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How does a four year degree become a six-and-a-half year degree?

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How does a four year degree become a six-and-a-half year degree?

10:00 AM on May 12, 2017 by **Ed Venit**

It's no secret that college costs a lot.

One good way to help minimize the expense is to do everything in our power to shorten the total time it takes for students to get a degree. We might not have much latitude to reduce the price of a year's tuition, but we can absolutely do more to control the total amount that an individual student pays by reducing unnecessary delays and roadblocks along the path to getting a degree.

Reducing time to degree isn't a panacea. Some students have obligations to work or family that prevent them from taking a full-time course

load, putting a ceiling on their pace to degree. Furthermore, shortening time to degree doesn't address the root cause problems associated with rising tuition costs, so there is a fixed upper limit to the cost savings, even for full-time students.

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That said, there are concrete and avoidable reasons why students who should be graduating in four years are not. We recently came across a **study** from the University of Wisconsin-Madison that attempted to document these factors and quantify their impact in terms of the average number of months each event added to a degree. Here are some of the biggest culprits:

- **Choosing certain majors.** Some majors often require more than the traditional 120 credits to graduate. For example, UW students in STEM majors took an average of two additional months to graduate. Nursing, Engineering, and Education students also took longer to finish.
- **Enrolling in fewer than 15 credits per term.** Each part-time term added an average of 2.6 months to degree. Similarly, full-time students that attempted an average of 12 credits instead of 15 credits took 4.5 months longer to complete.
- **Failing a class.** Each failed credit adds three-quarters of a month to a degree, meaning that each F in a three-credit course extends time to degree by a little over two months.
- **Stopping out.** On average, stop-outs took 1.4 additional years to complete. While these students were not paying tuition while stopped out, they suffered the opportunity cost of not being employed in a bachelor-degree paying job during that time.

These are not uncommon events, and the cumulative impact is staggering. Consider this: A UW biology major who averages 12 credits per term, fails a couple of classes, takes one part-time term, and stops out once would be expected to take *six-and-a-half years* to graduate!

In order to provide transparency to its students, The University of Texas at San Antonio has begun publishing the **average additional loan burden** students would incur for taking more than four years to finish. If our hypothetical biology major took an extra 2.5 years to finish at UTSA, she would end up with an added \$8,000 in loans in addition to whatever out-of-pocket tuition she was paying. This isn't even the full extent of her added cost, as she would also be missing out on whatever salary that she could have earned during that time. The true cost of these commonplace delays in graduation would be in the tens of thousands of dollars.

What can we do about this? Without a doubt, some of the reasons for these delays sit squarely on the student. But plenty of others could be assuaged or eliminated through proactive efforts from the institution.

Our student success research team spent a considerable amount of time last summer compiling every student success best practice we've ever published, an effort that resulted in the **Student Success Best Practice Library**. The Library covers a wide range of topics including special **advising**, **early intervention**, and **career development**, but no single topic has garnered more attention from our research teams than **degree planning and progress**.

We've identified six areas where schools can have the biggest impact inflecting time to degree and gave each their own sub-category.

1. Developmental education.

Developmental courses have notoriously high failure rates, and the students who take them are, by definition, starting from behind in college. How do we help these students catch up and graduate in the shortest time possible? Note that many of these best practices were gathered from our friends in the **two-year space**, where developmental education is one of the biggest student success issues.

2. Degree planning.

As the saying goes, "failing to plan is planning to fail." What kind of structured guidance should we be providing students as they select courses and lay out long-term academic roadmaps? Of note, we have written extensively about

degree maps, a practice that is coming back into vogue with the interest building around Guided Pathways.

3. Degree progress.

As noted above, multiple small deviations such as under-loading or withdrawing from a course can add up to significant additional costs for students. This subcategory addresses how progressive institutions are working to mitigate all these factors and keep students making good progress to degree.

4. Progress incentives.

A small handful of institutions are further encouraging degree progress by rewarding positive student behavior with additional financial aid. This subcategory addresses how these progress grants can drive summer enrollment and increase the number of students taking full credit loads.

5. Capacity planning and policies.

Some capacity-constrained institutions suffer from course bottlenecks that impede student progress. This subcategory addresses how schools like these are using progressive planning policies to alleviate bottlenecks and ensure students don't need to take extra semesters to get the requirements they need.

6. Course correction.

Perhaps the most important practices are those that help off-track students get back on track. In this subcategory, you will find a wealth of innovative ways to provide students with a second chance. These practices will be of special interest to schools with large numbers of part-time and working students.

I strongly encourage you to take a few minutes to browse one or more of these subsections and consider how these ideas might be adapted for your institution. You can download the PDFs and share with your colleagues.