



Digging into the Disciplines II: Failure in Historical Context – The Impact of Introductory U.S. History Courses on Student Success and Equitable Outcomes

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Introduction

In the first installment of this series, Digging Into the Disciplines I: Accounting for Failure, we shined light on largely unexplored dynamics associated with principles of accounting courses. Many readers of that report have approached us to share their surprise about just how pervasive failure issues in the introductory accounting course seems to be, especially for students from historically underrepresented and underserved backgrounds. They were not surprised by the STEM findings, but before reading the report, they had silently wondered if failure in accounting courses might just be an issue at their own institution. Our findings strongly suggest otherwise.

This next installment in the Digging Into the Disciplines series examines grades and outcomes in introductory U.S. history courses. The study places these history course findings in context with a highly enrolled STEM course – general chemistry – as well as the principles of accounting course that was examined in our first installment in this series. In doing so, this study answers a question we have been frequently asked by history educators, namely “I know science and other courses are tough, but how does introductory history compare to them?”

You will see from what follows that the answer to that question is, “It depends.” While introductory U.S. history courses do have a lower aggregate failure rate when compared to the two other courses in this report, once the introductory history course outcomes data are disaggregated by demographic variables, the same kinds of inequitable trends found in principles of accounting and introductory STEM courses emerge. In other words, many of the race- and income-based inequities that emerge in the history of the United States itself emerge in our study of students who take introductory U.S. history at colleges and universities today. It is not a pretty story.

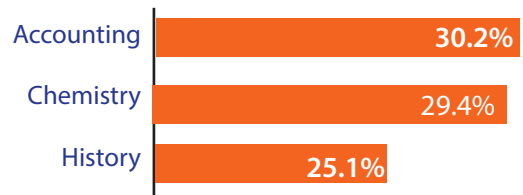
About the Data

The content found on this report comes from a broader study examining the rates of D, F, W (for any form of withdrawal on the transcript), and I (for incomplete) grades (DFWI rates) in introductory courses at thirty-six different colleges and universities in the United States. The thirty-six institutions include seven community colleges, two proprietary (for-profit) four-year institutions, eight independent (private) four-year institutions, and nineteen public four-year institutions – twenty-nine four-year and seven two-year total. The twenty-nine total four-year institutions further break down into six Baccalaureate Colleges, fourteen Masters Colleges and Universities, and nine Doctoral Universities.

Not all of the 36 institutions provided data for all of the courses we considered. In some cases, this was because the institution did not offer that kind of course. Thus, the data displayed in this document includes aggregate and disaggregate DFWI rates for principles of accounting courses at 32 institutions (18,217 students earning grades), and introductory college chemistry courses at 31 institutions (20,987 students earning grades), and introductory U.S. history courses at 32 institutions (27,666 students earning grades).

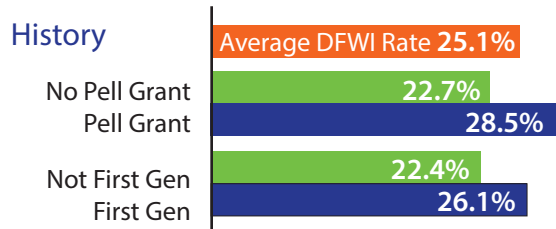
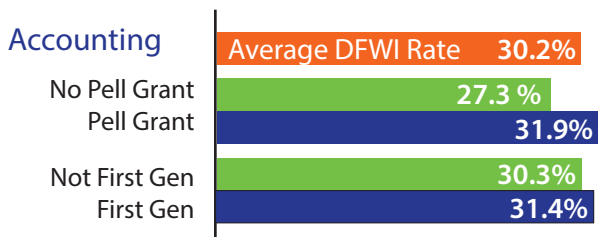
A. Average DFWI Rates for the Courses

The average DFWI rate by course ranges between 25.1% for introductory U.S. history to 30.2% for principles of / beginning accounting. General chemistry courses have a DFWI rate of 29.4% – higher than that of the history courses but lower than that of the accounting courses included in the study.



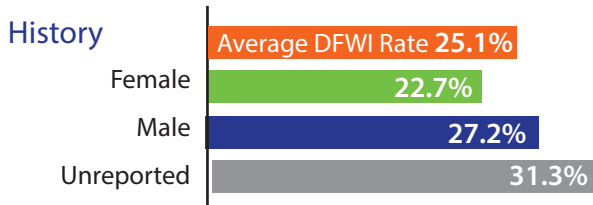
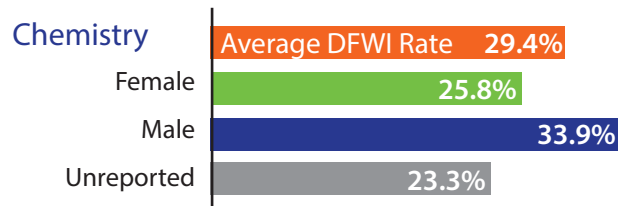
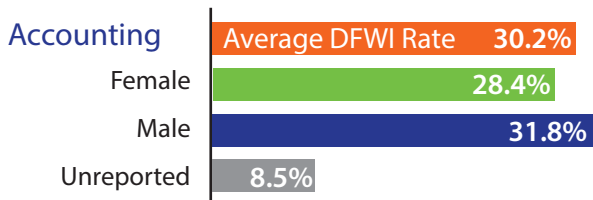
B. DFWI Rates in the Courses for Pell-Eligible and First-Generation Students Compared to Their Peers

Students from low-income backgrounds (defined as being eligible for a Pell Grant) or with less social capital (defined as being first-generation) always have higher DFWI rates in the three courses examined in this study. The differences are greatest for first-generation students in chemistry and Pell grant eligible students in introductory U.S. history. But the fact that this is a consistent aggregate trend across all three courses is a cause for concern.



C. DFWI Rates in the Courses for Men and Women

Males consistently have a higher DFWI rates when compared to their female counterparts in the three courses. The differences are greatest in chemistry, followed by U.S. history, and then accounting. These outcomes raise interesting questions about the cultural dynamics at work in the occupations and/or fields of study that these courses support. In other words, if women do better than their male counterparts in these foundational courses, why are they underrepresented in the STEM majors and occupations, Fortune 500 business leadership roles, and the history professoriate?



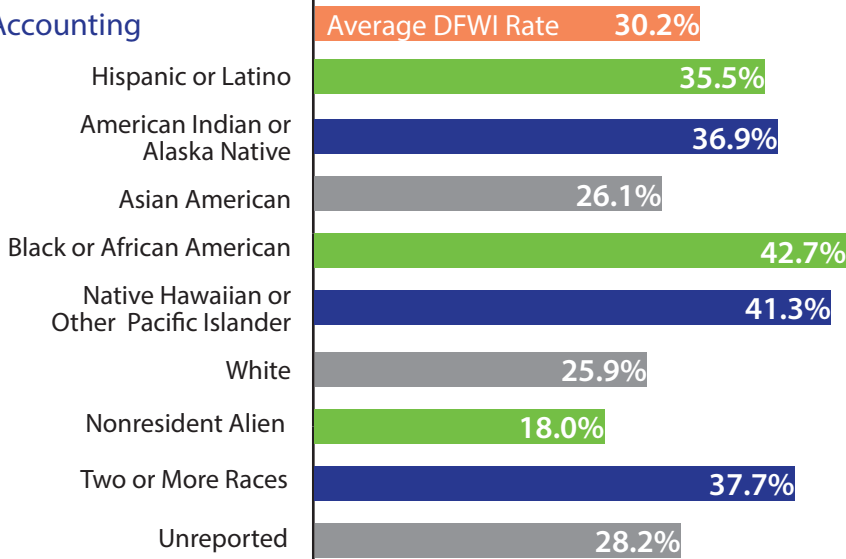
D. DFWI Rates in the Courses by Race / Ethnicity

Students who report their race/ethnicity group as being Caucasian / White, Asian-American, or who do not report a race/ethnicity group (Unreported) always have lower DFWI rates than the course average. In contrast, students of color always have DFWI rates higher than the course average – often substantially higher.

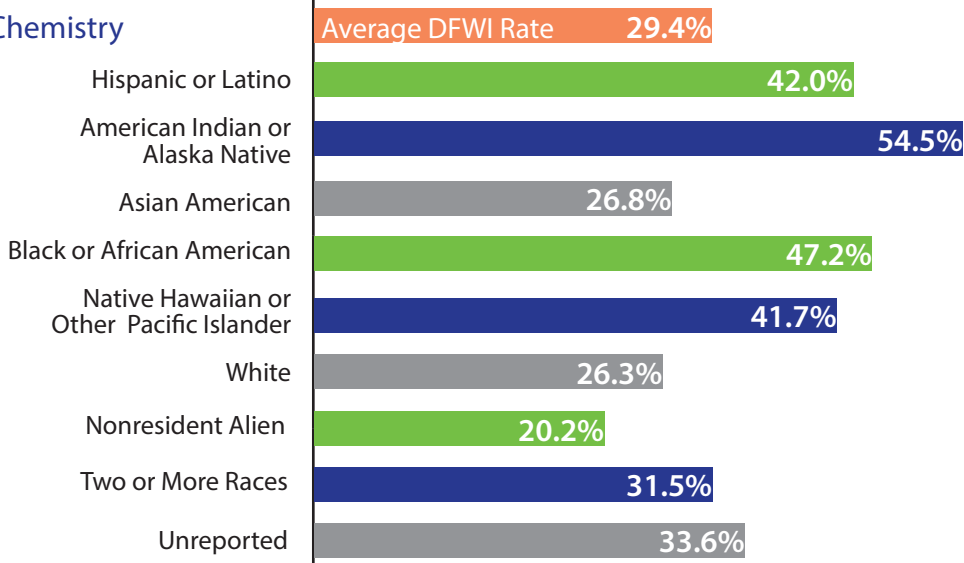
For example, Black / African-American students have DFWI rates that range from 16.83 percentage points (65.0%) higher in accounting, 20.9 percentage points (79.6%) higher in chemistry, and 21.0 percentage points (98.1%) higher in history than that of their White / Caucasian counterparts in the courses.

These outcomes are often blamed on inadequate prior academic preparation for college. However, the outcomes also suggest that the design and approaches used in these courses themselves do little to mitigate inequality. In other words, these courses may very well be functioning in unquestioned and perhaps unintended ways to effectively push students, particularly historically underrepresented and underserved students, out of courses and the academic programs they support.

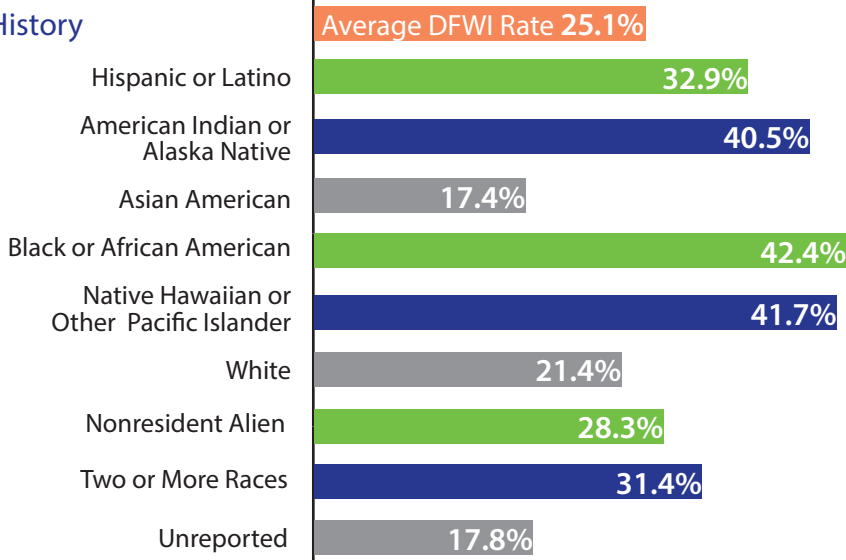
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Chemistry



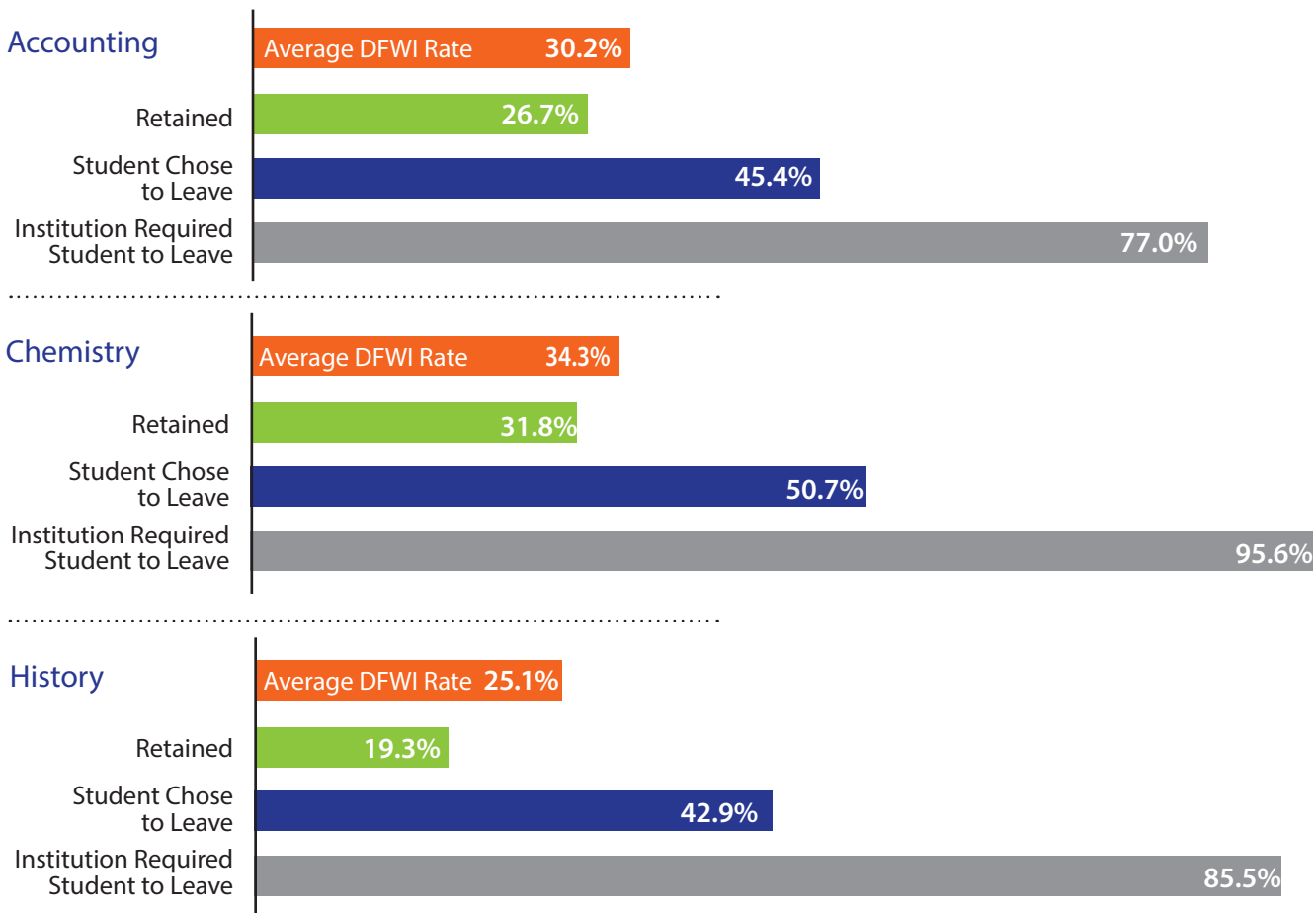
History



E. DFWI Rates Correlated with Retention Status

In all three courses, students who took the course and returned the next year to the institution at which the course was taken (a.k.a. were retained) had the lowest DFWI rates. Students who were dismissed from the institution for either academic or student conduct-related reasons had the highest DFWI rates. The DFWI rate for students who chose to leave the institution is of particular concern to the authors of the study. These students were eligible to return to the institution because they were in good academic standing (2.0 grade point average or better). They took the course included in the study, earned a D, F, W, or I grade, and elected not to return to the institution the next year.

In all cases, the DFWI rates for students who chose to leave are much higher than that for their retained counterparts. The differences range between 18.6 percentage points (69.7%) higher in Accounting (26.7% DFWI rate for retained students compared to 45.4% DFWI rate for students who chose to leave), 23.3 percentage points (89.60%) higher in chemistry (26.0% DFWI rate for retained students compared to 49.2% DFWI rate for students who chose to leave), and 23.6 percentage points (122.3%) percentage points higher in introductory U.S. history (19.1% DFWI rate for retained students compared to 42.9% DFWI rate for students who chose to leave). These outcomes strongly suggest that not doing well in even one of these courses is a significant predictor of attrition.



Summary and Conclusion

The gender, family income (Pell status), first-generation, race/ethnicity, and retention outcomes shared in this report compel us to point out that there are serious equity considerations and concerns associated with the findings for all three courses. While introductory U.S. history courses may have lower aggregate failure rates when compared to comparable introductory chemistry and accounting courses, the disparities among the demographic groups we examined are often the greatest in introductory U.S. history.

As we have done with our other research in the in the past, we must emphasize that the solution for addressing the issues identified in this report is not “giving everyone an A” or “lowering standards.” The solution is also not to blame faculty – many of whom are part-time and, like the students they teach, quite transient. Those kinds of approaches would perpetuate inequity in other ways.

The findings strongly suggest that course redesign is necessary – redesign that employs evidence-based, inclusive pedagogies, embedded support, reward and support structures for faculty, and other methods that better serve a steadily diversifying, twenty-first century student body. This is precisely why we are pleased to see and be involved with the American Historical Association efforts to redesign foundational history courses in its History Gateways project, which is being made possible with support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

While it is beyond the scope of this document to go into the approaches we mention above, it merits noting that use of these kinds of practices are shown to increase student engagement, learning, and success. This report shows what is occurring in the absence of widespread action, and suggests what is at stake if current trends persist. Given changing national demographics, and societal needs, these outcomes cannot persist in any discipline if the program of study and the higher education institutions of which it is a part hope to remain viable and supported by the public. Demographics cannot be destiny – especially not in introductory U.S. history courses.