance accountability measures for this program utilize, to the extent possible, data available as part of the accountability system developed pursuant to Section 84754.5 of the Education Code. By November 1, 2008, the Chancellor shall submit a report to the Governor and Legislature on the annual accountability measures developed pursuant to this process.”

Although not part of the original ARCC project, we have added the Basic Skills Initiative as well as the CDCP analysis to the ARCC effort at the request of oversight agencies (the Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst’s Office). Thus, by November 2008, the ARCC team developed the required BSI accountability framework using our current Technical Advisory Workgroup. Wherever possible, we will incorporate data already available for the ARCC in the BSI accountability reporting.

The November 2008 BSI report detailed the framework for assessing basic skills performance that will lead to BSI accountability analyses in future reports. BSI metrics will be reported separately rather than as part of the ARCC report, which is already extensive.

## **Board of Trustee Interaction**

### **When is the Board of Trustee interaction due for the 2009 report?**

The Board of Trustees interaction with the 2009 ARCC report must be completed, and its minutes submitted to the Chancellor’s Office /ARCC via email, by March 15, 2010. We encourage all colleges and districts to begin this process early. On the other hand, it is important that each college use the final ARCC report (issued in March each year) in its presentation to its board of trustees. So, the board interaction noted above should not occur so early that it presents results from one of the draft versions of the ARCC report. This use of the final version is important because only the final version contains the college’s self-assessment—a helpful element in the trustee evaluation of college performance.

Although the colleges technically have until March 31, 2010 (one year from the release of the 2009 ARCC report), we ask that you submit your board minutes to us no later than March 15, 2010, since we now include the dates from the board presentations in the ARCC report.

## **What information on interaction with the report should my Board of Trustees minutes reflect?**

- Reference to the Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges (ARCC) report and the specific year of the report (e.g., the 2009 ARCC Report).
- Reference to the areas discussed in ARCC (e.g., Systemwide section, college performance in a specific area, peer groupings, self-assessment, etc.)
- Reaction of trustees.

A documentation of a serious discussion of the ARCC results provides oversight bodies with evidence that the current level of accountability action has achieved the legislation's intended effect—locally driven improvement.

## **Upcoming Changes**

### **What changed in the 2009 ARCC Report?**

- Each performance indicator (systemwide and college level) will include data for the most recent cohort available. This includes information on wage trends using the most recent data available from the EDD.
- Annual Unduplicated Headcount, College Demographics, Table 1.7: We will extract this information from the DataMart instead of COMIS since most colleges use DataMart figures to check their demographics.
- Updated Wage Data: The Employment Development Department (EDD) provided updated data, so there will be an updated wage study in the systemwide section of the January 2009 draft.

## **Further ARCC Information**

### **Who are the ARCC contacts at the colleges and districts?**

The Chancellor's Office asked each college and district CEO to appoint an ARCC contact person and an alternate contact person to represent their college and district (updated lists are available on the ARCC website). If your campus has an update to this information, please contact LeAnn Fong-Batkin at the Chancellor's Office by e-mail at: [arcc@cccco.edu](mailto:arcc@cccco.edu) or by calling (916) 327-5886.

### **How can I get updates about this project?**

We will post updates to the ARCC website as they become available. Check the Updates section of the website for more information. If you would like to be on the ARCC e-mail distribution list, please send an e-mail to [arcc@cccco.edu](mailto:arcc@cccco.edu).

## **Who can provide more information?**

For any information regarding this project, please contact the Chancellor's Office by e-mail at: [arcc@cccco.edu](mailto:arcc@cccco.edu) or by calling (916) 327-5886.

## **How is the Chancellor's Office communicating with the field?**

The Chancellor's Office sends out periodic updates to the AB 1417/ARCC contacts appointed by each college's and district's CEO. If you would like to be on the ARCC e-mail distribution list, please send an e-mail to [arcc@cccco.edu](mailto:arcc@cccco.edu). If the Chancellor's Office has sufficient resources, it may schedule online information sessions or in-person presentations if the need arises.

## **Peer Grouping**

### **Why did the peer groups change so much in the 2009 report?**

It would be natural for the peer groups to change each year, given the year-to-year variation in some of the relevant uncontrollable factors for a particular performance indicator. So data that change for a set of uncontrollable factors in the 2008 ARCC report can result in peer group changes in the 2009 report. In addition, because the Chancellor's Office tries to update its peer grouping model for the sake of currency, each year it conducts new regression and cluster analyses with the most recent data for each performance indicator. So, if data for the performance indicator vary from year-to-year, then it is possible that the Chancellor's Office will identify different relevant uncontrollable factors with which to form peer groups. The use of different uncontrollable factors for the cluster analysis can often result in different peer groups. In the foregoing situations, we address the change stemming from real change in performance and environment at the colleges.

For the 2009 ARCC Report, a set of special circumstances have substantially magnified the expected change in peer groups. Unlike the real change noted above, these circumstances represent administratively-oriented changes to data. Circumstances of this sort include the CRCC project (Curriculum Reporting for the Community Colleges), updating the master course file, and the student identifier clean-up. These efforts to improve course and student data were system-wide, and affected our calculation of many of the ARCC performance indicators, as well as some of the uncontrollable factors. We have identified other sources of administratively-oriented data change as follows: (1) coding for CDCP (Enhanced Noncredit) funding; (2) improved programming for the data match with the National Student Clearinghouse; and (3) campus-initiated data resubmissions that are unrelated to any of the three foregoing situations (i.e., the resubmissions stemmed from a college's general effort to improve its data quality). The System Office MIS Unit has pursued a vigorous, multi-year effort to improve its data quality, and future alterations to data should be anticipated. We consider the cumulative effect of these administratively-oriented data changes as the primary cause for the major changes that occurred in the peer groupings for the 2009 report.

Note that the peer groupings can change if college data for outcomes OR for uncontrollable factors have significant alterations. Although the cluster analysis portion of the peer grouping uses only the uncontrollable factors in its process, the Chancellor's Office selects these factors on the basis of their statistical (and theoretical) linkage to outcome variables (the performance indicators). Therefore, movement in the data for the performance indicators by itself may result in our selection of a different set of adjustment variables (i.e., the uncontrollable factors for which the peer grouping tries to adjust), which in turn results in peer groupings that differ from those in the 2008 report.

The need for data on all colleges (or as many colleges as possible) in the ARCC analysis can also cause peer group changes. For example, in the analysis for the SPAR, the past lack of data for a predictor (the Student Average Academic Preparedness Index) at two of the newer colleges in the system (Copper Mountain and Santiago Canyon) forced the Chancellor's Office to substitute the next best predictor (the percent of students enrolled in a Basic Skills course) into the statistical model. Although the predictive quality of the new model was still quite high, the substitution of a new predictor variable into the peer grouping process probably caused a shift in the peer group composition for the SPAR.

**What does it mean from a policy perspective that two of the peer group analyses related to Basic Skills use uncontrollable factors (i.e., exogenous variables) that explain a relatively small amount of the variation in the corresponding performance indicators?**

For the 2009 report, the ARCC staff produced regression models that explained only about one-fourth of the variation in the Basic Skills Course Completion Rate and the Basic Skills Improvement Rate. This means that the ARCC staff may need new data to produce stronger peer groupings to "level the playing field" for between-college comparisons.

For example, one major unmeasured predictor could be student motivation, but we lack statewide data on this factor. Furthermore, motivation occupies a gray area in terms of status as an uncontrollable factor (an exogenous variable) for which we should "level the playing field."

Nobody can be certain that there are more exogenous variables to explain a larger portion of the variation in these two indicators. It is theoretically possible that the controllable factors (i.e., budgeting, counseling, and program structure or staffing) have a major effect upon these two indicators, much more than the level of effects from uncontrollable factors we seem to have found for the other four indicators. All this implies that much more empirical research should occur in our system to understand the basic skills situation.

### **Why did the 2009 regression model used to identify peer grouping variables change for the ESL Improvement Rate, compared with the 2008 ESL regression model?**

The adjusted  $R^2$  for 2009's ESL regression model is considerably lower than the adjusted  $R^2$  from the 2008 ARCC analysis (adjusted  $R^2 = .31$  versus  $.47$ ). There are several possible explanations for this change, none of which takes precedence or precludes other explanations. First, the colleges' percentages of students age 30 or older replaced last year's BA+ Index as a better predictor in the model. Second, the 2009 model's other predictors remained the same as last year's, but the student count variable was updated to reflect more recent data. Changes in student counts from 2008 to 2009 were, on average, larger than changes in the counts from 2007 to 2008. This could have affected the regression analysis. Third, heteroscedasticity in the residuals for last year's model justified a weighted least squares (WLS) adjustment that contributed to a higher  $R^2$ . We did not detect heteroscedasticity this year and did not adjust the data.

### **How do we know that these new peer groups are accurate or valid?**

The primary purpose of the peer grouping process is to put each college into a set of similar colleges for a relatively equitable comparison of each college's performance in a specific area or function. The assumption behind the validity of this concept is that the comparison should allow us to compare a specific college to other colleges that experience similar uncontrollable factors (environmental factors) as an analyst considers the concept of relative performance. The comparative task only needs a reasonable level of *similarity*, not exact replication or "identical twins," so to speak. Furthermore, no comparison could occur between colleges if we demanded exact similarity. So, practically speaking, we must accept some level of dissimilarity between a college and its peer group partners. We primarily try to achieve equity by using cluster analysis to minimize the measured dissimilarities between colleges.

Still, it is a judgment call about whether the resulting peer groups have sufficient validity for the task of equitable comparison between fairly similar colleges. Validity is not usually an all-or-nothing concept in program evaluation, and that is true for the ARCC analysis as well. If an analyst wants to compare college X's performance in 2008 to a college that is most similar to it, then he/she should really use the same college's performance in other years (i.e., non-2008 performances by college X) as the closest "match" for comparison purposes. This leads us to the year-to-year trend in college performance (also sometimes labeled as the "value-added" approach). The ARCC report includes that approach in it. But even if we get almost an "identical twin" here for the comparison of relative performance, we may still create an inequitable evaluation of college performance if a college's environmental factors changed substantially from one year to the next (or one cohort to the next cohort).

### **How can I explain these major changes in peer groups to my audiences?**

If a college experiences a major change in its peer group classification, then it should note the following circumstances:

(a) College officials may point out that the Chancellor's Office undertook a several data improvement projects that involved many colleges (e.g., updating the master course file and cleaning up student identifiers). The subsequent changes to the data in the Chancellor's Office MIS altered much of the peer grouping. So, even if a specific college did not change its data (through a data improvement effort), that college could have a different peer group in 2009 because of changes that occurred in the data at other colleges. Naturally, peer group performance reflects two elements of performance, the college's own performance and the performance of its ARCC-defined peers. A college's position within a peer group can change if its own performance has changed and/or if the peer group has changed so much that the performances of its new peers are different.

(b) College officials should first examine whether the average performances of their 2009 peer groups really did change from their 2008 average performances. In some cases, the identification of new peer colleges will have negligible effects upon the college's performance relative to its peer group average performance.

### **What use are peer groups for an indicator that you can't predict or model very well?**

Because the peer group analysis relies upon a statistical model (a regression model) that identifies those salient environmental factors related to a performance indicator, a peer grouping's relevance for evaluation at the college level does vary with the predictive quality of the statistical model. (See Appendix C in the ARCC report for more details about these models.) Because predictive quality is a factor that has a continuum, rather than a yes/no status, it can be difficult to decide when a specific peer grouping becomes irrelevant. That said, we note that peer groupings that use a model with relatively low predictive quality should receive less attention from the college officials, the trustees, and the public. The college's institutional researcher should note this for his/her administrators (and for their trustees) to promote efficient use of their time and resources when reviewing the ARCC results.

### **Why must there be six peer groups per indicator?**

In the case of ARCC, there was a need to create peer groups that were neither too small nor too large. With 110 community colleges in the system for the 2009 analysis, six

equal-sized peer groups would result in an average peer group size of 18 colleges. Using fewer than six peer groups would tend to place too many colleges in groups that contain far different institutions, increasing the chance for unfair comparisons. So this option (fewer peer groups) had low acceptability.

In general, researchers would prefer a higher number (versus a lower number) of peer groups, because the higher number of peer groups would result in more homogeneity within groupings. However, without a six-group maximum, the cluster analysis used in the ARCC peer grouping process would have begun to produce more one-college peer groups (basically an outlier) and two-college peer groups. Colleges that reside in one-college peer groups (somewhat of a contradiction in terms) really have no peer colleges. Thus, they escape any between-college comparison for that indicator (a condition that partially nullifies an evaluation effort). Colleges that reside in two-college peer groups (and to some extent three-college peer groups) can face some comparison. However, placing last or first in such small peer groups may do a disservice for those colleges, aside from imparting little information about their successes.

### **What's wrong with using a peer grouping method that matches colleges by student enrollment size, urbanization level, and region?**

These factors may create peer groupings that have less validity than the factors that the Chancellor's Office derived through its statistical modeling (regression analysis). If student enrollment size has no relationship to a college's performance on a specific indicator, why would one want to "adjust" or "control" for it? When student enrollment size does matter to a performance indicator, our analysis has included it in its peer groupings (see the appendices in the ARCC report). The three traditional factors noted in the question could help if an analyst needed a very global peer grouping, one that has no particular focus. But, in the research literature, we see the precaution about using classifications for purpose that their designers did not intend for them. The application of these three traditional factors for the peer grouping of colleges, for comparison on a specific performance indicator, throws that precaution to the wind. Peer grouping for comparison on a specific performance indicator is no longer a general analysis.