

# Three Policies to Reduce Time to Degree

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**COMPLETE  
COLLEGE  
AMERICA**

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# Three Policies to Reduce Time to Degree

Tick. Tock. Cha-ching. The old saying that time is money is nowhere more true than in U.S. higher education. Time is measured two ways in academia—by the calendar and by the credit hour. Both can be costly, whether in the form of tuition, taxpayer subsidies, or the wages students lose with each additional term enrolled.

For many years, in credit terms, the standard for a bachelor's degree was 120 hours; for an associate degree it was 60. On the calendar, that's four years of full-time attendance (30 credit hours per year) for a bachelor's, and two years for an associate degree.

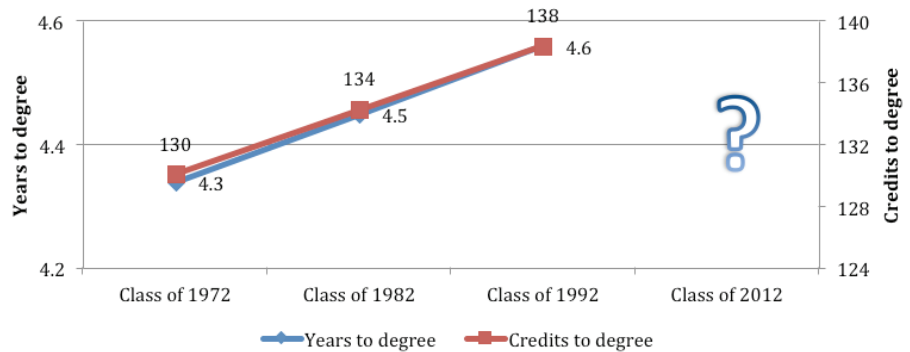
Yet in the past generation, credits and time have started creeping up. High school graduates in 1972 could expect to complete a degree with an average of about 130 credits and in 4.3 years. When the class of 1992 entered college 20 years later, that total had risen to 138 credits and 4.6 years.

So the four-year bachelor's degree is no longer the norm. Nationally, more than 60 percent of bachelor's graduates take longer than four years, and close to 30 percent take more than six. It's much worse for bachelor's graduates who transferred at least once, with 90 percent taking longer than four years to graduate. Fewer than a quarter of 2003-04 college freshmen who completed associate degrees did so in two years or less, and about the same number took more than four.

What leads to extended time? Despite frequent finger-pointing, there is no simple answer. Part of it has to do with students—both the things they can't control and the things they can. They come to college ill-prepared or ill-informed and fail or repeat many courses. They work part- or full-time jobs, often out of necessity. They change majors ... once ... twice ... three times. They choose to stay longer than they have to, whether for academic, social, or economic reasons.

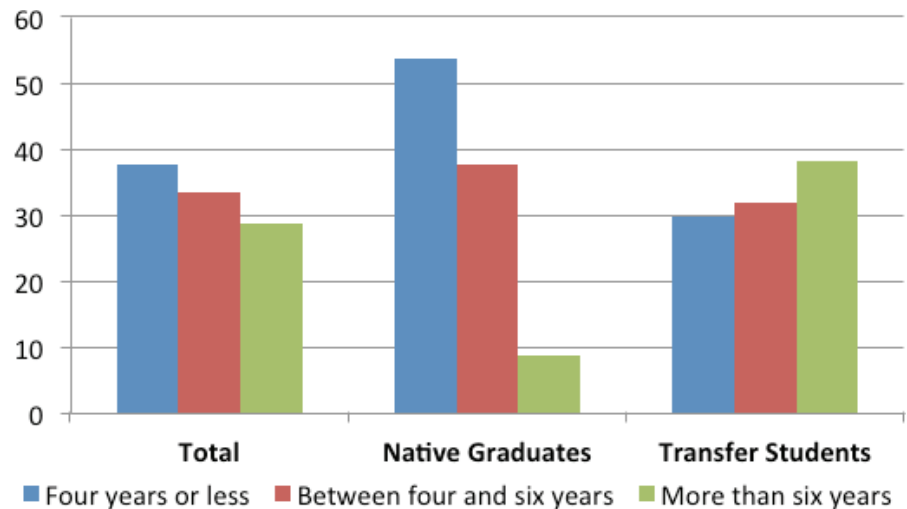
Institutions contribute, too, some-

**Time to Bachelor's Degree for HS Graduates Who Entered Postsecondary Education**



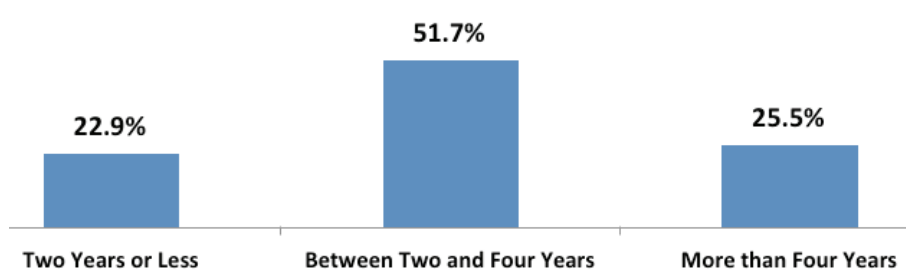
Source: NCES, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories*

**Time to Bachelor's Degree for Native and Transfer Students (2000-2001 Graduates)**



Source: NCES, *Baccalaureate and Beyond Survey 2000/01*

**Time to Associate Degree for 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students**



Source: NCES, *Beginning Postsecondary Students 2004/09*

times intentionally and sometimes by neglect. They allow degree requirements to creep upward. They fail to provide clear “road maps” to timely degrees. Community colleges give college credit for material they should know four-year colleges won’t accept. Four-year colleges fail to give credit for legitimate community college work.

Finally, state systems and legislatures also share the blame. Sometimes they don’t fund institutions or provide student aid in the summer. They don’t create appropriate time or credit caps on their student aid programs. They give generous subsidies to students who don’t need them (tempting some well-off students to linger into the next football season). They give inadequate support to poor students, who then have to work more (and study less). They fund institutions for keeping students enrolled, not for getting them out the door. And they often fail to lead when leadership is needed.

There are good strategies to address each of these issues. But some are harder to change than others. Many of the actions that states and institutions are taking to improve student success generally—reforming remedial education, restructuring financial aid, making distance learning and early college programs more widely available—will also help shorten the time it takes students to finish.

This brief, however, focuses on just three policies that are most directly related to time and have the clearest role for state and institutional leaders: controlling credit creep, creating clear academic maps, and establishing a statewide transferable general education core. These are strategies that state leaders can and should implement now, if they have not already done so.

## Strategy 1: Control Credit Creep by Limiting Program Length

In the mid-1990s, alarmed by the rising number of credits that institutions were requiring for a bachelor’s degree, several states took strong action. One of the leading states, Florida, surveyed nearly 100 colleges and universities around the country to see how program requirements in the State University System stacked up against peers nationwide. What they found was wide variation in most program areas. Credit creep had affected some institutions and programs more severely than others, and Florida’s were generally no worse and no better than average. The results also showed, however, that there were examples in almost every major of a reputable program where requirements had been held down to 120 hours. So no one could argue that it couldn’t be done.

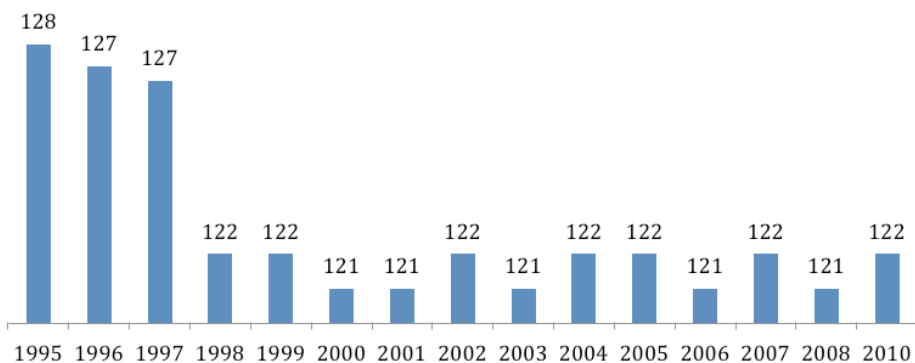
Within less than a year, 600 programs around the state had been reviewed, and

**Policy lever:** Governing boards or legislatures should require clear justification for any bachelor’s degree program requiring more than 120 hours or associate degree program requiring more than 60. See resource kit for an example of a statewide rule in California and implementation documents from California and Florida.

300 of them had their requirements reduced. (Those that weren’t reduced were usually already at the 120-hour goal.) By the end of the process, 500 of the 600 programs were at 120 hours, and many of the remaining 100 were shorter than they had been.

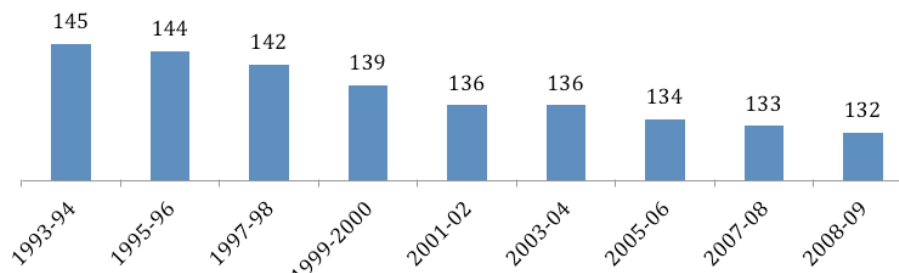
At the largest university at the time, the University of Florida, the average degree requirements for graduates dropped by about six credits. It may

**University of Florida: Average Degree Requirements for Spring Term Graduates Following 1995 Board of Regents Program Length Review**



Source: University of Florida Fact Book

**Credits Attempted by University of Wisconsin System Bachelor’s Degree Graduates**



Source: University of Wisconsin System Accountability Report 2009-10

not sound like much, but with 9,000 graduates a year, the change translates to nearly 56,000 credits annually—the equivalent of more than 400 additional four-year degrees with the same level of enrollment.

In 1993-94, the University of Wisconsin system set a clear goal to reduce credits to degree at its institutions and enacted reforms similar to those in Florida. The result? Average credits attempted by graduates in the system have declined from 145 to 132 over the past 16 years. The most recent system accountability report notes that this change was enough to accommodate 15,000 additional students in 2009-10 compared with what would have been possible in 1993-94.

## Strategy 2: Establish Model Four-Year or Two-Year Semester-by-Semester Road Maps for All Programs

The range of options and choices in a typical online college catalog can be overwhelming for new students. Even for those who know clearly what they want to do, program requirements can read like a logic puzzle: Take three courses from Group A and either two from Group B or one from Group C, unless the selections from Group A include Z. There is often no sense of which courses to take when, leaving students, parents, advisors, and faculty to reinvent the wheel every time they create a schedule.

One of the best ways to reduce students' time to degree—and improve the odds of success as well—is to ensure that the courses they take are the ones they need to stay on track to finish their degrees (and make sure to offer those courses on schedule as well!).

Many institutions over the past 15 years

**Policy lever:** Governing boards and legislatures should require that institutions publish model term-by-term road maps for undergraduate programs. See resource kit for examples of academic maps.

have transformed the way students are advised, so that students may register only for courses consistent with their degree plan. Some of the leaders in advising reform, such as the University of Florida, have made extensive use of technology to make this possible with tens of thousands of students and 100 or more majors.

But at its core, the technology is just a means to an end. It is primarily about good academic planning and communication. With 40,000 students to manage, creative use of technology is a part of almost any significant change, but some of the same principles would apply whether using a supercomputer or a chalk slate and abacus.

The starting place for a good system is clear, sequential, term-by-term outlines of what a typical student's course load should be, including both required courses and electives. These serve two purposes. First, they are the foundation for a strong advising system, since both computers and human beings will be able to process information more easily. Second, they help academic leaders plan for the courses they need to offer to ensure a viable four-year (or two-year) degree.

This may seem like common sense, but it is not yet common practice. As an experiment, imagine you are a parent, friend, mentor, or high school teacher of a student who is interested in engineering. You want to know what the first year's course schedule is likely to be so you can offer some friendly advice. Go to the websites of a couple of nearby colleges with engineering programs and see whether you can find a model course schedule or program map. Now go to one of these best-practice schools—whichever is most appropriate for comparison—and look for the same

### First-Year Program Map for Associate in Engineering at Illinois Valley Community College

#### Programs of Study - Engineering

##### Program Type - Transfer Information

##### Fall, Year 1

Course Prefix	Course Number	Course Title	Credit Hours
CHM	1006	General Chemistry I	5
EGR	1000	Engineering Graphics I	4
ENG	1001	English Composition I	3
MTH	2001	Calculus & Analytic Geometry I	5

##### Spring, Year 1

Course Prefix	Course Number	Course Title	Credit Hours
CHM	1007	General Chemistry II	5
ENG	1002	English Composition II	3
HPE	Gen Ed (1)	Health and Wellness Gen Ed	1
MTH	2002	Calculus & Analytic Geometry II	4
PHY	1001	General Physics (Mechanics) - Engineering	4

Source: <http://www.ivcc.edu/catalog/programguides>

information:

- Arizona State University
- University of Florida
- California State University-Northridge
- Illinois Valley Community College

There is no good reason why any U.S. institution that claims to offer a four-year or two-year degree should not have maps as clear as these. Most, however, do not. State and system leaders can help, first by noticing any that have put these maps into practice and holding them up as examples. They can also encourage or require institutions to communicate this type of information clearly. The California State University system, for example, expects all of its institutions to provide similar maps.

Once maps are established, institutions and systems can decide what technologies and organizational processes are best to track students' progress and facilitate scheduling.

Most campus enterprise software systems, such as Banner or PeopleSoft, have modules that are suited to tracking systems. There are also software packages and consulting services directed specifically at the issue. These can be especially helpful at small to mid-size institutions. Many larger universities have the need and capacity to build homegrown systems suited to their complex organizations.

Sometimes, a system- or state-level solution may be the most cost-effective if all, or virtually all, institutions agree on the need. But one-size-fits-all statewide solutions can also become an expensive distraction, especially if many institutions already have workable, but different, solutions in place. Lack of funding for technology should not be an excuse for implementing what is, essentially, a common-sense instructional practice. Ultimately, it is the academic leadership and execution that will determine the success of a mapping initiative, not any particular software package.

### Strategy 3: Guarantee the Transfer of General Education Curriculum

Extended time-to-degree cannot be addressed by individual colleges alone. More than half of bachelor's degree graduates have attended multiple institutions, and problems transferring credit when students move from one institution to another can be a major source of delay.

Many states have attempted to make transfer "seamless" by requiring certain forms of transfer or providing admission guarantees to community college graduates. Still, transfer arrangements in the 50 states range from more or less *ad hoc* to highly centralized. Florida has probably the most comprehensive system, including common statewide course numbering, associate degree transfer guarantees, transferable general education, common major prerequisites, and common standards for acceleration credit.

Few states may go as far as Florida does, but the transferability of the general education curriculum is a good place to start and will eliminate much of the uncertainty in student transfer.

Some states, such as Iowa and Washington, guarantee the transfer of the general education curriculum only for students who have completed the entire associate degree. Students who transfer with an associate degree know they will not have to do any more general education coursework at the senior institution. That is more than many states can say.

Students are probably better served, however, by one of two other models.

#### Model One: The General Education "Block"

In North Carolina and Florida, students who complete the general education core (36 credits in Florida and 44 in North Carolina) are guaranteed to have met the general education requirements of state universities when they transfer, even if they do not complete the associate degree. Institutions must ensure that their core fits general distribution guidelines and that instructors meet regional accreditation standards.

There are two advantages

to this approach. First, it provides another clear milestone for students to work toward. Second, it creates an additional policy mechanism to avoid duplication of instruction and student effort. Even in Florida, which is a national leader in the number of associate degrees awarded, many students transfer before the 60-credit mark.

#### Model Two: Common General Education Categories

In Texas, general education transfer is guaranteed by course and curriculum area. Each institution decides on its own requirements in each area, and the total curriculum can range from 42 to 48 credits. But a course that meets the general education requirements in, say, natural sciences at one institution is guaranteed to count toward the natural science requirements anywhere in the state. The state maintains a database listing which institutional courses count toward which requirements (at <http://statecore.its.txstate.edu/>), and the courses that meet general education requirements are flagged specifically on student transcripts.

What the two models have in common is that they set clear statewide expectations, while leaving the management of the curriculum within those expectations to individual institutions and faculty. They do not mandate that institutions teach particular general education courses. Rather, they establish ground rules for institutional autonomy that are consistent with state objectives. Leaders in states that have successfully put transferable core education in practice have found this approach to be the most effective educationally, politically, and logistically.

**Policy lever:** Governing boards or legislatures should initiate a process for higher education faculty to agree on transfer of general education requirements, either as a block or within broad subject areas. See resource kit for enabling legislation and system rules for the statewide general education programs in Florida, North Carolina, and Texas.

## Conclusion

Many states already have the elements of these key strategies in place. Leaders in those states know that the work does not stop with the adoption or initial implementation of a piece of legislation or an administrative rule. There are always improvements that can be made, new issues that arise, new curriculum or institutions to incorporate.

In the many states where these policies are not the norm, however, they may be the lowest-hanging fruit. Before looking to more costly, experimental, or logistically challenging solutions, consider turning first to these.

### Further reading and other time-to-degree strategies:

The three policies recommended here are the building blocks of a comprehensive approach to time-to-degree that may include many other components. The other elements could include tuition and financial aid incentives, common course numbering, developmental education reform, and implementation of best practices in academic advising.

For additional information, visit Jobs for the Future/Lumina Foundation's online resources for time-to-degree policy:  
<http://www.collegeproductivity.org/page/projects/time-completion-ttc>

Also worth reading is Cheryl Blanco's "Doing More With Less: Approaches to Shortening *Time to Degree*," November 1994. Available from State Higher Education Executive Officers ([www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org)).

## Resource Kit for the Three Strategies

### Controlling Credit Creep

1. California Code of Regulations requirement that bachelor's degrees not exceed 120 units without justification
2. California State University system memorandum implementing the code requirement
3. Implementation description and working papers for Florida's effort to reduce requirements to 120 hours
  - 3.a. LeMon, R.E., and Pitter, Gita Wijesinghe. "Standardizing Across Institutions: Now That We All Look Alike, What Do We Look Like?" Florida Board of Regents, 1996.
  - 3.b. Pitter, Gita Wijesinghe, LeMon, R.E., and Lanham, Claudia. "Hours to Graduation: A National Survey of Credit Hours Required for the Baccalaureate Degree." State University System of Florida, 1996.

### Degree Program Maps

4. Four-year graduation course schedule for bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at:
  - 4.a. California State University-Northridge
  - 4.b. Arizona State University
  - 4.c. University of Florida
5. Two-year graduation course schedule for associate in engineering at Illinois Valley Community College

### Transferable General Education Core

6. Statewide legislation and administrative rules requiring transferable general education curriculum from:
  - 6.a. North Carolina
  - 6.b. Texas
  - 6.c. Florida