ABSTRACT

GAVIN PAUL JOHNSON. Click Here For an A; or, Grade Distribution Data, Student Course Choice, and the Implications of a Grade-Driven University. (Under the direction of Professor Susan Miller-Cochran.)

While prior studies of student course selection from the fields of education and education economics have provided important information about the type of informal data students rely upon when choosing courses (Borgida and Nisbett, 1977; Wilhelm and Comegys, 2004; Kocak and Sever, 2011), none to-date have commented upon the type of university-sponsored data students use to make course selections. This empirical study expands upon the established literature in two defining ways: first, the study addresses how students use university-sponsored grade distribution data to make course decisions. Second, this study specifically addresses how students use such when choosing a section of first-year writing, a general education requirement. To accomplish these goals, a group of students enrolled in first-year writing for the 2014-2015 academic year were surveyed and interviewed.

The results of this study demonstrate that students rely on a number of data points to make complex decisions about every course in which they enroll. At a university where grade distribution data are published by the university, students use such data because of their seemingly objective nature. Therefore, when choosing between different sections of a required course, such as first-year writing, students often rely on these data to guide them towards “success,” which is often understood as higher grades. Additionally, this essay addresses implications of the use of such data by students, teachers of writing, and writing program administrators in making informed decisions about course selection, pedagogical practice, and programmatic policy, respectively.