

Why Students Don't Graduate On Time—If At All

Over the last few decades, college has become far more accessible—but earning a degree is still elusive for many. Although the vast majority of incoming college students are confident they'll graduate in four years,⁴ just 41% of students manage to do so in four years⁵ and 58% in six.⁶ This rate drops to just 30-35 percent for students who are older, attend part-time, or don't have a typical high school diploma.⁷ These low rates are attributable in part to factors within the control of students, but also to structural barriers that institutions ought to remove.

STUDENT CHALLENGES: SHIFTS IN DEMOGRAPHICS AND NEEDS

College was previously an institution targeted only at an elite, homogenous few. That made it easy to develop a one-size-fits-all model, and demand that students “make or break it.” Today, college students are increasingly diverse—as is the potential college experience itself. Roughly three-quarters of today's college students are “post-traditional” meaning they juggle some combination of families, jobs, and school while commuting to class while only a quarter attend school full-time, live on or near campus, and have tuition paid for by their parents.

Students struggle and often drop out of college for three primary reasons:



FINANCIAL:

although college is vital and accessible for so many more students than ever before, tuition has soared. As a result, 40 percent of all college students work at least 30 hours a week—and grade-point averages tend to decrease as the number of hours worked increases.⁸



ACADEMIC:

Many students arrive with gaps in their knowledge or preparation that make it challenging for them to persist through the academic, logistical, and financial hurdles that college presents, let alone complete their degree. At least half a million students a year are placed into remedial courses, including at least a third of low-income and minority students.⁹



SOCIAL:

College students often don't feel adequately supported to transcend financial and academic challenges. More than 40 percent of college dropouts surveyed by the University of Washington said they felt isolated or alone compared to one in five who said they had ran into financial problems or worried about falling too deeply into debt.

4. <https://www.eri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2016.pdf>
 5. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/19/just-41percent-of-college-students-graduate-in-four-years.html>
 6. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport16/>
 7. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/breaking-with-tradition.pdf>
 8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/education/edlife/6-reasons-you-may-not-graduate-on-time.html>
 9. <https://hechingerreport.org/colleges-enroll-students-arent-prepared-higher-education/>

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS: COMPLEXITY, REGISTRATION CHALLENGES, AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

In addition, colleges and universities present structural barriers to students that slow down their progress or sometimes stop it entirely. A given university's schools and departments are often run in a siloed way, as are support services and resources, making them difficult to navigate within—let alone across. Indeed, college itself has also become more complicated even for the most well-prepared student, with an exciting but often bewildering array of expectations and options for students to pursue. For example, at large state schools like the University of Michigan and Arizona State University, students choose from more than 250 majors.¹⁰ UCLA offers 125 majors, 90 minors, and more than 3,800 courses across 109 different departments.¹¹ Beyond academics, students' options expand even further: one in 10 undergraduates now participate in study abroad programs¹² and more than half participate in an internship at some point in their college career.¹³

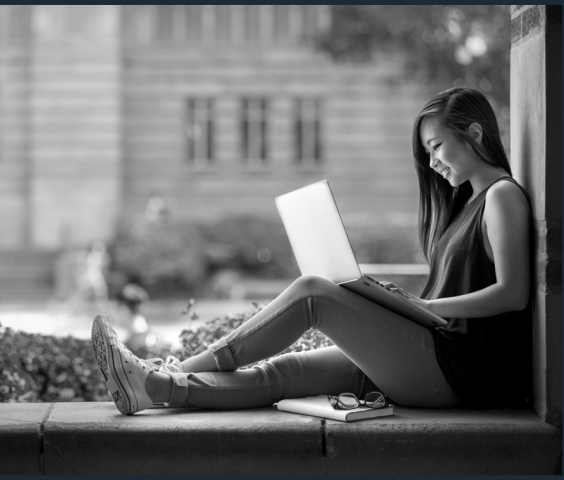
Fundamentally, many students take either insufficient credits at a time, with just 12 credits per semester counted as “full-time” but 15 per semester required to graduate with 120 credits on an eight-semester, four-year timeline; on the flip side, many bachelor's degree candidates actually tend to accrue too many credits, graduating with an average of 136.5 units.¹⁴ Some of this is driven by changing majors, which about a third of students pursuing associate's or bachelor's degrees do at least once.¹⁵ Increasing interest in certain majors and subjects exacerbates the challenge: for example, despite massive increases in the number of computer science majors nationwide, and demand for computer science courses by many students from other majors, the number of tenured faculty in the subject has not risen accordingly.¹⁶ As a result, students are left in the lurch. Last year at the University of Pennsylvania—where the number of students majoring in computer science tripled in a decade from 250 students in 2007 to 800 in 2017¹⁷—a 150-student Applied Machine Learning course ended up with a 377-student wait list.¹⁸

Ultimately, the pathway to a degree—let alone a career—is unstructured and confusing at best, and nearly impossible to attain at worst. “To remain competitive, most colleges want to provide all of the programs that students like, so there's actually an embarrassment of choices,” Dr. Anthony Carnevale, research professor and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, told GoodCall News. “When 60% of the courses are not in your major and aren't relevant, this sort of cafeteria-style offering causes people to get lost in the maze of classes, and they end up not finishing.”¹⁹



10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/choosing-one-college-major-out-of-hundreds.html>
 11. <http://www.ucla.edu/about/facts-and-figures>
 12. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/11/13/study-abroad-numbers-continue-grow-driven-continued-growth-short-term-programs>
 13. <https://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2017/publication/executive-summary/2017-nace-student-survey-executive-summary.pdf>
 14. http://www.completecollege.org/state_data/
 15. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434.pdf>
 16. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/24/technology/computer-science-courses-college.html>
 17. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2017/04/cis-coding-intro>
 18. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2018/11/upenn-engineering-computer-science-course-waitlist-penn>
 19. <https://www.goodcall.com/news/college-students-graduate-010855>

Indeed, courses are frequently difficult to register for, unavailable at the times that work for students, or don't have enough space for all the students who are interested in or need that course to graduate. As the Southern Regional Education Board put it:



The challenge is for all students to have the courses they need — when they need them — and to make them accessible. This involves not only complicated formulas based on the number of students needing each course among hundreds of courses, but also the task of securing appropriate-sized and appointed space for the classes. Some students have difficulty graduating on time because the courses they need are not available in a workable sequence. Missing only one prerequisite course can cost a student an entire year — and can lead to their frustration, longer time to degree completion, or possibly dropping out.²⁰

Although college and university advisors are charged with the task of helping students navigate, their caseloads tend to be high, on average, between 300 and 450 students per advisor. On many campuses, advisors are saddled with outdated tools for helping students navigate their course options. As a result, students either receive shallow support, with only the most motivated students getting the kind of deep support that so many others really do need. This hits first-generation students especially hard: many feel anxious and isolated, but despite their need, they are less likely to seek out faculty and advising support.²¹

Without strong support nor the tools to navigate through to completion on their own, some students flounder. On-time graduation rates are relatively high at elite private institutions and public universities, but far lower at two-year community colleges (see graphic), where just under 20 percent of the 10 million students they enroll each year will earn an associate's degree within three years. "The same features that have enabled these institutions to provide broad access to college make them poorly designed to facilitate completion of high-quality college programs," explains the Community College Research Center, including "an array of often disconnected courses, programs and support services that students are expected to navigate mostly on their own."²²

As a result, more time on campus doesn't translate into better outcomes. "The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way of success," notes Complete College America, finding that an extra year to earn an associate's degree or an extra two years to earn a bachelor's degree only increases graduation rates by 4.9 percent — for both groups.²³