

What We Did On Our Summer Vacation: Practice 399 Precision Competencies!

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In an attempt to provide meaningful access to strongly motivated but poorly prepared students, Jacksonville State University is addressing the academic and nonacademic skills necessary for college success for "high-risk" students. A residential summer session, known as Experiencing Student Success: Education and Life (ExSEL), was piloted in Summer '93 as the only means of freshman level entry for students whose ACT Composite score was less than 16. Thirty-three prospective freshmen were enrolled. The 17 women and 16 men presented ACT Composites between 7 and 17 with a mean of 15.

Coursework in the eight week session included 12 credit hours, with emphasis on developing skills in studying, reading, reasoning, writing, quantifying, and adjusting to college life. All courses were competency-based with Precision criteria. Coursework was supplemented in the residence halls by workshops and discussions, such as time and stress management, realistic choice of major, cultural diversity, and personal finance. There were lifetime sports activities, field trips, and cultural events, as well. Graduate students assisted by living in the residence hall, monitoring structured study sessions and developing rapport with participants. The goal of ExSEL was to prepare students for a successful transition to college life in the fall term.

Almost thirty years of research in Precision Teaching has indicated that true competence occurs only when students are fluent at academic skills. Using the Center for Individualized Instruction model of intense, individualized approaches to learning, ExSEL ensured success by developing competence in academic skills. The Center team diagnosed each individual student's presenting skill levels. The prerequisite tool skills necessary for developing competency were pinpointed with individual prescriptions for learning activities. Individualized activities

directed each student into fluent, proficient performances. Rather than classes scheduled for a set amount of time, students worked every day at developing all their competencies. Each day students began with their weakest skill. As a daily aim was reached in that area, the student progressed to aims in other areas. A total of 399 competencies were required across the five courses. Chart 1 demonstrates the group's progress on mastering these competencies across the eight weeks session. Seventy percent of grades earned in the five courses were "A" and "B". True individualized instruction provided each student consultation from the CII team and sufficient practice opportunities to develop his/her competencies. As each student experienced success, she or he strengthened both self-concept and academic preparedness. Each became more aware of how true learning through Precision was taking place, as each student became his/her own reinforcer and learning guide. There was a strong positive relationship ($r = .82$) between number of competencies reached and improvements on the ACT Assessment. Chart 2 shows one student's competencies reached on writing and quantifying each week and her ACT subtest scores in English and Mathematics before and after ExSEL.

Students signed weekly performance contracts to keep on target for accomplishing the required competencies. Typically, a student committed to reach 15-20 competencies per week in each class. Weekly Chart Shares were held on Friday afternoons where students were encouraged to show at least one of the Charts they kept in each course. A mean of 11 Charts was shown at each session.

This program was expected to show a high degree of success because of its depth and "whole-student" approach. With the added variables of a residential setting, scheduled study sessions, team-building, self-monitoring,

and a high degree of mentoring, ExSEL students were expected to be well prepared for college success. What none of us bargained for during the two and a half years of meetings to design ExSEL was the detrimental effects of overwhelming proportion of this intensity on student feedback and performance. Students lived in the University's nicest, newest residence hall with men on the first floor, women on the second floor, and transient groups not affiliated with ExSEL on the third floor. Mandatory Saturday excursions off-campus and Sunday night study sessions allowed students little free time to visit family or friends outside the program. Such intense closeness lead to "groupthink" and "groupact" of almost everyone being on a collective "high" or "low." Changes in romantic involvements, fears of ghosts in the attic, fire alarms being falsely activated, illnesses, party binges and unexplained absences affected almost all participants. Faculty, who had always worked with students without obvious influence from their personal lives, were suddenly wrapped up in racial discord, fears of pregnancy, menstrual cycles, financial problems, and other extremely personal issues ExSEL students presented. Since the group was so tightly knit, students typically brought these concerns directly to the classroom, rather than the privacy of the instructor's office. While we regret we were not farsighted enough to chart some of the concerns and their effects on performance we were so overwhelmed by, ExSEL '94 will not require residential living. Students in ExSEL '94 will be treated as other freshmen in regards to living arrangements with no attempt to contain them in any particular location. Commuters, as well as residential students, will be welcome. While we missed the opportunity to more fully study this unexpected phenomenon, none of us is willing to recreate such havoc for the good of science!

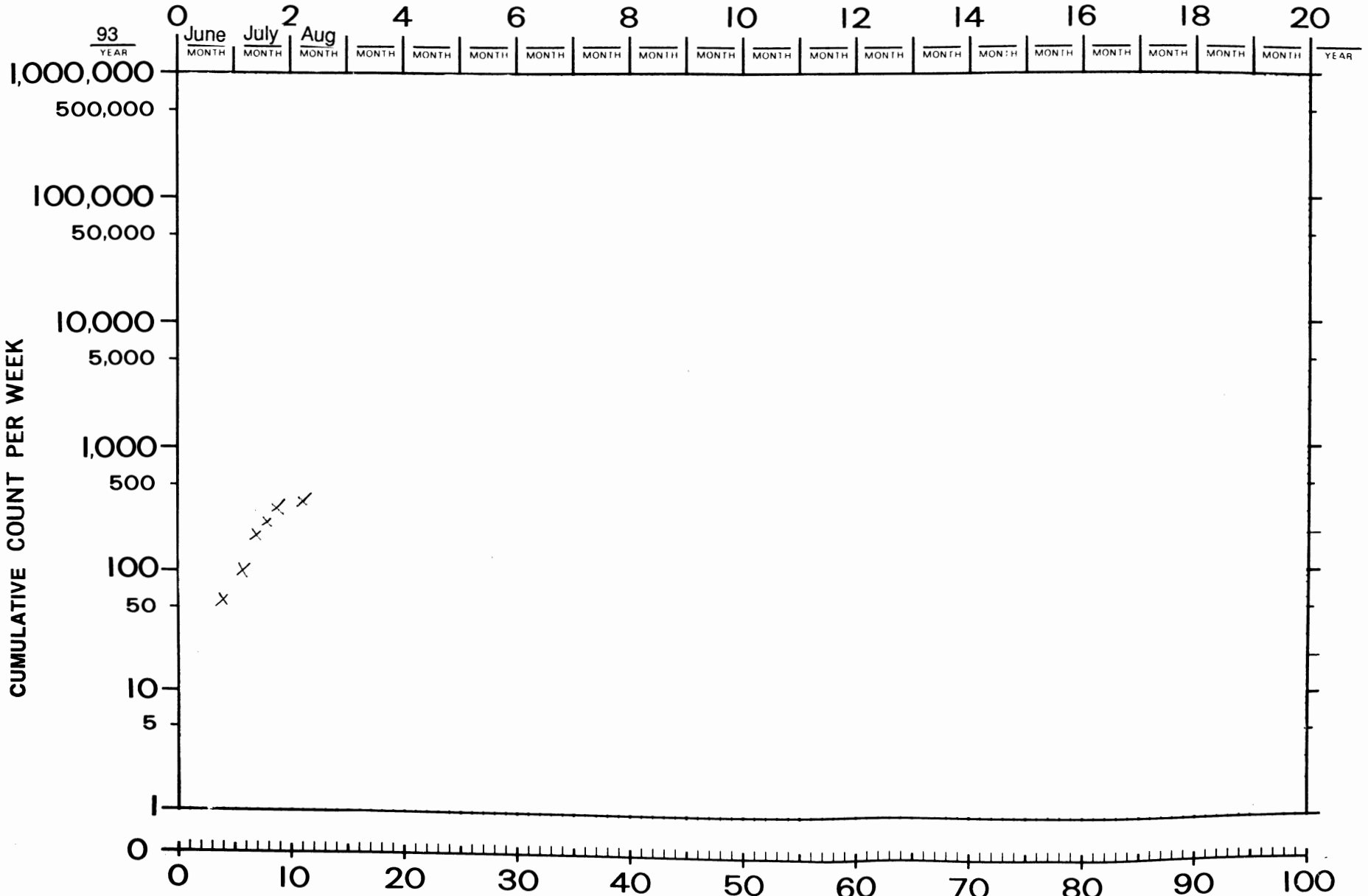
CII staff assisted ExSEL students in planning their fall schedules, based on their post-tests in each skill. Of the 33 students who were eligible to enroll as full-time freshmen, 30 actually did (one used a scholarship at a community college, one left homesick after one day, and one could

not get enough money). In the Fall Semester '93 students meet monthly with Center staff to ease the transition to a regular semester and to keep a running check on student performance in core curriculum courses. Other indicators of adjustment to the freshman year show that nineteen have on-campus jobs, three have joined the marching band, three have pledged a fraternity/sorority, one has become a disc jockey at the campus radio station, one writes for the campus newspaper, and two have become involved in the Student Government Organization.

ExSEL was a terrific learning opportunity for all involved. We faculty are more empathetic of student concerns, while ExSEL students report they are better adjusted to the collegiate experience than their peers who entered in Fall '93. We are readjusting our competency requirements and curricular materials on the basis of student performance. ExSEL students have reported greater academic success than their peers, although they have not yet received any course grades. They will be carefully tracked by the Office of Assessment throughout their years at JSU--both in their coursework and their satisfaction with the University. Stay tuned for further developments as this Precision intervention grows!

CALENDAR MONTHS

6 CYCLES — 100 WEEKS (20 MONTHS)
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CALENDAR WEEKS

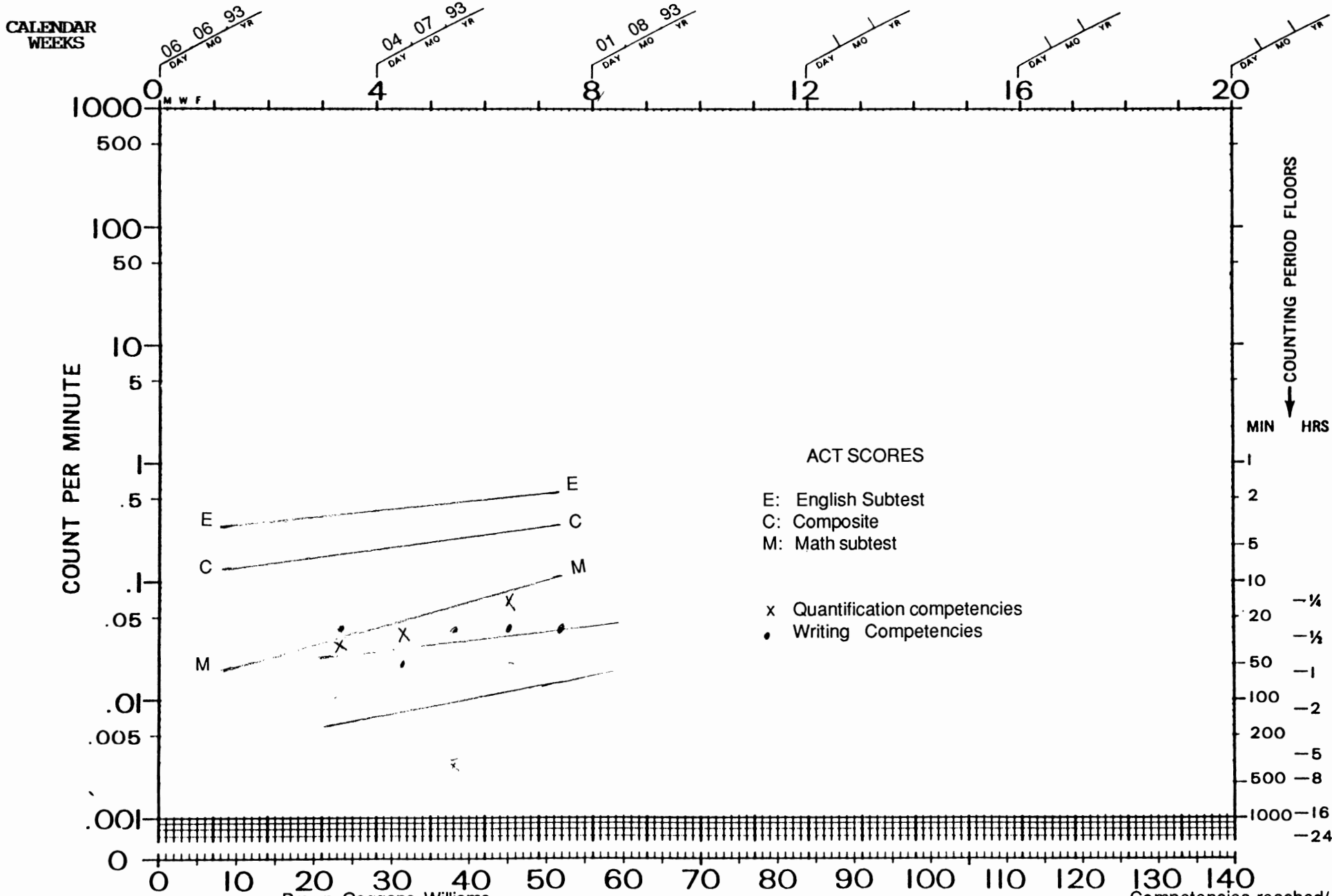
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Competencies reached/
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