

# **Influences on Incoming Students' Anticipated Time to Degree**

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## **Introduction**

Demographic projections indicate that there will be an enormous increase of high school graduates in the United States and hence, an influx of first-year college students, referred to as Tidal Wave II, in the next few years. With Tidal Wave II ready to engulf them, higher education institutions feel the urgency of assuring adequate space before “the rubber ...[hits] the highway...” (Maclay 2000). Although a range of strategies for serving as many new students as possible are being considered on campuses throughout California, one obvious (if sometimes controversial) approach is to encourage current students to complete their degrees within the traditional four years, in order to make their “slots” available for new students. Irrespective of the fact that 57 months or 5 years to degree has become a national norm (Adelma 1999), extended time to degree was considered more harmless by many even a decade ago (Kramer 1993). There were therefore far fewer studies on related issues than there were studies on student retention and persistence (Knight 2000). As a result, inquiry into determinants of TTD is still at an early stage. The goal to shorten the extended TTD raises the question of how, when, and in what way institutions can shape student academic plans. In this effort, understanding the influences of variables on time to degree (TTD) is of crucial importance.

The main body of existing literature on TTD suggests that stop-out, transfer, light class loads, withdrawal from classes, part-time, increasing non-traditional, part-time students, and change of major are the main culprits responsible for lengthening time to degree (Adelman1999, Duby & Schertman 1997, Knight 1994, 2000, Lam 1999, Hall 1999, Oklahoma SRHE 1996). Some research has also tested the effect of institutional integration, commitment and satisfaction on time to degree (Noxel & Katunich 1998). One study concludes that students in a more

competitive research institution give themselves additional time in order to protect their grades (Volkwein & Lorang 1996).

This paper analyzes the expectations of time to degree and the associated factors that students bring with them to their college careers. Campus data from the CIRP (The Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey) conducted annually by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) are used to consider the relative weight of several variables on a student's anticipated time to degree (ATTD). It addresses the questions:

- How many years do incoming first-year students anticipate taking to complete their undergraduate degree?
- What factors and perceptions of students are most strongly related to their anticipation in regard to time to degree?

It is important to emphasize that this analysis does *not* attempt to determine whether incoming students' expectations regarding time to degree are accurate predictors of the actual length of time they spend earning their undergraduate degree. However, understanding background variables will help institutions begin to focus their efforts to encourage incoming students to set a course for a four-year program. It is also a necessary first step to analyzing the degree to which "input" variables can be used to predict "output" of time to degree (Astin 1993).

### **Research design and methods**

The study explores data from CIRP and the additional institutional items of the same survey for the years of 2000 and 2001. The CIRP allows each participating institution to add to the standard national survey instrument up to 20 survey items of particular interest to the institution. The authors' office was part of a network of IR offices on their campus who agreed to include three items related to ATTD in their CIRP 2000 and 2001 surveys: 1) Incoming

Student's Anticipated Time to Degree; 2) Incoming Student's Estimated Time of Average Students to Degree; 3) Reasons for Extra Time to Degree Needed.

The study uses Chi-square and correlation (gamma) to measure the strength of association of ATTD with other variables. Based on these bivariate analyses and to further verify the influence of these variables on ATTD, an explanatory model of stepwise multiple-regression is constructed and tested.

## **Findings**

The preliminary analyses find that about 80% of entering students of UCLA expect to graduate within the conventional 4 years. The real time to degree statistics of UCLA from the 1995, 1996, and 1997 cohorts showed 42%, 46%, and 52% graduated within four years (UCLA Office of Academic Planning and Budget). Apparently there is a gap between students' anticipation and their real life experience. The leading reasons for anticipating more than 4 years to degree are to get good grades and to accommodate double majors, followed by plans to take part in extra-curricular activities and to work part-time. Race and ethnicity also make a difference in anticipated time to degree, although gender does not appear to affect it.

The bivariate analyses indicate that students' perceptions of how long it takes *other* students to complete a degree affects their own anticipated time to degree. Students who intended to major in Engineering, Math, Fine Arts and Physical Sciences seem to have anticipated longer times to degree, while students that intended to major in English, History, and Political Science are less likely to anticipate extending time to degree. Students who have higher academic aspirations seem to have shorter ATTDs. The data seem to suggest that planned class loads have no influence on ATTD, although those who are thinking of changing majors and career choices expect extended time to degree.

The stepwise multiple-regression model of ATTD shows consistent results for most of the variables in the bivariate analyses. It shows that perception of how long it takes other students to graduate is most important in deciding how long students think they themselves will take to graduate. The result also supports the literature that in more selective institutions students may take extra time to protect their grades, whereas students' confidence to earn at least a B average is negatively related to the anticipated time to degree (ATTD). Again major fields make a difference in perception of time to degree: Engineering, Math and Statistics students are more likely to anticipate extended time to degree. Unsurprisingly, high school GPA is negatively related to ATTD. Those who think that they would have a good chance to seek counseling tend to think it would take them longer to degree. Expectation of double major or a change of major leads to longer ATTD. Planning to pursue a degree beyond the undergraduate level at UCLA tends to have a positive effect on ATTD. Although being Caucasian was a significant variable in the bivariate analyses, it becomes unimportant in the regression model. This tells us that the effect of being Caucasian was intervening via other variables. However, the model only explains a relatively small amount (17%) of variance in ATTD. One of the reasons is the small variation of Anticipated Time to Degree--a 4-level ordinal dependant variable.

### **Implications**

One of the important implications of this study is that it demonstrates that first-year students' thinking regarding lengthening time to degree starts before they come to the University. Their perceptions of their future major and of the level of its difficulty were formed in their pre-college years. Some entering students are not very firmly committed to particular majors or careers, and anticipate changes in direction down the road.

The findings suggest that time to degree is a thinking-to-action process that starts prior to college and continues through a student's post-secondary career. Close monitoring can provide valuable insight into how student thinking evolves. Based on this knowledge, administrators may develop interventions designed to facilitate a student's successful four-year college career.

This study leads the authors to the next set of questions: Do those who anticipate extended time to degree really take longer to finish? What happens during their time in the University that did or did not make their anticipated time to degree reality? In other words, how do their preconceived perceptions of time to degree interact with their college experience? The longitudinal data triangulated with HERI's CIRP Freshman Survey, other surveys conducted during a student's college career, and student records data, together with qualitative data gathered from case studies, may provide good insights.

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