

Graduating on Time: Fixing a Broken System



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Recent studies show that only 1 in 3 students graduate on time. This results in average financial loss of \$60,000 every year as well as emotional issues. Research suggests that the main reasons for the graduation delay are due to failing courses, poor planning and scheduling issues. A study shows that about 89% students at CMU-Q seek for better advising system (Bilal et al. 2015). Therefore these studies confirm the existence of the problem due to graduation delay and its negative impact. This proposal addresses the problem and later on provides three possible solutions to minimize the number of graduation delay. The solutions are enhancing student academic committee, providing better course planner and training them how to use it.

Significance:

According to New York Times and completecollege.org, only 36% of Bachelor's students graduate on time.¹ At Carnegie Mellon University-Qatar, the administration claims that approximately 13% of the students aren't been able to graduate on time. While the number might seem low, but as the tuition fees are similar with the top-tier universities, students face financial as well as emotional problems by delaying their graduation. Continuous effort from the administration resulted in the lower number. But as the problem still exists, better solutions can decrease the number to minimal.

Root Causes:

To determine the root causes of the problem, I've conducted interview with the associate dean as well as different students from freshmen to seniors. Besides interview, I've also analyzed the academic report of CMU-Q from 2010- 2015. These research methods concluded that the following are the major causes of students delaying their graduation in their order of priority:

- **Poor planning:** One of the major causes of students delaying their graduation is improper planning in registering classes. Due to poor planning, Information Systems & Biological Sciences students face more problems than other majors because of the infrequent core course offering.
- **Failing core courses:** Students who fail to pass pre-requisites for advanced classes in their own major eventually fall behind.
- **Transferring Majors:** As students transfer after a semester or more, they miss core courses for their new major resulting them to delay graduation.
- **Dropping classes for better grades:** A good number of students drop classes in order to get better grades by retaking it next semester, realizing too late that the courses aren't offered next semester.
- **Integrity, suspension and sick absence:** A small number of students delay their graduation due to personal and other sudden situations.

Analyzing the Causes:

After studying the causes and discussing with administration, the causes can be categorized into following three main aspects:

1. **Educational:** The main educational cause of people delaying their graduation is *failing core or pre-requisite course* for core courses. Short interview with students failing courses concluded that their understanding capacity, absences and teaching technique of the instructor played a crucial role in failing courses.
2. **Administrative:** The administrative causes include *transferring majors, poor planning and suspension*. These causes are primarily handled by the CMU-Q organization; it plays a major role in resolving it while individual students play a minor role in it.
3. **Technical:** The technical cause primarily includes *poor course planner* that can be enhanced solely by CMU-Q IT department. The major technical issue that the students face while registering is planning courses. The current SIO course planner provides a general approach to the students irrespective of their major, minor, tracks and concentrations.

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/education/most-college-students-dont-earn-degree-in-4-years-study-finds.html?_r=0

Proposals:

After analyzing the causes, following are the proposals forwarded which are both feasible and can help students mitigate the core problems effectively.

Proposal One: Enhancing the Student Academic Committee

The Student Academic Committee (SAC) should hold focus group for courses where students are facing the most problems. The focus group will help students address the problems they face during class and possibly suggest solutions which can possibly resolve them. The SAC should organize the suggested solutions and the report should be forwarded to the responsible personals.

Proposal Two: Implementing Personalized Course Planner

According to Bilal et al. (2015) about 89% of the students seek for better advising and course planner. Adding into that, many students I've talked to are unaware about the access to their academic audit. As students aren't aware about their requirements, they fail to plan their schedule according to their needs. This eventually results them to miss pre-requisite for various core courses.

The screenshot shows the 'Academic Audit On line' interface. It has a header with 'College', 'Major', and 'Catalog Year' fields. Below the header, the user's name 'MOHAMMED ZAKARIA' is displayed. The main section is titled 'Course-Requirement Matchings' and lists requirements for a BS in Information Systems, 2013-Qatar. It includes sections for 'INFORMATION SYSTEMS CORE' and 'DISCIPLINARY CORE' with specific course numbers and status (e.g., 'unfilled course').

Fig (a): CMU audit website

The screenshot shows the 'Carnegie Mellon SIO' interface. It has a header with 'Academic Info', 'Course Schedule', 'Finances', and 'My Info' tabs. Below the header, the user's name 'MOHAMMED ZAKARIA' is displayed. The main section is titled 'Semester Schedule' and shows a grid for the Spring 2016 term. The grid lists courses and their status (e.g., 'unfilled course') for each day of the week.

Fig (b): CMU SIO website planner

In academic audit website for students shown in fig (a), students get to know the courses they have completed and courses they need to take. However students have to use SIO website in fig (b) to plan and register for their classes which is completely an independent website from their audit. Therefore, students unaware about the audit take many unrelated courses instead of their requirements.

The new SIO should have better course planning system synchronized with their audit. It should provide the students with templates for relevant courses they're eligible to take through audit course relevance ranking system. As a result, students should be able to receive personalized advising and course planner rather than general preferences. Students should also be having their advising council from the new SIO that improves the advising process.

Proposal Three: Initiating the Freshmen Training Program

Alike Information Systems seminar courses taught in freshmen year, other majors should also include training for students. These courses will provide an idea of tracks or concentrations, different minors students can take, use of course planner, academic audit and other important aspects.

Next Steps:

In order to initialize the provided proposals, the authority should focus on the following steps:

- First step would be organizing list of courses students face most challenges and identifying the frequency of the problem.
- Second step would be to let the Student Academic Committee know about the challenging courses and arrange focus group for those classes.
- Third step can be prototyping a better schedule planner synchronized with academic audit in order to provide individualized advising.
- The final step should be to contact the head advisors and department heads for all the majors about initiating the Freshmen Training Program.

References:

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