

April 26, 2002

Colleges Offer Students Incentives To Finish Their Degree in 4 Years

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

This May, 1,800 seniors from the class of 2002 will don caps and gowns to receive their diplomas from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. But finance major Lacey Pavliska won't be one of them.

"Everyone says you never want to leave college," says Miss Pavliska, who would have had to cram 21 credits into one semester to graduate on time. "Now I get to stay and enjoy myself."

Want to enroll in the "five-year" program? Get in line. From the University of Wisconsin to Baylor University, schools are getting tired of dilly-dallying students who take five and even six years to graduate. Instead of wishing the problem away, they're going on the offensive, granting tuition discounts, running television commercials and even sending out e-mail alerts to get kids into their caps and gowns. The latest tactic at the University of Iowa: Asking new freshmen to sign a "contract" promising to get out in four years.



Educators say they have to act now because the ranks of procrastinating students keep inching up. According to a recent sampling by ACT, Inc., 49% of college students take more than five years to graduate, if they do so at all -- the worst levels since the education outfit started keeping track in 1983. Between budget cuts, demographic swells and crowded classrooms, many universities say they just can't handle the growing number of hangers on. Indeed, the National Center for Education Statistics expects the number of kids in college to jump 14% by 2011.

"We don't see a culture of students chomping at the bit to get out," says Larry Abele, provost of Florida State University, where the four-year graduation rate has hovered at 39% for a decade. "We seem to be stuck."

So are parents who have to keep footing the bill for all of that extra tuition. In Dallas, Bill and Linda Honker just discovered their son Tim won't be out in four at the University of Texas -- and he's only a sophomore. They're threatening to send him to community college unless he picks a major soon. "We're not a bottomless pit in terms of being able to fund college," says Mr. Honker.

Late-graduating students, of course, are nothing new, but educators were hoping the roaring

'90s might improve the situation. After all, an extended stay in college isn't good for anybody. Aside from crowding dorms and classrooms, dawdlers strain resources like health centers and may have a harder time getting a job or adjusting to post-campus life. Another downside? "Super seniors" aren't exactly a selling point for universities trying to move up on the typical college-ranking survey.

But educators say some schools may have only themselves to blame. Back in the '80s, many started allowing kids to take fewer classes and still get full-time financial aid. Other schools have begun tacking on credit requirements for more elaborate and popular majors such as computer science and engineering. Another factor: more people who enter college at an older age, and tend to study part-time and stay longer.

During the past year, many colleges were also caught off-guard by the downturn in the economy, which pushed more students to take on jobs to pay for everything from rising tuition to CD players. "We sometimes see students saying, 'Do I really want to push hard and get out in May if there are all these firms laying people off?'" says James Vick, vice president for student affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.

At Pepperdine University, some kids were overstaying their welcome for a completely different reason: the wildly popular study-abroad programs. In the past 10 years, the number of students signing up for the overseas classes -- where some took courses that didn't count toward graduation -- shot up almost 50%. In response, the school is encouraging students to go as sophomores instead of juniors and to take core requirements overseas. That helped both with the flow of student traffic and what spokesman Carin Chapin calls "the dorm crunch."

Going on the Offensive

Dozens of other schools -- both public and private -- are going on the offensive, too. One of the most aggressive: the University of Minnesota, where this fall, full-time students will be required to take at least 13 credits a semester. Down the road, the school is considering everything from making it harder to drop classes to insisting freshmen register for a year's worth of courses at a time. University President Mark Yudof calls the school's current four-year graduation rate "anemic," given how many applicants are coming down the pipeline. "It's a problem," he says. "If students stay longer, you can admit fewer freshmen."



Baylor University has decided to appeal to wallets. Instead of the current pay-by-the-credit system, undergraduates will be able to take all the credits they want for a flat \$15,700 per year. (Overachievers need permission to take more than 18.) And while Northwestern University says its graduation rate has held steady, the school is introducing an online system to help students figure out how close they are to graduating. A bonus: With a few clicks, they can discover how much extra time they would need to put in to switch majors.

Still, it's a long battle. While the contracts at the University of Iowa have boosted four-year graduation rates 16% since 1995, only about half of the students who sign them actually manage to finish on time. (The school says there's no penalty for breaking the contract.) Undergrads at the University of Texas at Austin are already griping that the flat-rate tuition plan

won't work because it will be too taxing academically. When Florida State tried to get creative by opening an academic advising office in its gymnasium, just two students showed up.

"Apparently, people don't want to see a counselor when they're working out," says Mr. Abele, the school's provost, who eventually closed the office.

No plan, it would seem, could have gotten Adam Meyers out of George Washington University any faster. That's because the fifth-year senior has been so busy earning \$100 an hour as a computer consultant, he has barely had time to worry about matters like class schedules and diplomas. His priority? Spending that paycheck on the important things: paying his taxes, "clubbing and taking my girlfriend to dinner."

Spoiled Students

Indeed, many educators feel kids are to blame, claiming they're more spoiled than earlier generations, without the work ethic to get out on time and more interested in the latest-model cellphone than figuring out how many credit hours it actually takes to graduate. (There's even a movie out about a seven-year undergrad, "National Lampoon's Van Wilder.") Or, there are those so pressured by overachieving boomer parents, they drop classes at the first sign of a B.

The issue has become so troublesome some state governments and even the Feds are sticking their noses in. Last year, Pennsylvania doled out \$6 million in "performance grants" to schools that graduated more than 40% of their Pennsylvania students on time. Sixty-five schools, from the University of Pennsylvania (\$183,000) to Carnegie Mellon (\$112,000), cashed in. Through the U.S. Department of Education, the Bush administration has proposed monitoring graduation rates more closely in its new long-range plan.

And while all the Advanced Placement classes high-school kids are taking could eventually help fix the problem, Education Under Secretary Eugene W. Hickok says slow rates are "an important issue" for the administration.

Just about the only unworried party? The students themselves. Back at freshman orientation in 1998, Jenny Ferguson, 22, signed a four-year contract with the University of Iowa. But the Hawkeye went ahead and switched majors her junior year anyway -- a move that meant she would have to breach the contract. "Our advisers told us to just sign it because if you didn't follow it, it didn't matter," says Ms. Ferguson.

The Six-Year Plan

Maybe it does matter where you go to school, after all: We found that private colleges and universities top public schools in getting their students to graduate in four years. Below, some sample graduation rates. (Figures are for 2001 seniors, unless noted.)

College	Out in Four	Comments
Clemson University <i>Clemson, S.C.</i>	38%	The biggest delay: students who can't decide on a major. (Some seniors try to come back a fifth fall just to get football tickets.)
Dartmouth College <i>Hanover, N.H.</i>	86%	No need to worry here. Instead, Dartmouth is turning its attention to raising money for new dorms and faculty.

Florida State University <i>Tallahassee, Fla.</i>	39%	The school has 36 new academic counselors, but had to close the new advising office in the gym because no one showed up.
Harvard University <i>Cambridge, Mass.</i>	84% ('99)	The grad rate here dropped 2% in three years, partly because the dean encourages students to take time off.
Michigan State University <i>East Lansing, Mich.</i>	54% ('99)	Students here have to plan more carefully: They register for an entire year's worth of classes at once.
Pepperdine University <i>Malibu, Calif.</i>	71%	Students studying abroad their sophomore still take core classes; they have two years to finish their majors when they get home.
University of Wisconsin <i>Madison, Wisc.</i>	40%	Introduced in 1998, the four-year contract has had relatively few takers.

Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at elizabeth.bernstein@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB1019774857708130000.djm,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:elizabeth.bernstein@wsj.com>

Updated April 26, 2002

Copyright 2002 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Printing, distribution, and use of this material is governed by your Subscription agreement and Copyright laws.

For information about subscribing go to <http://www.wsj.com>