

The Changing Time to Degree Causes and Solutions

by Frank Daniels

The Time to Degree is one of several simplistic statistics that are used to assess the ease with which students attain their educational goals. Like the Graduation Rate, the Time to Degree can be quite deceptive. Graduation rates are overly simplistic because not every student who enrolls in an institution has a degree-based goal. This is particularly true for community college students, who may take a few classes for fun, or for the skills they represent, or in order to transfer without a degree to another institution.

The Time to Degree is the length of time (in terms of years) from first matriculation to graduation. Many years ago, when nearly all students attended college full-time and remained enrolled until they graduated, the time to degree was nearly equal to the time that the college or university scheduled for the completion of the degree. In the past fifteen to twenty years, the Time to Degree has lengthened, and this change has been a fundamental one. Some studies have thought to understand the reasons why there has been a nationwide increase in the length of time that students spend in college, while others have merely asserted that an increased Time to Degree must be something horribly negative – something for which the colleges and universities ought to be held accountable.

Consider the following quote, which originates with the National Student Clearinghouse:

“Tracking enrollment and graduation data provides a realistic picture of the postsecondary experience. Time to degree completion is a critical variable that is linked to student and institutional success and accountability, education expenditure, and time investment (*CPEC 2006*). Postsecondary research tells us that it takes an average of 55 to 57 months — from first-time enrollment to graduation — to complete a bachelor’s degree without stopping out (*Tuma and Geis 1995; NCES 2003*).”¹

The first sentence is broadly believed to be true. This is to say that one ought to be able to discern *something* by examining students’ enrollment patterns. However, the reasons why students might take time off from their college educational experience have grown in number over the past thirty years. By looking at Time to Degree alone, it is impossible to tell whether someone had to work full time for one year or longer in order to afford returning to college. It is also impossible to tell whether someone took time off, or reduced the number of credits per semester, because they chose to raise a family. Years ago, the typical student completed his/her education before making other life decisions, but this is no longer true. The Time to Degree and Graduation Rate statistics also cannot distinguish between family and other background factors, such as success in high school. We can tell that it is taking students longer to graduate, but without learning why this is happening, we are unable to draw rational conclusions about what directions to take.

¹ “Time To Degree Study,” Postsecondary Education Research, National Student Clearinghouse, 2008.

Without understanding why Time to Degree might increase, one might offer up a solution such as requiring that the number of credits for an associate or bachelor's degree be reduced to a specified number (60 and 120 are popular). However, any application of that sort should first require some understanding of the causes of increased Time to Degree. Arguing about cause is always difficult; as a result, we will look at several deeply-layered factors which often overlap.

The Causes of Increased Time to Degree

According to a recent report from the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan, the "...increased time to degree has been associated with slower accumulation of degree credits, not an increase in the level of credit attainment. That students are accruing credits more slowly implies deferral of the higher wages associated with college completion, lowering the rate of return to college, and reductions in the availability of college-educated workers in the labor market."²

There are two phenomena here: the accumulation of credits without crossing any further benchmarks (i.e., degrees) and the accumulation of fewer credits per term and per year. The increased role of the community college in higher education has contributed to the increased time to completion of a bachelor's degree. The same report notes that, "At a descriptive level, students starting at community colleges are considerably less likely to complete than students starting at four-year institutions in the public and private sectors."³ Much of this appears to be connected with the financial demography of the student population, although some of this increased role relates to preparedness.

This is borne out in data examined by Jobs for the Future, an organization that is working together with the Lumina Foundation to develop strategies for increased degree attainment. They report:

"The average time to completion for a student who transfers to a Bachelor's degree-granting institution from a community college is 16 months longer than a student who began at such an institution. Nontraditional students, including those who delayed initial enrollment, attend part-time to work while enrolled, or have a family, are the students least likely to complete a degree in five years."⁴

Just as Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner report, this increased time to degree is not always related to an increase in the number of credits taken by the average student. In fact, their report indicates that as early as 1992, the American college student was choosing to take fewer courses per term. As Jobs for the Future suggest, the growing presence of the community college mission has led to more students extending the Time to Degree. This is particularly noteworthy among students over the traditional age, for whom some additional time is added.

² "Understanding the Decrease in College Completion Rates and the Increased Time to the Baccalaureate Degree," by Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner, *Population Studies Center Research Report 07-626*, University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, November, 2007, pp. 3-4.

³ Ibid, pp. 8-9.

⁴ "Time to Completion," <http://www.jff.org/projects/current/education/time-completion/928>

The authors of “Understanding the Decrease” continued by examining the possibility that students might be struggling to complete the courses that they take – leading to longer times to degree. What they discovered, however, was that, “We have explored changes in the ratio of attempted credits to credits completed and find only a modest increase; these changes suggest attempted credits have not risen appreciably over time and are not large enough to explain much of the increase in time to degree.”⁵ They further found no empirical evidence that an increase in science and math majors – fields that often require more study for students – would account for the longer completion times.

Instead, what they found was that two factors together appear to explain most adequately the change in Time to Degree. These were the composition and academic preparedness of students entering college and the resources to pay for college costs (including the availability of financial aid). Notice that there has been no finding that increased credit requirements may cause students to drop out or to take longer to finish.

Composition and Preparedness

The average college student is less prepared for college-level work now than in decades past, leading to an increased necessity for remediation. The shift in the preparedness of the first-time college student may stem in part from the widening gap between salaries for high school graduates and college graduates. This factor has led to students seeking college degrees in this generation who would not have done so previously:

“...demand-induced shifts in the characteristics of new college entrants and students at the margin of college completion, changes in the supply-side of higher education reducing resources per students, and increased difficulties in paying for college that may lead to increased employment and reductions in the rate of collegiate attainment.”⁶

According to US Census data, in 1947 just over 50% of the population aged 25-29 years had high school diplomas, while roughly 5% of that group had earned bachelor’s degrees. Since 1980, the high school graduation figure has remained between 85% and 88%, while the portion of that age group attaining bachelor’s degrees has risen somewhat steadily to 28%.⁷ Thus, a greater percentage of students are seeking higher educational opportunities than ever before. As opportunities arose for less affluent students to enter college and to obtain degrees, the overall education level in the United States has risen. However, this means that more underprepared students are entering college than did so just 25 years ago.

Furthermore, the composition of the student population includes people over the traditional age who are returning to pursue further education. This is not so prevalent at universities but is noteworthy at the community colleges, which target such students as part of their missions. These students often require some form of remediation before entering their proposed degree programs. They may succeed at different rates, many of them are employed full-time, and as a

⁵ Op. Cit, Bound, p. 13.

⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

⁷ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf>

result they may wind up taking longer to graduate. As one report points out, these are the issues involved whenever developmental work in college is necessary:

“One of the recurring criticisms of developmental education is that these programs encourage students not to put forth their best effort in high school because they can make up the work when they get to college. This, in essence, forces taxpayers to pay twice for students to learn the same thing. However, a report on developmental programs in Nevada indicated that only 19.6% of students enrolled in developmental courses in higher education in summer and fall 1999 were recent high school graduates (University and Community College System of Nevada, 2000). A report issued by the Institute for Higher Education Policy indicates that those involved in developmental education are as likely to be over age 22 as 22 or younger, and more than a quarter are over age 30 (Woodham, 1998). Clearly, developmental courses are serving populations beyond the recent high school graduates who failed to apply themselves in high school (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).”⁸

However, it must be noted that the preparedness-related issues actually explain dropout rates far more readily than they correlate with an increase in Time to Degree. The dominant contributor seems to be the changes in the average student’s financial status. Gone are the days when only the wealthy attended college. Since the advent of the Pell Grant in 1972, and the development of state financial aid funds, colleges have opened themselves up more and more to students who previously could not have afforded to attend. America has seen an increase in the effect that finance-related issues have on the Time to Degree.

Adequate Resources

The major contributing factor to the discovered increase in Time to Degree appears to be funding. According to a 2004 report by the Education Trust, the six-year graduation rate of students from low-income families is 54%; for high-income families the rate is 77%.⁹ The author attributes a portion of the lower achievement rate to a lack of preparedness stemming from the quality of the schools that they attend, and part of it is due to lack of resources – just as “Understanding the Decrease” indicates. The Education Trust now reports that the portion of a needy student’s costs paid by the Pell/BEOG grant has dramatically reduced from over 80% to 36%.¹⁰ It is no wonder, then, that many students are choosing to work long hours in order to pay for the higher education that they value.

The importance of having adequate resources to pay for tuition, fees, and textbooks, is supported by another statistic: that of the rising number of hours worked every week by the typical college student. This varies from state to state and institution to institution, but the results of some surveys are staggering. For example, a 2005-6 survey by Purdue University Calumet of college students in Northwest Indiana showed that 79% worked over 20 hours per week while attending

⁸ “ERIC Review: Issues in Developmental Education,” *Community College Review*, March, 2002.

⁹ “A Matter of Degrees,” by Kevin Carey, the Education Trust, May, 2004, p.2.

¹⁰ <http://www.edtrust.org/>

college, 55% worked over 30 hours per week, and 22% worked more than 40 hours per week.¹¹ The same survey showed that 54% of working students cited paying for college as a reason for their employment.

The information in Indiana coincides with the national statistics. The International Center for Educational Statistics reports that in 2007 (the most recent year available) about 46% of full-time college students had jobs. While this number remained between 46 and 52 per cent during the 2000's, that same figure was just 34% in 1970. This indicates that there is a long-term trend toward increased employment that agrees with the assessment made by Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner. The national statistics also demonstrate a trend toward longer working hours: just 10% of all full-time students in 1970 worked for at least 20 hours per week; in the 2000's, that figure hovers around 22%, with the percentage working over 35 hours per week also doubling during the same period.¹²

Now, in "The Impact of Employment during School on College Student Academic Performance," the author demonstrates statistically that every additional hour of work per week on the part of a college student corresponds to a drop in GBA that is just greater than 0.01 grade points.¹³ Thus, for those students who continue to work full time and attend college full time, there is a resulting reduction in student success.

This is likely an accumulative factor for the rising number of students who choose to work full time while taking fewer credits in college. This affects students over the traditional age somewhat more than it affects traditional students, and it affects lower-income students far more than students from affluent families. This may create a disparity between those students who start at community colleges and students who enter a university immediately after high school. One article from the Center for American Progress explains it this way, "First, since two-year college students tend to be older and come from lower-income families, the opportunity cost of their time tends to be higher. Second, many two-year college students attempt to lower the cost of foregone earnings by continuing to work and enrolling only part-time in college."¹⁴

Sugarman and Kelly (1997) learned that when a student is over the traditional age, that factor adds an average of 1.42 semesters to the student's Time to Degree. Working part time or full time and going to school part time adds on average 4.10 semesters to the student's time to degree. Once again, Time to Degree was not increased significantly by superfluous credits in the program but by the lack of availability of financial resources.¹⁵

¹¹ "Summary of the Northwest Indiana Working Student Project," by Beth Pelicciotti, Institutional Research and Assessment at Purdue University Calumet, 2006, p. 1.

¹² "College Student Employment," Contexts of Postsecondary Education, US Department of Education, 2009, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2009/section5/indicator44.asp>

¹³ "The Impact of Employment during School on College Student Academic Performance," by Jeffrey S. DeSimone, *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper* No. W14,006, May, 2008.

¹⁴ *The Other College: Retention and Completion Rates Among Two-Year College Students*, by Molly F. McIntosh and Cecilia Elena Rouse, Center for American Progress, February, 2009, p. 8.

¹⁵ An Analysis of Student Time and Credits to Degree, by Sugarman and Kelly, presented at the Association for Institutional Research Forum, May, 1997.

Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner summarize the long-term impact of increased working hours this way:

“To bound the potential effects of hours worked on time to degree, consider a student with a time budget of 60 hours per week available for course work and employment. With this fixed budget, increased hours worked necessarily reduce the time available for study. We measure the extent to which “effective time to degree,” measured as the amount of non-working time, in years, it takes each individual to obtain a baccalaureate degree out of high school, has changed over time.”¹⁶

By taking into account the time that students have to spend actively pursuing their degree goals, Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner indicate that the Effective Time to Degree actually went *down* over the twenty-year period from 1972 to 1992. For example, a student who now spends only half of the traditional time in class and studying actually graduates in less than twice the time that it would take a true “full-time student.” Thus, students who find it necessary to work more and take fewer credits may be more efficient in the long run than the student from the past who pursued the traditional “four-year” bachelor’s degree or “two-year” associate degree.

Given these findings, techniques for improved involvement and persistence may be more useful than finding ways to return to the traditional times to degree, although the so-called “Spellings Report” does propose that “States should provide ... incentive payments to institutions that significantly reduce academic attrition and increase graduation rates within the traditional period for the degree (e.g., four years for a bachelor’s degree).”¹⁷

Is Credit Creep the Culprit?

“Credit Creep” is defined by its believers as a gradual increase in the number of required credits for graduation. The believers in Credit Creep usually assert that degrees were once streamlined at 60 credits per associate degree and 120 credits per bachelor’s degree; however, they claim that colleges and universities have added superfluous credits to degree programs. This, they say, has the end result of making degrees less attainable and increasing the Time to Degree for the typical college student.

Marc Silver at National Public Radio explained the viewpoint this way, “For example, to major in English or journalism, many schools have actually increased the number of courses you have to take because they want to make the program more rigorous. That makes it harder to graduate in four years.”¹⁸

We must now ask to what extent “Credit Creep” is a factor in the increase of the Time to Degree statistic. The Lumina Foundation makes the following observation and claim:

“Many colleges and universities now have degree programs that require more than 120 credits for a Bachelor’s degree, rendering it impossible for students

¹⁶ Op. Cit., Bound, p. 41.

¹⁷ *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, Spellings Educational Commission, US Department of Education, September, 2006, p. 20.

¹⁸ “How to Earn a Degree Without Going Broke,” by Marc Silver, National Public Radio, October 24, 2006.

attending full-time to complete in four years, with implications for student and state costs per degree. Several states and systems have begun to examine degree requirements at a system- or institution-level. [A few] have conducted credit audits to identify Bachelors degree programs that exceed approximately 128 credits – a credit load that would require full-time enrollment through a tenth semester, or about five years.”¹⁹

Their hypothesis that “Credit Creep” is an identifiable factor in the increase of Time to Degree for the average college student is flawed in the following respects:

1. Laboratory classes (such as science courses) and other longer courses routinely add to the number of required *credits* without adding to the number of required full-semester *classes*. For example, an engineering degree that requires three semesters of calculus typically meets that disciplinary need via three four-credit courses. Taking UNR’s Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering as an example, we see that the Core Curriculum is modest at 33-36 credits (with the difference depending on whether ENG 101 is needed). However, this core includes three four-credit courses: two in science and one in mathematics. Two more four-credit math classes are required outside the Core. Finally, there are several discipline-specific four-credit courses, most of which are laboratory classes. Although the number of required credits is shown on the UNR website as 129, if we count courses and their labs as a single course, there are no semesters during which a student would have to take more than five full-semester courses, and the program’s recommended schedule indicates that a student who follows it completes his or her study in four years.
2. The Lumina study proposes that students should essentially be advised to take only the minimum number of credits necessary to qualify for full-time financial aid status: that is, 12 credits. However, a standard for adequate progress toward a degree has been in place for many years, with that standard of progress being 30 credits per year. By their calculations, then, ten semesters are already required at twelve credits each. Their assessment is inaccurate, for what we actually observe is that students are *choosing* to pursue their degrees at slower rates in order to make money at their part-time or full-time jobs. In the past, being a “full-time student” meant *going to school literally “all the time” without working at a job*. The fact that students are deliberately choosing other options for their valuable time is lost in the Lumina analysis.
3. Even though there are some degree programs that have a greater number of required courses, adding to the list of degree requirements does not necessarily impact the total number of credits taken. Instead, what typically happens is that the number of *free electives* is reduced while the overall number of credits for the degree remains the same. This allows less time for students to explore potential majors by taking a diverse group of courses, but general education requirements and faculty/professional career counseling are intended to assist in that task. The number of credits to degree is not increased.

Although it has been a popular mantra among states calling for “reform,” the Lumina “Credit Creep” hypothesis simply does not hold water.

¹⁹ “Degree Program Requirements,” Time to Completion, Lumina Foundation, <http://www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/>

Whence the Extra Credits

A national study conducted in 1995 by the State University System of Florida indicated that legislators and boards were responding to an increased number of credits required for baccalaureate degrees.²⁰ Usually, the increases in credits were compared to the number of required credits in the early 1970's. They found that liberal arts disciplines and those in the social sciences tended to have requirements that were at or slightly above 120 credits. The sciences and most business majors tended to require four to six credits more than their liberal arts counterparts, while majors such as education, agriculture, architecture, and engineering required the most credits.

Inflammatory statements like the following have portrayed the situation as one in which needless additional coursework is now required for degrees: "Previous studies have documented what many suspected: that there has been an upward creep in credit hours required for baccalaureate degrees. With fiscal concerns looming large, both private and public institutions are seeking to reduce costs by various methods aimed at decreasing the time spent in obtaining a degree. One obvious means of doing so is to reduce the credit hours required."²¹ The assertion that the number of additional credits has led to an increased length of Time to Degree is not supported in most cases, and few attempts have been made by the "credit creep" believers to understand the nature of these so-called "additional" credits. Naturally, colleges do not want students to take courses arbitrarily and at random.

As we have seen earlier, a larger credit requirement does not necessarily equate to a longer time requirement. Any increase in time seems to stem not from the college's requirements but from the necessities of the student's life, and in particular, from the student's choice to continue at a slower pace while working a greater number of hours each week. However, there are students, as in the Florida study, who appear to take more credits than they need. What is taking place in Nevada?

Let us take the bachelor's degree at UNLV as an example, for which the required number of credits is 124. The requirement reads, "The minimum number of semester credits required for a bachelor's degree for a student graduating under the regulations of the 2008 - 2010 Undergraduate Catalog is 124. At least half of the credits required for a baccalaureate degree at the institution must be earned at a four-year institution, except in cases where transfer agreements for specific degrees have been made between institutions."²² Is this an example of "credit creep?"

The English degree program, a typical non-science major, includes 23 credits of free (general) electives. Someone is asking whether this number could be reduced to 120, but the more appropriate question concerns whether or not the college's requirements have been "creeping" up – or whether in fact the baccalaureate degree at UNLV has been at 124 for an extended period of time without any adverse effects. Aside from the reference to transfer agreements, the language

²⁰ *Hours to Graduation: a National Survey of Credit Hours Required for Baccalaureate Degrees*, by Pitter, LeMon, and Lanham, Office of Academic Programs, State University System of Florida, May, 1996.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 10-11.

²² Undergraduate Catalog 2008-2010, UNLV.

in UNLV's 1994 catalog is identical to how it reads now. Simply put, there has been no change at UNLV in the minimum number of credits for a degree in the past generation. There has been no credit creep.

While it is likely to be true that UNLV could reduce their credit requirement to 120, the current number of 124 is clearly not an impediment toward obtaining a degree – or it would have been one sixteen or more years ago. The credit requirement is not why students are taking longer now to obtain degrees, and therefore compelling the institution to reduce the number of required credits only micromanages a policy that does not require correction.

Career Management Issues

Another issue that results in an increase both to the total number of credits taken and to the Time to Degree has little to do with a college's requirements. According to the University of Florida study from 1995, the average university student actually took 24 credits more than the required number to graduate. These excess credits essentially wound up being unused general electives. Between 4 credits and 8 credits of that excess was accounted for by students changing majors or acquiring two degrees concurrently. However, the majority of unnecessary credits were not taken because of major changes. Instead, "about half of the 24 excess hours could be eliminated by better management of the student's progress through the university. Some of the remaining excess hours are a necessary cost of students' exploration of alternative degree paths, while other hours, due to students dropping, repeating or failing courses may be susceptible to management."²³ They also found that transfer students took an additional 8 credits beyond what students who began at their institution took.

That Florida study backs up several that were done around the same time in other states. For example:

"The Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board (WSHECB, 1994) tried to identify factors which explain why some students take longer to graduate and why some accumulate large numbers of credits at the time of graduation. They found that Western Washington University students who took longer to graduate than their peers were more likely to have: (1) changed majors, (2) retaken courses to raise a grade, and (3) taken fewer than 15 credits per term."²⁴

This is not evidence of "Credit Creep" but of the phenomena that we have already observed, namely, that students whose Time to Degree is greater than four years usually have taken fewer credits per semester (mainly due to jobs) or have the career management issues that were described in the Florida study.

Conducting a study of their own during the 1994-5 academic year in Kentucky, Sugarman and Kelly examined a number of factors that might have been related to an increased Time to Graduation. Although an increase in the number of credits to graduation was on their list of possible factors, it proved irrelevant. Their statistical analysis indicated that by far the strongest factor associated with an increased Time to Degree was a reduced number of credits per

²³ "Excess Hours," *Measuring University Performance*, Issue I-5, December, 1995.

²⁴ *Op. Cit.*, Sugarman and Kelly.

semester. This factor alone accounted for over 38% of the variance in the number of semesters to graduation. The only other factors accounting for 2% or more of this variance were changes in major (5%) and low ACT composite score (2.1%).

Majors and Laboratory Courses

Sugarman and Kelly also found connections between the student’s major and the Time to Degree. Some programs – such as Pharmacy, Architecture, and Education – had requirements that went beyond 120 credits. Even so, a four-year program was recommended for some of these (including Education), while others (including the other two aforementioned) were actually programs having five-year timelines. However, they pointed out – in agreement with what was observed in Florida – that both the number of credits earned and the number of credits attempted was significantly higher than what credits were required. As an aggregate total, approximately 13 credits more were earned than required, 15 additional credits were attempted but not completed, and the typical student graduated in 4.84 years instead of 4.00 years. The additional credits account for the additional time, but again it must be noted that the time estimates varied by major, so that students in more intensive disciplines generally took longer to graduate.

Certification Requirements

Associate of Applied Science			
Agriculture	65	Human Services	64.5
Business – Accounting	60.5	Industrial Energy Efficiency	67.5
Business – Entrepreneurship	61.5	Industrial Millwright Technology	73
Business – General	60.5	Nursing	60
Computer Office Technology – GIS	60.5	Radiology Technology	64.5
Computer Office Technology – Graphic Communications	60.5	Welding Technology	75
Computer Office Technology – Information Specialist	60.5		
Computer Office Technology – Network Specialist	61.5	Associate of Arts	
Computer Office Technology – Office Technology	63.5	General	60
Computer Office Technology – Web	60.5	Agriculture	65

Specialist			
Criminal Justice – Corrections	64.5	ECE	60.5
Criminal Justice – Law Enforcement	64.5	Teaching	60.5
Diesel Technology	72	Associate of Science	
Early Childhood Education – Early Childhood Emphasis	62.5	General	60
Early Childhood Education – Infant/Toddler Education Emphasis	64.5	Agriculture	63
Electrical Systems Technology	73.5	Engineering Science	64.5
Fire Science Management	63.5	Mathematics	60

In fields such as education, the same governmental entities that have expressed outrage at what people have labeled “credit creep” are the very one who have created it. They have added state requirements such as Nevada’s NRS 396.500, which requires instruction to all students in both the US and Nevada constitutions, and NRS 396.514, 396.515, 396.5915, and 396.523, which place curricular requirements on individual programs. Since membership in certain professional organizations is also regarded as important for the status of the degree, those organizations further contribute to the additional credit requirements in these fields. For example, the state of Nevada requires prospective secondary-school teachers to have passed twenty-two credits of education courses in addition to a comprehensive major in an endorsement area.²⁵ In addition, courses in assessment, diversity, special education, and other areas may be required in order for certification by bodies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Associate Degree Requirements by Discipline

At Great Basin College, the credit requirements for the associate degrees are as follows:

The reader will notice that nearly every program having a requirement over 60.5 credits (sixty credits plus orientation) is in a technical field or a field involving specific licensure. In each case, the additional credits are required by the discipline. These are not superfluous credits that result from “credit creep.” We observe something similar at Western Nevada College, where the associate degrees requiring more than 60 credits include:

Associate of Applied Science			
Automotive Mechanics	61	Real Estate Broker	64
Construction Technology	61	Welding Technology	63
Criminal Justice – Law Enforcement	63.5	Associate of Science	
Graphic Communications	63	Biological Sciences	63
Musical Theatre	64	Computer Science	64
Nursing	71	Engineering Science	64

At the College of Southern Nevada, nearly every Associate of Applied Science degree requires more than 60 credits. A few clock in at 61 credits, but some major requirements are in the 90’s.

²⁵ Teacher Licensure, http://nvteachers.doe.nv.gov/2nd_Academic.htm

Virtually all of these in highly specialized fields such as Paramedic Medicine, Landscape Design, and Power Utility. The associate degrees at Truckee Meadows Community College are fairly well-split between those requiring 60 credits and those taking more time to complete. Again we discover that the longer programs include medical areas, technical fields, and selected other disciplines.

By major, then, certain fields themselves require more training. The community colleges in particular have aligned their training to specified needs from the businesses and agencies in the service area. Any downward adjustment to the permissible number of credits per degree would most adversely affect the disciplines for which degrees are most closely aligned to real-world necessity. This has been seen in some of the places where the 60/120 rule has been in effect.

Some Effects of 60/120 Reform

The most noteworthy state in which a 60-credit associate degree and 120-credit bachelor's degree was mandated was Minnesota, where the state mandated these numbers by law in 2007. There, legislators who believed that "credit creep" was taking place imposed a law restricting the number of required credits for the degrees, as follows:

"By January 1, 2009, the board must adopt a policy setting the maximum number of semester credits required for a baccalaureate degree at 120 semester credits or the equivalent and the number of semester credits required for an associate degree at 60 semester credits or the equivalent. The board policy may provide for a process for granting waivers for specific degree programs in which industry or professional accreditation standards require a greater number of semester credits."²⁶

Community college faculty strenuously objected to the new law. They were particularly concerned about any requirement that would restrict the Associate of Applied Science degree. Faculty members in the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences were described as being "neutral" about the change in requirements. In December, 2008, the state's Board of Trustees expressed displeasure with the negative impact that the new law would had. The following month, they directed their system chancellor to pursue avenues toward asking for the law to be repealed during the 2009 legislative session. A bill was drafted by the state senate, but this bill wound up being revised to contain a provisional exemption for all AAS degrees, as follows:

"Until July 2, 2012, an associate of applied science degree offered by a college in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is exempt from the 60-semester credit length limit for an associate degree specified in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board Policy number 3.36, part 3, subpart C. The chancellor may consider criteria for waiving the credit length limits under this board policy for emerging or innovative programs. By January 2, 2012, the Minnesota State College Faculty and the Minnesota State College Student Association must present a joint report to the house of representatives and senate committees with jurisdiction over higher education policy on a process for reviewing the credit requirements for an associate of applied science degree."

²⁶ Higher Education Funding Bill, HF 1063, ch. 144.

Since other associate degrees typically had requirements of close to 60 credits already, and since those degrees included free electives, it was the AAS degrees that were hardest hit by the new legislation. The issuance of a blanket exemption for AAS degrees resolved that problem, but the wording of the law now subjects the content of every Applied Science degree to a review by the state legislature.

Moving beyond Minnesota, the CUNY system in New York has a 60/120 policy in effect. Exceptions to the policy have been created at many of the system's institutions. Consider this wording from the College of Staten Island's website:

“Students who enter under the catalog beginning in the fall of 1996 up to the present, are required to have 120 credits for Bachelor degrees* and 60 credits for Associate degrees*. Prior to the fall 1996 catalog students were required to have 128 credits for Bachelor degrees and 64 credits for Associate degrees. (*Exceptions include: Bachelor of Science (BS): Biology, Computer Science, Engineering Science, Associate in Applied Science (AAS): Computer Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology, Medical Laboratory Technology, Nursing).”²⁷

In fact, Staten Island College grants AAS degrees in several disciplines; the only major that appears not to be exempt from the 60-credit policy is the AAS in Business. At LaGuardia Community College, associate degrees in education, engineering, nursing, physical therapy assistant, and radiologic technology are among those AAS degrees that are exempt from the 60-credit rule; CUNY LaGuardia offers no traditional technical degrees (diesel, welding, etc.).

The results of the observations in Florida in 1995 led to identical credit restrictions. Within one year, approximately 100 bachelor's degrees statewide were regarded as “exceptions” to the 120-credit rule. Most of the credit reductions that occurred eliminated one or two elective courses. The exceptions are mainly in medical, engineering, and performance disciplines.²⁸ This is likely to be the case in other systems (such as Maryland) that are in the process of making similar changes. The 60/120-credit rule has been a popular “fix” at the system and legislative levels, but it has not resulted in any significant reduction of Time to Degree for students. Why is this?

Generally speaking, programs all across the country are being properly managed by the colleges and their faculty. While there may be a few cases nationwide where a genuine case of “Credit Creep” has occurred, by and large this is not what is observed across the board. Where we encounter deliberate attempts to require colleges to reduce the number of requisite credits for degrees, there has been no demonstrated positive impact. Furthermore, since an increase in credit requirements is not one of the principal causes of the observed increase in Time to Degree, the perceived problem itself is not solved by imposing mandates.

The motivation for implementing these reductions may be noble, but the impact of the measures seems to revolve around control rather than an actual reduction of Time to Degree. Consider this quote from a 1996 report on Texas government:

²⁷ Frequently Asked Questions, Staten Island College Registrar, <http://www.csi.cuny.edu/registrar/faq.php>

²⁸ Standardizing Across Institutions, by LeMon and Pitter, University of Florida, 1996.

“State law should be amended to limit requirements for most bachelor's degrees awarded by Texas colleges and universities to 120 credit hours.

“Exceptions to this policy should be formally requested by colleges, reviewed by THECB staff and approved by the board. This process would allow for necessary exemptions to certain programs like engineering and health sciences.

“Exceptions should be limited in number and approved only after considering criteria such as accreditation and licensing standards, employment trends in various professions, and norms for similar programs at other Texas institutions and around the nation. After the initial program review and granting of exemptions, THECB should review programs every five years thereafter to ensure compliance and a continuing need for the approved exemptions.

“A cap on undergraduate credit hour requirements would force institutions to revisit program requirements that may need adjustment.”²⁹

The operative word here is contained in the last sentence, and that word is “force.” Every sentence of the recommendation is restrictive. Without understanding the reasons why students are taking longer to obtain college degrees, legislators and system administrators are being guided to the phantom scapegoat of “Credit Creep.” Yet imposing a layer of bureaucracy on higher education has not proven to have any redeeming value. Still, there must be some actual ways to address the real causes of increase in Time to Degree.

Possible Remedies

Since the largest and most important factor leading to increased Time to Degree is the necessity for students to support themselves financially in order to attend college, **increased funding** in support of student financial need from federal and state governments, and from other sources of financial aid would go a long way toward reducing the Time to Degree. In times of financial downturn, however, states are often unwilling to part with additional money, and the Pell Grant has been increasingly more inadequate.

To address the students who take credits unnecessarily, **required academic advisement** for registration may solve the problem. Colleges complain that this slows down the registration process, and that modern registration ought to take place online. However, self-advisement appears to lead to unnecessary credits. If we are unwilling to place more emphasis on advisement, then we must accept the additional time associated with those extra credits.

Greater emphasis on **dual-credit** and **advanced-placement** courses in high school would streamline the transition from high school to college for higher-level students. However, this avenue cannot be pursued by the majority of students, and the systems of higher education would be unable to implement this strategy without significant partnerships with local school districts.

Similarly, **improved high-school language and math skills** would reduce the need for remediation. However, we must be aware of the fact that remedying the above two situations would not affect the majority of students' Time to Degree.

²⁹ Disturbing the Peace: The Challenge of Change in Texas Government, Texas Performance Review, 1996, ch. 1.

Some colleges and universities now **require** an increased use of the **Summer** term for students. Students who take twenty-four credits during each of four years find themselves with only 96 credits. Requiring Summer classes appears not only to improve the student's progress toward a degree but also to reduce the amount of material that is forgotten over a prolonged Summer recess. The University of Florida currently requires that all students who enter with fewer than 60 credits take nine (9) credits of courses during Summer terms in order to graduate.³⁰ Students who take six credits each Summer would be very close to graduation with reduced per-term credit loads. However, this option seems to be most viable at larger institutions that offer a sizable number of courses during the Summer session.

Students who have difficulties making it to class because of work schedules may find the time to take **asynchronous distance education** classes. Many students are not successful with online classes, and academic advisement would be even more important if this avenue is pursued. Still, if a student takes one online class per semester that (s)he would otherwise have been unable to take, this factor would make up for much of the increase in Time to Degree.

Some systems now require that colleges implement **excess credit surcharges**. Students whose total credit count goes beyond a trigger number (such as 140) without their obtaining a degree pay more for their continued education. This is a disincentive for students to enroll in vast numbers of unnecessary credits. However, the measure is largely punitive in nature and might backfire – resulting in dropouts rather than earlier graduations.

Conclusions

There has been a noticeable increase in Time to Degree over the past fifteen to twenty years. This increase has been caused not by unnecessary increases in degree requirements but by factors external to the colleges and universities. The most important of these factors has been the interest that less affluent students have taken in pursuing college educations and the associated need for funding to continue that education. Strong academic advisement programs can resolve some of the issues, but resource-related matters will need to be addressed creatively. This cannot be accomplished by forcing credit requirements on colleges – a move that would particularly damage the AAS degrees at community colleges. Therefore, several options ought to be implemented to address the causes of the lengthening time that it takes to achieve academic success.

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³⁰ Undergraduate Catalog, see <http://www.registrar.ufl.edu/catalog/policies/regulationgraduation.html#summer>