

6 Reasons College Students Don't Graduate in 4 Years

by Donald Asher

What's with college students taking so long to graduate? A friend called me today, all upset because he'd just read that only 53% of college students graduate *in six years*. His daughter is enrolled to begin college in the fall, and he was concerned about her, and his wallet. "I can't afford for her to have a 53% chance of success in six years. I need for her to have a 100% chance of success in four years," he said.

He'd seen a widely reported American Enterprise Institute study, based on U.S. Department of Education data. "It's worse than you think," I warned him. "About a quarter of freshmen don't return for the sophomore year. So half the problem occurs by the end of the first year."

These data are widely misunderstood, however. What they actually say is that of first-time college students, only 53% graduate *from the institution where they begin their studies* within six years. Many will graduate from other institutions.

A good college fit goes a long way toward reducing the 25% failure rate between the freshman and sophomore year. So choosing the right college for the student is important. The other factors that seem to conspire to keep young people in college forever are these:

- 1. Parents let them.** If you want your children to graduate in four years, tell them that's the goal. I once heard an educator say, "I told my kids I'll pay for the first four years of their education, and after that they're on their own." He meant it, and his kids graduated right on time. Parents who are on the hook for college expenses, in full or in part, can lay down a marker that the support stops at four years. This can have a focusing effect on young people.
- 2. Students don't go to school every day.** Being a college student is a full-time job, but you wouldn't know it by talking to some of them. They arrange their class schedules so they don't have to go to school except on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the Holy Grail of class scheduling is to have Friday off. Classes that meet too early or too late are also avoided. So by making these lifestyle choices, students extend their term. When I was a freshman I had a math class that met five days a week, at 7:30 in the morning. No student would sign up for such a class today. Students who want to get out of college on time should take the classes they need to advance to the degree, *whenever they're offered*. As universities cut costs by cutting classes, this problem is going to get worse, maybe a lot worse. A student who is too picky about class times is going to be a student for a long time.
- 3. Students change their majors too much, and too late.** A freshman who changes her major is not going to delay graduation, but a junior who changes her major will. Also, the trend today is for college students to have double and triple majors, which adds on time. It used to be shameful to take a fifth year to finish, but now students call themselves Super Seniors and justify the extension to pick up an extra major or two. The major counts less than students think, anyway. The major does not determine the career, and grad school is always out there to allow a shift in focus. Choose a

major by the end of the sophomore year, and stick with it. Have just one reasonable and interesting minor, and it is no challenge to finish on time.

- 4. Students go to too many schools, or they transfer and lose credits.** Every single time a student transfers, she will lose credits. Transferring from community college to a four-year school costs credits, and transferring between four-year schools costs credits also. One student I know went to about a half a dozen community colleges, picking up classes here and there that she thought would count toward her degree. She had a transcript audit nightmare. Her four-year school eventually counted some of her community college classes, but several they wrote off as “below college level.” The process was far from transparent, and post hoc. Her attempt to speed up her program ended up costing her even more time. The solution is to stick with a school until you get the degree, and if you do start at a community college, pay a ton of attention to which classes will transfer to which four-year schools!
- 5. Students work too much, and working class students work way too much.** The data on student employment are rather interesting. In short, a little work never hurt anybody, but a lot of work, especially a lot of work off campus, does. Students today are working tons of hours at real jobs, trying to juggle classes and activities with these external obligations. The results are lower grades, inflexibility in taking the right classes when they’re offered, isolation and disengagement from the college experience, and longer time to graduation. One thing I’ve noticed is that many of these students are working so hard to finance a lavish college lifestyle. College used to be a time for a vow of poverty. Even upper-middle-class youths were expected to live modestly during their college years, to build furniture out of concrete blocks and construction scrap. Today, some students are working really hard to pay for the super cable package and spring break in Cancun. A little delayed gratification might go a long way to getting a student out in four years. Besides, one has to do a little financial analysis of the cost of extending the college experience by a year or two. If a high school graduate on average earns \$44,598 per year (US Census Bureau, all full-time workers over 25 in 2007, reference: <http://www.postsecondary.org/archives/Posters/EducationTraining.pdf>; last year this data was combined, the next year it is broken down by gender and thus not useful in this type of article), and a college graduate earns \$67,766, it costs every student who delays graduation \$23,168 in real money. It makes more sense to work less if it will help a student graduate faster.
- 6. Universities make it difficult to get required classes.** This one is a real Catch 22. If a class is offered every other year, but you have to be a senior to sign up for it, then you can do the math. This creates an impossible situation for those working hard on the four-year plan. My only advice here is for students to keep one eye on the path to graduation, so they see these dilemmas coming. They need to get in to see faculty early, and if they need to, visit the dean or appeal policies which prevent them from taking the classes they need to graduate on time, all of which takes a lot of time and advanced planning. However, to be fair, students should be able to see this coming from some distance.

My friend sat down with the first draft of this article and had a heart-to-heart with his daughter. She's planning on graduating in four years. It's really not that hard.

NOTE TO READERS: This article generated the second-highest volume of mail I ever received in response to an online article, most of it explaining to me that I was an idiot. I stand by the article. I realize that it's a bit glib, especially that last line, "It's really not that hard." That's probably a bit arrogant, I'll admit now, but I'll reproduce the article here as it was published. One thing not fully covered in the article is the meltdown of the community college and state college systems in many states due to financial crises. It is not just difficult--it is impossible now--in many schools to sign up for "required" courses, thus forcing students into extended times to graduate. Students and faculty at private schools do not report these same problems with class scheduling. I'll leave it to you to ponder the societal implications of that fact.

BIO:

Donald Asher is the author of eleven books on careers and higher education, including *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming and Just Plain Different* and *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; as well as *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*; and *The Overnight Resume: Fastest Way to Your Next Job*. He speaks at over 100 college and university campuses every year, and invites your comments at don@donaldasher.com or visit his web site at www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.