

## Experiencing Success in Education and Life: An Intensive Skills-Building Program

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The Center for Individualized Instruction at Jacksonville State University offers an intensive six-week summer program to assist poorly prepared high school graduates in developing skills necessary for college success. Students must master Precision-based competencies to earn "A's" in developmental reading, writing, and quantifying courses. Those who successfully complete the program are far more likely to remain at JSU and to earn higher grades than the entering freshman cohort from 1993. Adaptation of the program to other settings is discussed.

### *Brief Description of the Institution*

Jacksonville State University is a regional, state-assisted comprehensive university serving approximately 7800 students per year, most of whom live in rural northeast Alabama and northwest Georgia. Approximately half of the undergraduates are first-generation college students; about 52% are female; about 34% are over the age of 25; about 18% are minority. A liberal admissions institution, JSU requires an ACT Composite scores of 19 for unconditional admittance and 16 for conditional admittance. Many entering students are underprepared for college, with approximately 70% and 38% placed in developmental quantification and writing courses, respectively.

### *Description of the Retention Program*

To increase the academic competencies of entering college freshmen and improve the probability of success through the freshman year, the Center for Individualized Instruction at Jacksonville State University offers an intensive six-week summer development program for prospective freshmen. While encouraged for any student who feels underprepared for college, ExSEL (Experiencing Success in Education and Life) is required for students whose ACT-Composite is below 16 or SAT is below 650.

Extensive evaluation of students' presenting skills in reading, writing, and quantifying lead to individual prescriptions for developing competence. Coached by an instructor, graduate assistants, and undergraduate tutors, students

work to reach prescribed competencies each week to make optimal progress toward their goals (McDade, 1993). Between 100 and 240 competencies are required to earn an "A" in courses in technical reading, writing, and pre-algebra skills. The ExSEL instructional team uses Precision Teaching, Direct Instruction, and other individualized strategies to guide learners (McDade & Goggans, 1993). In addition to regularly scheduled class times, students must master between 20 and 50 computer modules in each area and work on their competencies during structured study sessions (McDade, 1992). Weekly data shares keep students motivated by showcasing their progress to others in a socially reinforcing atmosphere. ExSEL students continue to be mentored through the fall semester with both academic advisement and a freshman success course (McDade, Brown, Williams, & Poe, 1994).

### *Specific Goals and Objectives of the Retention Program*

ExSEL exists to prepare students for their freshman year by strengthening their competencies in reading, writing, quantifying, and studying. While the program specifically targets students with entering ACT composite scores below 16, it has appealed to others who are conditionally admitted, but who recognize their need to enhance their skills.

From the institution's perspective, the goal of ExSEL is to increase student persistence. From the student's perspective, the goal of ExSEL is to

Jacksonville State University's ExSEL Program received the 1996 Noel-Levitz RETENTION EXCELLENCE AWARD. Only 9 institutions in the United States received this distinction.

increase their academic and self-confidence. For most students ExSEL is a route toward college graduation, even for those who do not enroll at JSU after the ExSEL experience.

Objectives of ExSEL include the following:

- To develop student competence in basic and study skills.
- To ease students through the transition from high school to college.
- To accelerate student progress through the core curriculum.
- To increase student graduation rate.

## **Results and Outcomes for Students and the Institution**

*To develop student competence in basic and study skills.*

Assessment of ExSEL includes total competencies reached in each course, ACT retest scores, and tracking of students throughout their years at JSU. Virtually all students complete enough competencies to earn at least a "C" in each course, while significant improvements in ACT subtest scores in reading and writing are seen. Compared with other JSU students, ExSEL students earn more hours and higher grade point averages through the first four semesters.

The first two groups were given a post ACT Assessment after ExSEL. The class of '93 was required to reach a composite of 16 to enter JSU. Seventy-five percent of them did, with a mean improvement of 2.375. Post ACT Assessments were used for placement only on the class of '94, so the motivation to succeed was less. Still, 44% improved with a mean improvement of 2.43. Combining both groups, 38 out of 64 students showed higher ACT Composite scores with improvement ranging from 1--6 points and a mean improvement of 2.3. For the class of '95 COMPASS, an ACT product, was used because of its diagnostic capability. Insufficient data are available from institutional norms or national norms to make pre-post comparisons cross-referencing the ACT.

ExSEL students have a high persistence rate, significantly better than JSU students at large.

University-wide persistence rates through the freshman year are 80%; beginning the third semester, 64%. Also ExSEL students' GPAs are higher than average freshman and sophomore GPAs.

*To ease students through the transition from high school to college.*

Much of the literature on student persistence points to adjustment difficulties of various kinds which cause students to drop-out. While some of these difficulties are academic, most are related to social and personal adjustment. Strong study habits, including SAFMEDS practice, time management skills, and collaborative learning styles are developed during ExSEL. In the fall semester following ExSEL students take LS 102: Freshman Orientation from one of the ExSEL team. There they develop additional skills in the adjustment process, while they continue to be mentored by ExSEL staff and have several classmates from ExSEL. Ninety-one percent of ExSEL students have earned at least a "B" in LS 102.

Multiple converging evidence indicates that ExSEL students adjust well to the college experience. At end of ExSEL evaluations students report positive feelings toward the coming year; on the post-ExSEL College Expectancy Scale, they show fewer apprehensions of college that when ExSEL began. During individual conferences with students each semester at midterm, adjustment difficulties are discussed. In consultation with ExSEL staff students typically report resolution of such conflicts. On essays regarding the freshman experience in freshman composition classes ExSEL students report greater overall satisfaction with JSU than other freshmen.

*To accelerate student progress through the core curriculum.*

Because progress through the core curriculum is at the student's option, JSU suffers from many students delaying completing tough subjects early in their academic careers. Due to extensive mentoring, ExSEL students are more likely to register for core courses in their first two years and to make satisfactory progress toward completion of the core. By the end of the fourth semester 84% percent have completed the

composition requirements and 55% percent, the mathematics requirements.

Representative Standard Celeration Charts kept by ExSEL students of their LS095 (Reinforcing Communication Skills) SAFMEDS accompany this article. One competency in the course is to master a deck of 90 basic writing terms at a rate of 60 correct per minute. These Charts take on a new meaning in light of the grade students earned in subsequent EH 101 (Freshman Composition). Those students whose celerations were the steepest earned "A" or "B", compared with those who did not reach mastery at all or whose celerations were less steep.

### *To Increase Student Graduation Rate*

Since the first class of ExSEL students is in its junior year, graduation rates have not yet been affected. Persistence of these students through their sixth semester is 52 percent, however, which is significantly higher than the entering cohort of all full-time freshmen from 1993. Compared with overall university persistence through the freshman year of 80%, ExSEL students stay at a rate of 91%. While 64% of JSU students return for their sophomore year, 75% of ExSEL students do. Those ExSEL students who do leave, do so for personal rather than academic reasons. Four students have left due to illness, but expect to return; one member of the first class has died.

### **Potential for Adaptation by Other Institutions**

The ExSEL model could be easily adapted in other settings. As to the key variables for the program's success, there are at least three. First, students develop COMPETENCE in the basic skills of reading, writing, and quantifying. If they do not reach a minimum number of prescribed competencies in each course, but are making strong progress, they may be conditionally admitted, but required to continue to work in the skills area. Thus a student who completes ExSEL without mastering all the writing competencies necessary to succeed in EH 101 will earn a "no credit" grade in the course, Learning Skills 095 and retake 095 in the fall semester. That student will begin with the

competencies already reached and continue working until the required number are mastered. How do we know what constitutes competency? For years we have tracked student success in subsequent courses to determine exactly what is necessary. Other institutions might set other standards to suit their students' optimal progress through the core curriculum.

Second, each student receives individual attention and mentoring. The ExSEL team designs their fall schedules with teachers who are the best matches for them. As they progress through the university, they continue to meet with ExSEL staff as long as necessary for academic advisement, even after they have a declared major. At midterm each semester, the team checks ExSELEes' academic progress and assists them with tutors or other support services. ExSEL students bond with ExSEL staff during their summer experience and know where they can turn for true academic support.

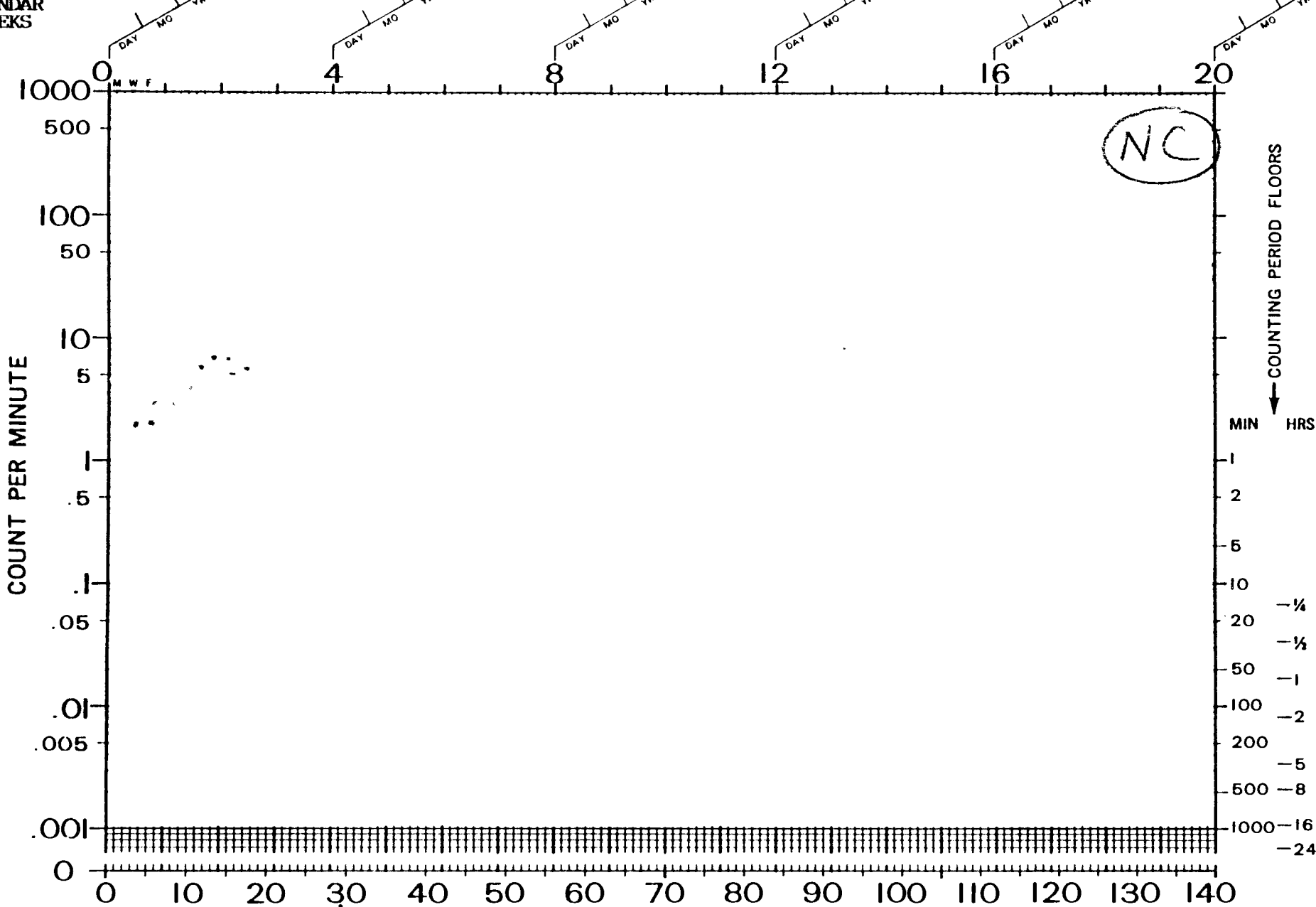
Third, students develop close friendships which lead to academic and personal networking. The ExSEL teams show them how to use SAFMEDS, as well as to organize and implement study groups, encouraging them to develop these in all classes. True cooperative learning occurs, encouraging students to continue with the ExSEL motto in the fall: Success Breeds Success.

### **References**

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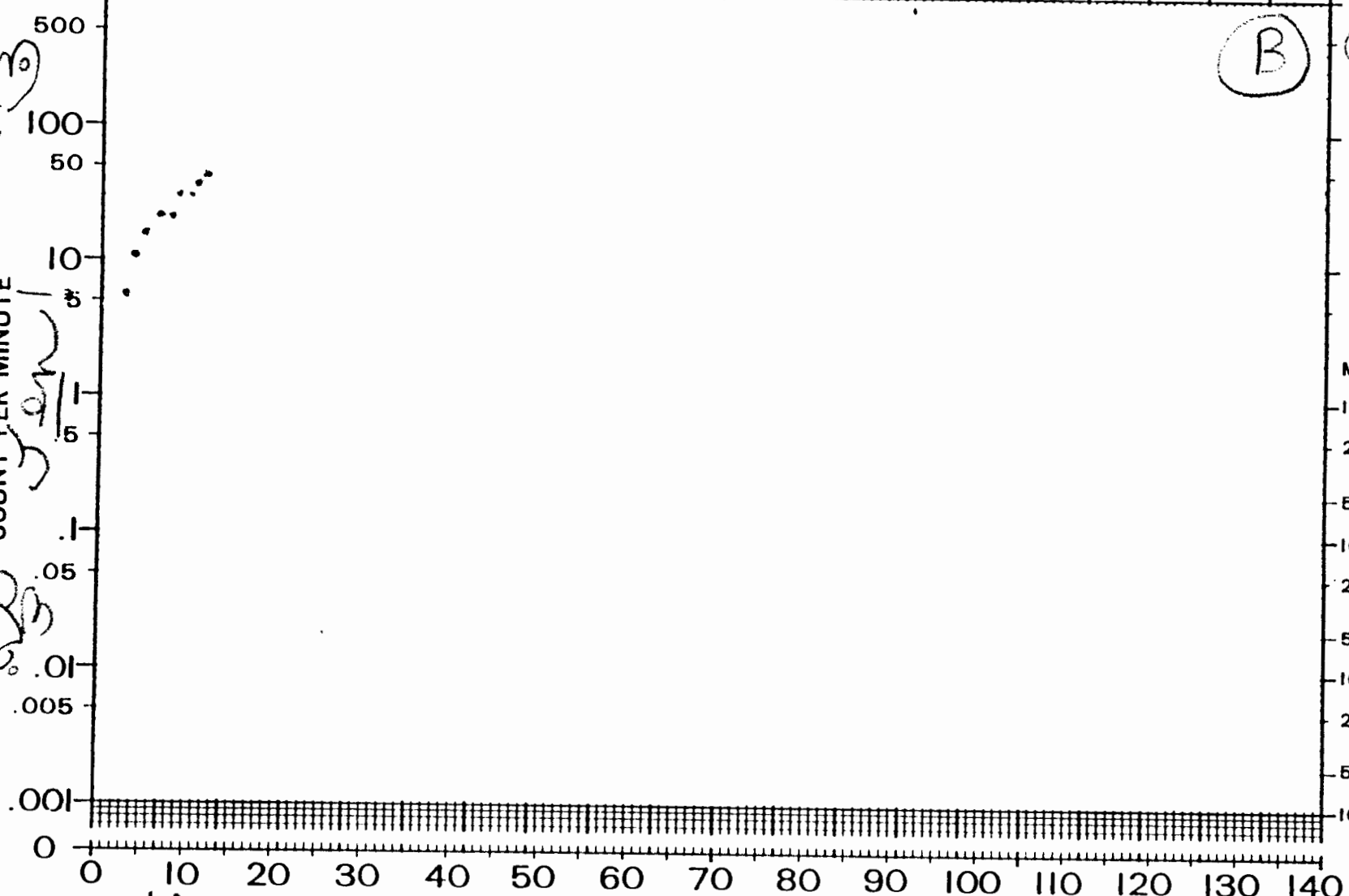
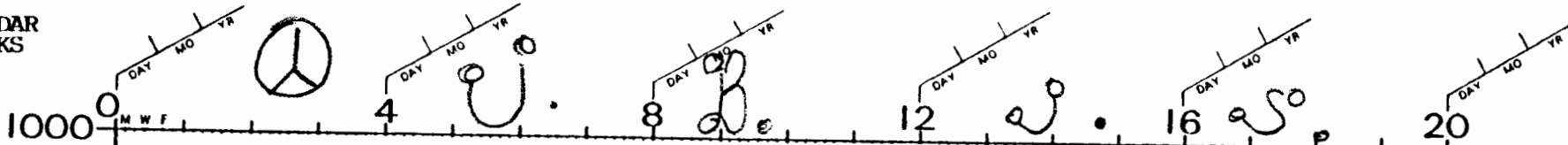
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CALENDAR WEEKS



CEM                      JB                      DAVEN                      SAMPEDS  
 SUPERVISOR              ADVISER              MANAGER              BEHAVIOR              AGE              LABEL              COUNTED  
 JSU                      CII                      SAMPEDS  
 DEPOSITOR              AGENCY              TIMER              COUNTER              CHARTER

CALENDAR WEEKS



17

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(B)

CEM  
SUPERVISOR  
J.S.V.  
DEPOSITOR

A.B.  
ADVISER  
C.I.X.  
AGENCY

MANAGER

SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS

TIMER COUNTER

JENNIFER  
BEHAVIOR

AGE LABEL

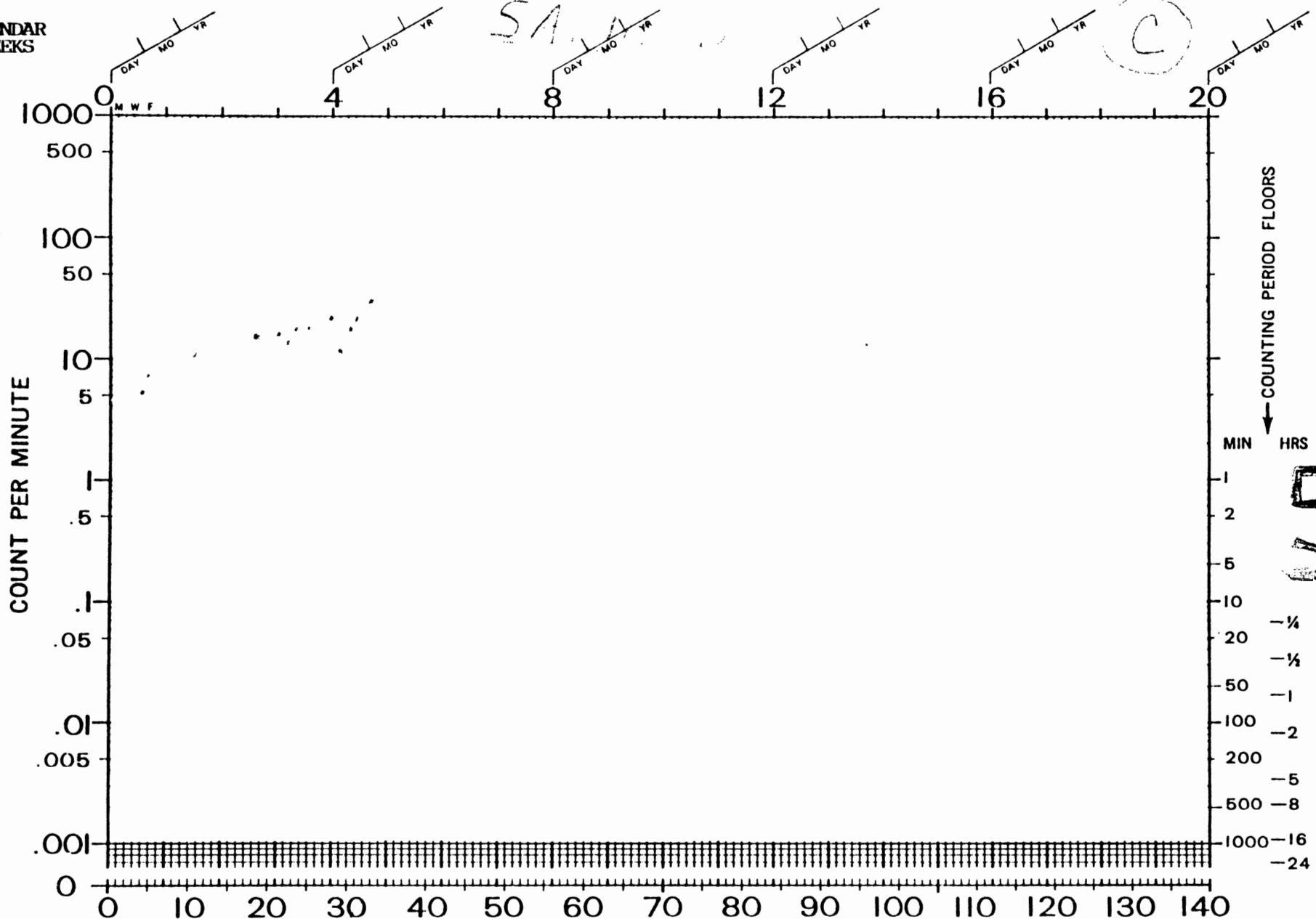
SAFEMEDS  
COUNTED

CHARTER

CALENDAR WEEKS

S.A.A.

(C)



81

MIN HRS

C.I.V.	J.P.								
SUPERVISOR	ADVISER	MANAGER			BEHAVIOR	AGE	LABEL	COUNTED	
J.									
DEPOSITOR	AGENCY	TIMER	COUNTER	CHARTER					