

FROM INTENTION TO ACTION (FIT: Action)

September 2011 to April 2012 Pilot Year¹

Executive Summary

FIT: Action Program Overview

The FIT: Action program was created and implemented by the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC), and sponsored by the office of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Enrolment) and the Carleton University Registrar. The program is based on the idea that the same interventions that have been found to successfully reduce attrition rates among students with learning disabilities (LD) could also reduce attrition rates among students at academic risk. It has been argued that, like LD students, students at academic risk often fail or quit university programs for reasons unrelated to their academic potential, such as poor motivation, ineffective study habits, mental health concerns, or procrastination. As such, the FIT: Action program is designed to provide these students with vocational, personality and study skill screening, as well as educational testing to identify academic strengths and weaknesses. The FIT: Action program also provides follow-up with Learning Strategists and Coordinators who develop rapport with students as they work together weekly for one academic year (September to April).

Target Population

FIT: Action is aimed at students who met criteria for Academic Warning (AW). These are students who failed to meet the minimum Overall GPA (OGPA) or Major GPA (MGPA) requirements of their respective programs. Students on AW are required to undergo an Academic Performance Evaluation (APE) at the conclusion of the academic year, at which time failure to reach the minimum OGPA and MGPA levels would result in a one-year suspension from the university. As such, these students are considered to be highly at risk for attrition. A previous study conducted through the Registrar's Office showed that Carleton Students on AW have a slightly better than 50% chance of graduation in the 7 years following receipt of Academic Warning status.

2011-2012 FIT: Action Student Participants

To date, 112 students have been enrolled in FIT: Action in the pre-pilot and pilot years. For the 2011-2012 academic year, 25 students who took part in the pilot program the previous year enrolled for a second year. 82 new students were recruited during the 2011-2012 academic year. Of these 107 students, 72 were still enrolled in the program at the end of the 2012 Winter term. Our research shows that students make the greatest gains in their first year; approximately 22 students voluntarily left the program, though they demonstrated a bump in academic performance as did students who remained in the program. Sixteen students who initially expressed an interest in the program could not meet initial attendance

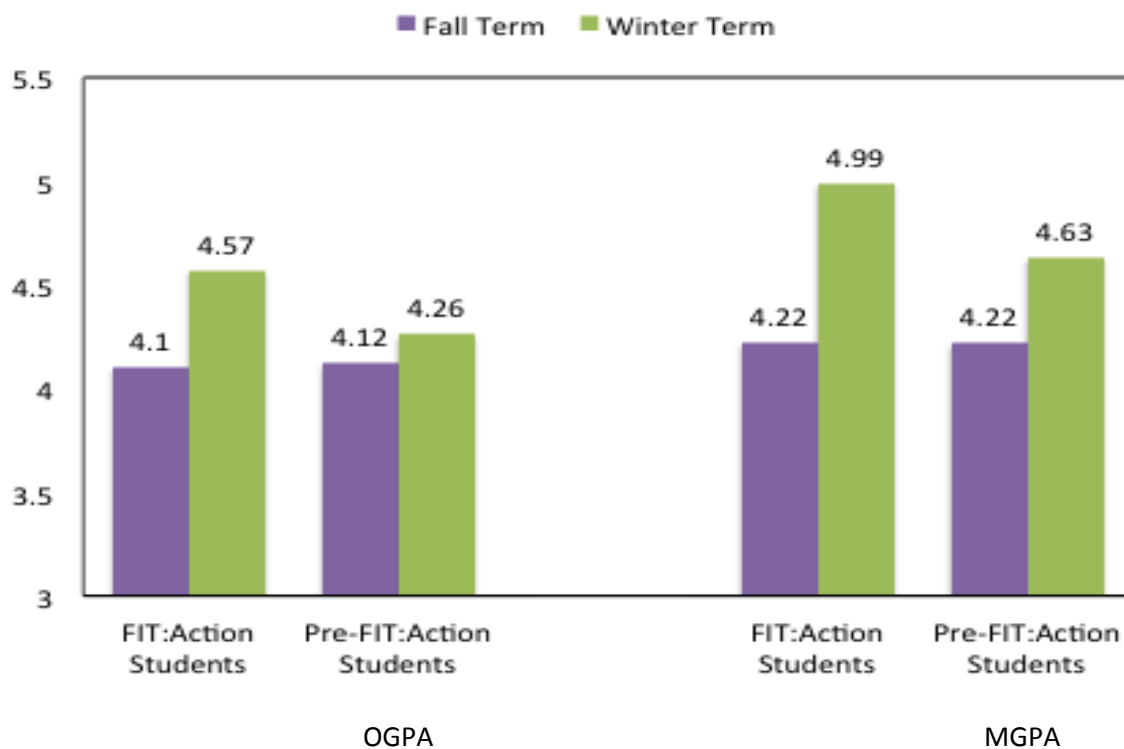
¹ Excerpted from "FIT: Action Final Report 2011-2012" by Andy Thompson

requirements necessary to be vested in the program and 2 students were dropped from the program due to poor attendance.

FIT: Action Students showed significant grade improvement in Major CGPA and Overall GPA when compared with other Students on Academic Warning. Prior to taking part in the program, FIT: Action students did not differ in grades from the comparison group.

Although relative increases in OGPA and MGPA were observed, the magnitude of improvement was greater for the FIT: Action students than for the comparison group. This suggests that students enrolled in FIT: Action will see significant improvement in their overall and major grades from the Fall to Winter term that exceed those of students on Academic Warning. In this way, the FIT: Action program has the effect of boosting student performance over-and-above that which would be seen in absence of the program.

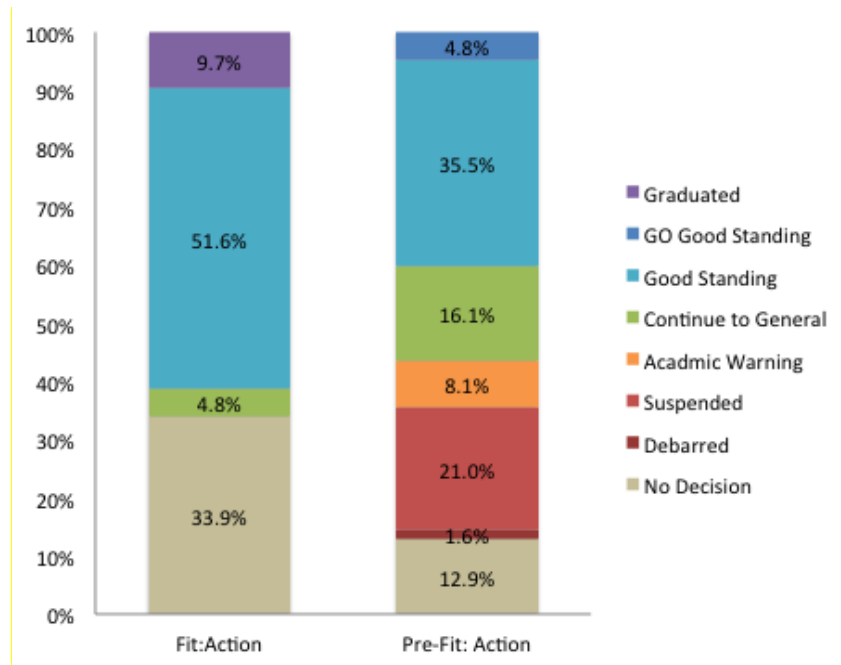
Figure 1. Fall and Winter OGPA and MGPA for FIT: Action and Comparison Group



Meeting Program Minimums. The main goal of FIT: Action is aimed at more than just grade improvement. It is designed to help students with low academic performance meet the minimum requirements of their degree and major programs. Therefore, program success is also indicated by the number of students who meet the minimum requirements of their degree program at the end of the 2011-12 academic year.

During the 2011-12 academic year there were 66 FIT: Action students (46 new, 20 returning) who had a minimum OGPA requirement and 62 had a minimum MGPA requirement for their degree program (44 new, 18 returning). Of the new FIT: Action students, 95.7% (N = 44) met the minimum OGPA requirement 93.7=2% (N = 41) and the MGPA requirements. Of the returning FIT: Action students 85.0% (N = 17) met the minimum OGPA requirement, and 94.4% (N = 17) met the MGPA requirements.

Figure 2. Academic Performance Evaluation decisions for New FIT: Action students and Comparison Group Students



As can be seen in the above table, over 60% of FIT: Action students received an APE decision of Good Standing or better. This is compared to approximately 40% of pre-FIT: Action students that had similar APE decisions. While over 30% of the pre-FIT: Action students received negative APE decisions (Academic Warning, Suspended, or Debarred) **none** of the FIT: Action students were given these negative decisions. Students may avoid having to meet minimum requirements by completing fewer than 4.0 credits during the academic year.

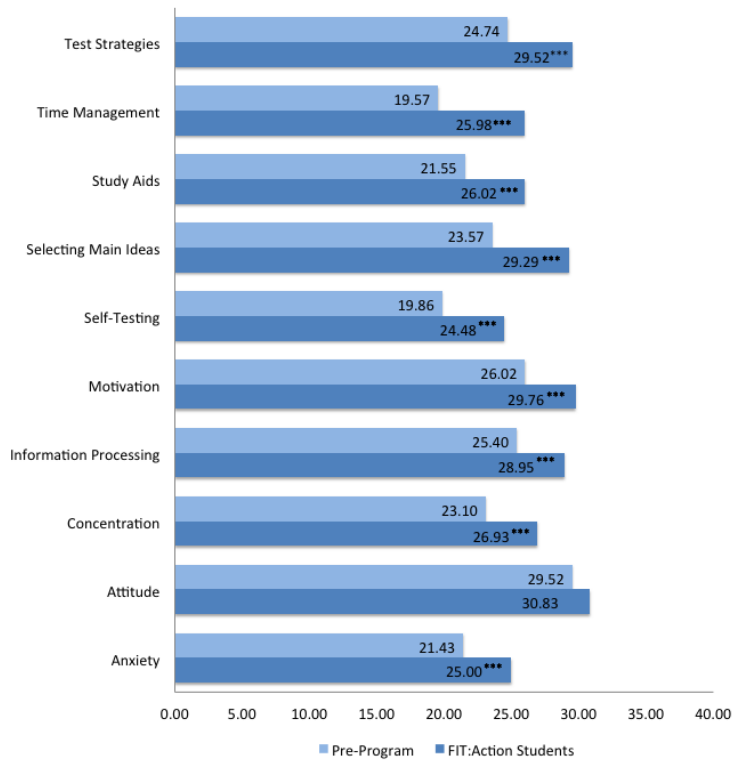
Students in the No Decision category were considered to be “under the radar” as they did not have a sufficient course load to trigger to trigger an APE. These students had lower marks than the other 2/3rds of the group. In the Fall semester of 2012, these students will be paired with experienced Coordinators and given more focus to try to bring up their marks as they will be facing an APE in 2013 and remain vulnerable to debarment.

FIT: Action students demonstrate improved study skills on pre-post measures:

A subset of students completed pre- and post-measures of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory. Students showed significant improvement on all but one scale on this Inventory. The largest changes

were seen on measures of *Time Management*, *Test Strategies*, *Selecting Main Ideas*, and *Developing Study Aids*. No change was seen on the *Attitude* scale that reflects attitudes and interests towards college success. As FIT: Action screens for a willingness to work this result did not come as a surprise.

Figure 3. Pre-Post Changes in Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI scores).



Academic Functioning Questionnaire (AFQ)

The AFQ is a questionnaire that was designed to assess factors that have been associated with a likelihood of staying enrolled in post-secondary studies. The AFQ includes self-reported weekly study hours, as well as statements designed to identify seven predictive factors correlated to retention. Significant increases were seen on measures of the amount of time put into studies (*from 10.6 to 16.6 hours*) on a weekly basis. Significant improvements were also seen in *study habits* (e.g., regular studying and keeping up with course material), *academic resource use* (e.g., awareness and/or use of university resources and student services), and *social contacts* (e.g., engagement and communication with course instructors and fellow students). Changes did not occur in the following areas: *motivation and determination* (e.g., desire to graduate with a university degree), *expectations* (e.g., how well student expectations of university match actual experiences), *self-efficacy beliefs* (e.g., student beliefs about their ability to succeed academically) and *goodness of fit* (e.g., how well courses suit personal interests, abilities, and career goals). The total AFQ score showed significant overall improvement across the seven predictive factors that correlate with retention and academic success at the post-secondary level.

Student Ratings of FIT: Action Coordinators indicate strong alliances:

On qualitative measures students reported a high level of confidence in and connection to their Coordinators that supported the goal of developing a therapeutic alliance. In midyear responses, FIT: Action students provided the following anonymous ratings (on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale):

- *Interactions with Coordinators:* “I was treated with respect by the FIT: Action members” (4.72)
- *Quality of Information Received:* “I trusted the information I received” (4.61)
- *Academic Self-Awareness:* “I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses” (4.23)
- *Program Involvement:* “I have attended meetings with my counselor” (4.11)
- *Appropriateness of Academic Courses:* “I am taking appropriate courses for my major” (3.79) (many students had enrolled in their courses prior to FIT: Action Audit).

Qualitative information obtained on exit questionnaires revealed that students enrolled in the program found it to be a positive and useful experience:

All of the students reported that they would recommend FIT: Action to a friend. The vast majority also indicated that they believe FIT: Action helps students graduate. Qualitative analysis of participants’ open-ended responses suggested that students perceive there to be several important benefits to participating in the program including developing academic skills (overcoming procrastination, better study strategies, better understanding of course material), feelings of increased accountability, having someone to provide support, reduced stress, and a change in attitude towards their own learning. One student wrote: “It gave me the confidence to take control of my own learning and gave me a sense of belonging at Carleton. Besides all the academic growth this year, it really helped me grow as a person.”

Conclusion:

The FIT: Action program is having a positive impact on the academic and more general functioning of its participants. Significant improvements were seen in OGPA and MGPA scores over and above those seen in matched-group of students on Academic Warning the year before FIT: Action was first implemented. Positive changes were seen in FIT: Action students’ study skills, amount of time spent on school work, their ability to connect with professors, TAs, and peers. Clear evidence of a strong therapeutic alliance between students and Coordinators was apparent.

Future Directions:

The FIT: Action program will be expanded to offer support for students who self-identify as being ‘overwhelmed’ with their course work at Carleton University even if they are not in academic difficulty. In this way we hope to play a role that supports students’ mental health and wellbeing avoiding crises that might otherwise emerge. As 1 in 5 individuals (both within and outside of post-secondary institutions) experience problems that reflect psychological disorders, it is hoped that this program will benefit those who seek assistance.

