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THE HIGH PRICE OF NOT COMPLETING COLLEGE IN FOUR YEARS

Most students take longer to graduate, so schools are trying to do something about that

By Lisa Ward
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How can you save over \$20,000 on college costs? Graduate on time.

At four-year schools, only about 40 percent of full-time students graduate on time, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education.

For some students, it is because they sign up for too few courses in certain semesters and don't earn enough credits in time. Other students can enroll in too many courses that don't count toward a degree. In still other cases, students have to work to cover their expenses, which sometimes interferes with studies.

Such delays add up. An additional year of school in a public four-year college will cost \$22,826, on average, according to the nonprofit Complete College America. Then there is lost income to consider. Students who stay in school an additional year miss out on about \$45,327 in salary, on average.

All told, Complete College America estimates that an extra year of college can cost as much as \$68,153.

More colleges and universities are trying to improve their on-time graduation rates. The move, some say, is a response to the rising cost of tuition and stagnating family incomes. But it also makes financial sense for the schools. When students are on track to graduate on time, dropout rates fall and revenues rise.

Many new initiatives urge students to earn more credits each semester. To that end, a number of colleges now charge a flat rate for a semester, rather than charge by the credit. Adams State University in Alamosa, Colo., revised its tuition policy so that students pay the same for 20 credits as they pay for 12, and have an incentive to take a heavier course load. Also, its tuition won't increase for four consecutive years for full-time students.

"We are trying keep the cost of education as low as possible," says Karla Hardesty, director of marketing and enrollment management at Adams State.

The average course load for degree-seeking undergraduates at Adams State rose 11 percent between the fall of 2010 and the fall of 2015, according to school officials. The university's goal is to have more than 20 percent of its students graduate in four years by 2020. For the freshman class of 2009, the rate was 11 percent.

FOCUS ON 15

Students at many colleges take 12 credits a semester, or 24 credits a year, which is considered full time by federal financial-aid programs. But students usually need 30 credits a year to earn the necessary 120 credits to graduate on time.

If students start taking more credits from the outset, education experts say, it sets a precedent that is likely to stay with them throughout their time at school. Students at four-year schools who took 15 credits their first semester or 30 credits their first year were more likely to graduate than students who attempted 12 or 24 credits, according to a recent study of data from Tennessee public colleges.

"The longer students stretch out their studies, the more life intervenes and the more likely students won't finish," says Davis Jenkins, co-author of the [study](#) and senior research scholar at Columbia University's Teachers College. The report also found that students who stayed the course paid \$52 (14 percent) less per credit and \$13,310 (20 percent) less per degree.

Some states have made enrolling in 30 credits a year a requirement to receive state scholarship money. New York state's Excelsior scholarship, included in the 2018 state budget, requires recipients to enroll in 30 credits. Indiana's 21st Century Scholar and Frank O'Brian Grant, both approved by the Indiana General Assembly in 2013, also predicate funding on earning 30 credits.

Miami-based Florida International University this fall will start encouraging students to consider earning credits in summer. Promoting a summer semester may offer more flexibility for students who work and attend classes, says Elizabeth Bejar, vice president for academic affairs.

Congress made it possible for more students to attend summer sessions when it signed an appropriations package last month that included an amendment to the Higher Education Act allowing students to use Pell Grants year round.

GUIDED PATHWAYS

In another approach to helping more students graduate in four years, some schools now require, or encourage, picking an area of study as early as possible. Degree maps, which show all of the courses required for each major (in the right sequence), are promoted on some college websites and through introductory courses.

"Students should be clear on what to do and when, not just handed a book and told to figure it out," says Courtney Brown, vice president at the Lumina Foundation, a private foundation that works to make higher education more available.

One big reason for failing to graduate on time, experts say, is that certain required courses aren't offered frequently enough for all students who need them to enroll.

Temple University, based in Philadelphia, works to prevent such situations with its Fly in 4 Graduation Partnership, an agreement that offers certain safeguards but requires students to be proactive in their class scheduling. To participate, students must be full-time freshmen or transfer students who begin in a fall semester, and they must agree to complete 30 credits a year. The students are also required to meet with an academic adviser at least

once a semester, register early each semester and let advisers know immediately when a required course isn't available so that a possible solution can be found.

For a Fly in 4 student who meets all of his or her obligations but still fails to graduate on time because a required course wasn't available at the necessary time, Temple says the student can complete his or her degree requirements fee and tuition free. But if students fail to meet the terms of the contract, Temple won't pay for any additional time in school.

For the first Temple students who signed the contract, in 2014, 61.6 percent are on track to graduate on time in 2018. For those who declined, 46.5 percent are on track, school officials say.

DATA ANALYTICS

Another tool being used to keep students on track: data analytics. At Georgia State University, in Atlanta, about 100 full-time advisers receive electronic alerts when students enroll in the wrong course, a course out of sequence or receive a bad grade. The advisers must then reach out to students within 48 hours.

"We are trying to approximate elite institutions that notice and redirect students when they make a bad choice," says Timothy Renick, vice provost at Georgia State, where 80 percent of students work full or part time.

The school's four-year graduation rate has doubled to 29 percent over five years. Moreover, the average bachelor's degree student is graduating with eight fewer credit hours than five years ago, translating into about \$15 million in savings for this year's graduating class, Mr. Renick says.

The University of Texas in Austin has used data from academic transcripts and personal records to identify the 25 percent of students least likely to graduate on time. Those most at risk are put in the University Leadership Network, which pays students \$5,000 each year if they earn 25 percent of their degree requirements and maintain a 2.0 grade-point average, school officials say. Students also are required to attend weekly seminars and do internships on campus.

David Laude, senior vice provost at the University of Texas, says the school's four-year graduation rate rose to 61 percent in 2016 from 50 percent in 2011. The goal for this year's graduating class was 70 percent, he says, but the school doesn't know yet if it met that goal.

"It creates a network on campus," he says. "So when students have a problem, they seek out someone at UT rather than taking a bus home."