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# Time to Degree: A Myth Demystified

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# The high cost of excess time and credits to degree

Estimated cost to average U.S. student, in attendance and lost wages, for each additional year spent in school:

**\$51,000** at 2-year public

**\$68,000** at 4-year public

**\$19 billion** estimated total cost of excess credits per year—  
nearly \$8 billion paid by students, \$11 billion by U.S. taxpayers.

Source: Complete College America, "Four-Year Myth," 2014, estimates based on U.S. institutions



# Time to Degree: A Myth Demystified

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- ▶ We question the validity and reliability of Calendar Year as a measure of time to degree, because
  - ▶ Calendar years  $\neq$  enrolled years
  - ▶ Variation of enrolled and earned units by term
  - ▶ Variation of total required units

# Trends of Student Characteristics: 2002 to 2008 First-Time Freshmen Cohorts vs. Fall 2014 Freshmen Cohort

Student Characteristics	Fall 2002-2008 Cohorts	Fall 2014 cohort
Headcount	17,680	3,422
Underrepresented minority (URM)	56.8%	72.3%
First-generation college students	61.3%	72.6%
Pell grant eligibility	47.2%	65.2%
Avg. HS GPA	3.28	3.34
Avg. SAT COMP	939	904
English/Math remediation required	70.8%	61.1%
Pre-college experience	21.4%	28.3%

# First Factor Affecting Time to Degree: Enrolled Terms vs. Calendar Years

# of enrolled terms	Graduation in calendar years							Total HC
	1-3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	6 yr	7 yr	8 yr	9> yr	
3	1							1
4	3		3	1		1		8
5	10	3	12	1	1	4	1	32
6	<b>85</b>	18	11	7	9	3	2	135
7		254	29	17	15	12	9	336
8		<b>2077</b>	102	31	27	8	10	2255
9			1381	46	31	16	19	1493
10			<b>2359</b>	201	39	19	29	2647
11				861	62	30	25	978
<b>12</b>				<b>980</b>	119	38	22	1159
13					286	20	23	329
14					<b>230</b>	40	23	293
15						76	12	88
16						<b>46</b>	21	67
17							19	19
18							14	14
19							5	5
20							3	3
21							2	2
22							1	1
<b>Total HC</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>2352</b>	<b>3897</b>	<b>2145</b>	<b>819</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>9865</b>

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## 4-year Graduates and Graduation Rate

Calendar year	2,451	13.9%
Enrolled year	2,767	15.7%
% change	12.9%	1.8%

## 6-year Graduates and Graduation Rate

Calendar year	8,493	48.0%
Enrolled year	9,044	51.2%
% change	6.5%	3.1%

Note: Enrolled year = 2 enrolled terms

# First Factor Affecting Time to Degree: Enrolled Terms vs. Calendar Years

	Graduation in calendar years						
	1-3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	6 yr	7 yr	8 yr	9> yr
Avg enrolled terms	5.8	7.9	9.5	11.2	12.3	12.8	12.9
% of ever stopped out	7.1%	2.1%	8.5%	21.0%	45.4%	69.3%	90.0%
Avg stopped terms	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.4	1.2	2.8	6.1
<b>Total HC = 9865</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>2352</b>	<b>3897</b>	<b>2145</b>	<b>819</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>240</b>

## Second Factor Affecting Time to Degree: Enrolled Term Units and Earned Term Units

	Graduation in calendar years							Grand Total
	1-3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	6 yr	7 yr	8 yr	9 yr or more	
Term units enrolled	17.6	16.1	14.7	13.9	13.4	12.9	12.8	14.5
Ratio of earned to enrolled term units	0.98	0.97	0.93	0.88	0.84	0.80	0.77	0.90
Headcount	99	2,352	3,897	2,145	819	313	240	9,865

*If 15 units are full-time, students who took 5 or more calendar years to graduate were on average NOT full time.*

*Students who took longer to graduate tend to have lower term success. The 6th-year graduates failed 12% of their courses, and this percentage rises to 16%, 20% and 23% for 7th-year and beyond graduates.*

# Third Factor Affecting Time to Degree - Total Earned & Total Required Units: Single-major Graduates\*

	Graduation in calendar years							9 yr or more	Grand Total
	1-3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	6 yr	7 yr	8 yr			
Cumulative units earned at graduation	129	132	137	141	146	147	145	138	
Ratio of total earned vs. total required units	1.07	1.09	1.13	1.16	1.20	1.21	1.20	1.14	
Headcount	82	1,838	3,068	1,607	607	249	189	7,640	

\* Single-major graduates had only one major (without a second major, a minor or certificate).

On average, 16% of the total units earned by 6th-year graduates are not needed for graduation. This percentage remains stable at around 20% for those who took 7 or more years to graduate.

# Conclusion

- ▶ Calendar Year as a measure of time to degree is neither valid nor reliable. We propose a 3-indicator measure to monitor progress and efficiency of earning a degree:
  - ▶ Enrolled Terms (Actual time spent in school)
  - ▶ Term Units Ratio (Success rate by term)
  - ▶ Total Units Ratio (Overall efficiency given term units ratio)

## Conclusion (continued)

- ▶ In combination, Term Units Ratio and Total Units Ratio better reflect institutional efficiency than passage of time to degree.
- ▶ The smaller the deviation from a ratio of 1.00, the more efficient an institution will be.
- ▶ With a given Term Units ratio, a student taking 6 years to graduate with a Total Units Ratio of 1.10 is more successful than someone taking 5 years to graduate with a ratio of 1.20.