

University of California

**PROGRAMS TO ASSIST STUDENTS TO GRADUATE WITHIN
FOUR YEARS**

**Report to the Legislature
October 2000**

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University of California

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supplemental Budget Language calls for the University to offer a four-year pledge program on each campus starting in 1995-96 and, beginning in March 1997, to submit to the Legislature an annual report on these programs. This report is submitted in response to that Language.

The University supports the premise underlying the Supplemental Budget Language—namely that UC should ensure there are no institutional barriers that would keep students from graduating in four years if they so choose. The University recognizes that it is responsible for providing the necessary courses and services so students can make timely progress toward their degrees. Faced with an expected annual enrollment growth of about 3%, or 5,000 students per year through 2010, the University recognizes the importance of moving students through their curricula as expeditiously as possible in order to accommodate additional students.

Student retention, graduation, and time-to-degree data show that the University has a very good record with respect to graduating students. For example:

- The proportion of undergraduates who graduate from the University of California is at an historic high point. Today, slightly more than three-quarters of the freshmen who enter the University can be expected to earn a baccalaureate degree within six years. Similarly, approximately three-quarters of the advanced standing transfer students who enter the University from one of California's community colleges will earn a baccalaureate degree within four years of matriculating at UC.
- Persistence rates—measures of the proportion of an entering class of students who return for their second, third, and fourth years—have also increased over the past twelve years. In fall 1997, for example, 92% of entering freshmen returned for their second year

compared to 89 percent in fall 1985. Likewise, 83.5 percent of freshmen who entered fall 1995 returned for their third year compared to 76 percent in fall 1985.

- Time to degree has also improved, as shown below:

Time to Degree for Students Entering:

Fall 1986:	13.4 enrolled terms
Fall 1987:	13.3 enrolled terms
Fall 1988:	13.2 enrolled terms
Fall 1989:	13.1 enrolled terms
Fall 1990:	13.0 enrolled terms
Fall 1991:	13.0 enrolled terms
Fall 1992:	13.0 enrolled terms
Fall 1993:	13.0 enrolled terms

The University strongly believes in the importance of encouraging students to complete their baccalaureate degrees in a timely way. Accordingly, all the general campuses have instituted finish-in-four advising programs. In addition, campuses have enhanced advising systems for students at risk, introduced electronic degree checks, and implemented other administrative initiatives to encourage students to graduate within four years. A number of campuses are also studying the factors that encourage timely degree completion in order to develop more effective institutional responses.

University of California

Programs to Assist Students to Graduate Within Four Years

Report to the Legislature

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Introduction

Item 6440-001-001 of the Supplemental Report of the Committee of Conference on the 1994 Budget Act states:

It is the intent of the legislature that the UC establish programs by 1995-96 to offer a four-year degree pledge on each campus so that students who agree to follow the necessary course schedule and make appropriate academic progress in the time frame specified get the courses and counseling they need to complete their degrees in four years. The UC shall also establish similar programs for part-time students involving longer time periods for degree completion. The UC shall submit an annual report on this program by March 1 (beginning in 1997) to the chair of the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the Legislature, the Director of the California Postsecondary Education Commission, the Director of the Department of Finance, and the Chair of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee. This report shall provide data or information on (a) the number of students meeting their graduation time-frame goal, (b) milestone data for students enrolled in the program, and (c) comments on actions and/or modifications the university is taking to ensure the success of the pledge programs.

The UC is requested to submit a report on March 1, 1995, to the agencies cited above, outlining their plans to start these programs on all campuses in the first semester of the 1995-96 academic year. The UC is also requested to include in this report other efforts to assist students to complete their degree in four years or less.

In the March 1, 1995 report, the UC shall also assess the impact of a four-year degree pledge program on the quality of program offerings. For example, will a four-year degree pledge program tend to result in less instruction in seminar modes or small classes, and if so how can educational quality be sustained within the four-year degree pledge program?

This report is submitted to the Legislature in response to the above provisions.

PART I

Undergraduate Persistence, Graduation, and Time to Degree at the University of California

Supplemental Budget Language called for the University, starting in 1995-96, to offer a four-year pledge program on each campus and beginning in March 1997, to submit to the Legislature an annual report on these programs. This report, submitted in response to that Language, summarizes each campus's finish-in-four initiative to date and describes other efforts to encourage students to complete their degrees in four years.¹

The University supports the premise underlying the Supplemental Budget Language, namely that UC should ensure there are no institutional barriers that would keep students from graduating in four years if they so choose. The University recognizes that it is responsible for providing the necessary courses and services so students can make timely progress toward their degrees.² Faced with an expected annual enrollment growth of about 3%, or 5,000 students per year through 2010, the University recognizes the importance of moving students through their curricula as expeditiously as possible in order to accommodate additional students.

Graduation Rates

Persistence, graduation, and time-to-degree data all show that the University of California has a very good record with respect to graduating students. For example:

- The proportion of undergraduates who graduate from the University of California is at an historic high point. Today, slightly more than three-quarters of the freshmen who enter the University can be expected to earn a baccalaureate degree within six years. Similarly, more than three-quarters of the advanced standing transfer students who enter the University from one of California's community colleges will earn a baccalaureate degree within four years of matriculating at UC.
- Persistence rates—measures of the proportion of an entering class of students who return for their second, third, and fourth years—have also increased over the past twelve years. In fall 1997, for example, 92% of entering freshmen returned for their second year compared to 89 percent in fall 1985. Likewise, 83.5 percent of freshmen who entered fall 1995 returned for their third year compared to 76 percent in fall 1985.

¹ For previous reports, see University of California, *Programs to Assist Students to Graduate Within Four Years*, March 1995, March 1997, March 1998 and May 1999.

² Strategies for ensuring course availability are detailed in the University's *Annual Report to the Legislature on Undergraduate Instruction and Faculty Teaching Activities*, July 2000.

- Time to degree has improved, as shown below:

Time to Degree for Students Entering:

Fall 1986:	13.4 enrolled terms
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Despite this good, and improving, record, some members of the public are concerned about delayed graduation. However, beyond the institutional level, many individual factors can slow progress, such as economic circumstances, individual levels of maturity, motivation, physical and mental health, and academic ability and preparation. Changing majors or adding a second major can also extend time to degree.

In 1988, a systemwide survey asked undergraduates to identify the factors that caused them to extend their time to degree.³ The most common reasons cited by students were personal in nature—taking an extra course for personal interest, changing majors, needing to work, and taking reduced course loads. None of these reasons can be described as *institutional* impediments to degree progress. However, among the 19 factors identified, there were three—the need for better advising, difficulty getting major requirements, and difficulty getting general education requirements—that could be described as *institutional* factors.

A 1994 survey at Berkeley also asked students who took more than four years to graduate what accounted for the delay.⁴ As with the systemwide study, most students cited personal problems and personal choices. However, a small proportion cited two reasons that were institutional in nature: poor or inadequate advising and inability to get required courses either inside or outside of the major. The University recognizes its responsibility to address these concerns. Where institutional impediments are found to exist, it is committed to overcoming them.

Who Finishes in Four?

Students who graduate in four years tend to have certain characteristics. In particular, they:

- have completed some university-level courses before entering the University,
- do not change majors,

³ University of California, Office of the President, Student Academic Services, *Survey of Graduating Seniors*, 1988.

⁴ University of California, Berkeley, Office of Student Research, June 1994.

- do not fail a course,
- complete the minimum number of units required to be full-time,
- experience no major financial difficulties,
- experience no personal, health, marital, or family problems, and
- complete only a sufficient number of courses to graduate.

In 1998, Santa Cruz's Associate Vice Chancellor of Undergraduate Education summarized the situation as follows:

Characteristics on that list . . . describe the obvious attributes of a successful student—one who is motivated, committed, focused, and plans ahead, someone who takes the initiative to discover what needs to be done and how to do it. If all non-academic distractions are absent—finances, health, family, social adjustment, etc.—such students do graduate in a timely way. But not all students begin college in that frame of mind; some are still in a critical development stage (intellectual, emotional, social) of discovering who they are and what they want to make of themselves; others want to take advantage of special opportunities UCSC offers, namely Education Abroad, research on campus, double major, preparation in-depth for graduate or professional school, or just time out before continuing. So even under the best non-academic circumstances some students will take a little longer to complete their undergraduate education. Despite all that, the average time to degree is still some 13 quarters.

PART II

Efforts to Facilitate the Four-Year Degree

Following legislative mandates, all eight general campuses introduced finish-in-four programs between 1994 and 1995. While the details vary, most campuses ask students who are interested in graduating in four years to identify themselves. This self-selected group of freshmen is then provided with special counseling and their academic progress is tracked. In addition, UC campuses have implemented a number of other initiatives to ensure that students make timely progress toward their degrees.

Finish-in-Four Programs

- Implemented in fall 1995, **Berkeley's** *4-Years, 4-You* initiative provides information and advising to freshmen entering the College of Letters and Science. The program consists of group advising sessions with specific information on four-year degree completion; follow-up advising prior to enrolling in courses; individual advising sessions throughout the year; and tracking of student progress. New students are informed of the program in their welcome packets and are asked to sign up during summer orientation sessions. Midway through the fall term students in the program are contacted with a list of services, such as drop-in academic advising, workshops in choosing a major, and individual appointments with academic advisers. The campus plans to remind all students in the program in spring 2000 about the services available to them. Those not meeting minimum progress toward graduation will be asked to meet with an academic adviser.
- The **Davis** *Finish in Four!* program seeks to increase the pace at which students graduate by encouraging them to seek the best academic advice available. A broader, less measurable goal is to change the campus culture so that entering students come to understand that the campus expects them to finish their degrees in four years. In the past two years the campus has distributed finish-in-four flyers to all incoming freshmen and at summer advising. Prior to that, participants were invited to meet every quarter with four associate deans and the Vice Provost-Undergraduate Studies to discuss advising issues. However, because only about 10 percent of the participants attended the meetings, they were discontinued after spring 1996.
- **Irvine's** *Finish-in-Four* program has three central goals: to ensure that every student understands what he or she must do in order to graduate in four years; to ensure that each student receives adequate counseling to achieve that goal; and to ensure that the necessary courses are available. First offered in fall 1995, this program is described in information packets, at summer counseling programs, and at advising sessions for newly

admitted students. To participate, students co-sign an agreement with the school of their major and meet regularly in special advising sessions. However, no new students chose to participate in 1998-99 or fall 1999. The program has been continued for the few remaining participants.

- **UCLA's** *Finish-in-Four* initiative aims to ensure that all incoming students are aware they can complete their baccalaureate in four years, to educate them about the benefits of doing so, and to provide them with the necessary information. Each summer the campus distributes a brochure describing how to graduate in four years to all incoming students who attend orientation and discusses that with students in both workshops and individual counseling sessions. Strategies for finishing in four years are also discussed at the *Academics in the Commons* workshops. Held in the residence halls, these informal workshops give lower-division students the opportunity to address a variety of issues critical to their academic success. Similarly, the workshop series *Charting Your Course: From Majors to Careers* helps students learn how to achieve their career or graduate school goals within four years.
- **Riverside's** *Four-Year Plan* provides academic advising to enable students to recognize that they can graduate in four years should they decide to do so. The program targets entering fall freshmen who are mailed a copy of Riverside's Four-Year Plan. The Four-Year Plan is also discussed at mandatory freshman orientations.
- All five of the colleges at **San Diego** have implemented programs advising new freshmen how to graduate in four years, and four have developed written "declaration of intent" programs. Colleges also sponsor residence hall workshops for students who have not declared a major or who are having academic difficulties. In addition, the colleges have developed academic planning templates that show how to weave together the pre-requisites for a given major with general education requirements.
- The goal of **Santa Barbara's** *GO-for-4* program is to counsel students in the College of Letters and Science about the importance of declaring a major as quickly as possible. The campus has also developed literature for students to use when charting four-year plans. The literature, which is distributed at new student orientations and in the residence halls, includes an insert for students to sign requesting that the College provide them with periodic updates on their academic progress.
- **Santa Cruz** makes incoming fall quarter students aware of its *Finish-in-Four Partnership* through newsletters from individual colleges and in the campus student handbook. In addition, the campus provides information about general requirements and requirements for particular majors in its summer orientation sessions. However, because the campus believes that college and departmental advising efforts are more effective than the finish-in-four initiative, it is currently putting more resources into its regular advising efforts.

Intensifying Academic Advising for At-Risk Students

Believing that finish-in-four advising efforts are not the only, or even the best, way to promote four-year graduation, some campuses are focusing their advising efforts on students who are more at risk for delayed graduation, especially those who have not yet declared a major.

- Irvine, for example, has targeted freshmen who have not yet declared a major for assertive advising. These students (approximately 25 percent of entering freshmen) enroll in a two-quarter, two-unit graded course, which is designed to introduce them to the university, orient them to campus resources, and train them in information technology and study skills. Students participate in at least seven mandatory academic counseling sessions, including three with faculty. In addition, students who are first-generation college attendees, come from low-income families, or who have lower academic qualifications than the campus norm have been targeted for special advising.
- UCLA requires students who have accumulated over 120 units and not yet declared a major to receive academic counseling prior to enrolling in classes. This enables counselors to help students plan their programs and successfully complete their degrees.
- All freshmen at Santa Cruz are given a self-assessment instrument to determine if they are on track for a major or undecided prior to the annual Frosh Advising Forum. Depending upon the results, students have an opportunity during the Forum to meet with faculty and departmental advisers and attend workshops to clarify their educational goals. Opportunities for advising continue throughout the year, with particular intensity at the beginning of the quarter, at the end of the sophomore year, and during times when students declare their majors. The campus also offers advising sessions for parents to ensure they are familiar with the stages of their children's education.

Providing Comprehensive Advising Services

Colleges and departments within the campuses are also developing comprehensive advising plans for their students.

- In 1996-97, for example, Riverside's College of Engineering implemented an advising plan that recommended assigning a faculty mentor to each student; more frequent contact between faculty, advising staff, and students; establishing an "Advise-Me" email account for all students in the College; and publishing a quarterly newsletter. The College also collaborated with the two other undergraduate colleges to initiate mandatory new student orientations where students receive personalized packets of information.
- The College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Riverside modified its advising structure to provide more help to students the first three weeks of the quarter. In addition, individual departments in the college increased the number of advising hours faculty provided and initiated workshops to help undeclared students choose their majors.

- The College of Engineering at Santa Barbara assigns a faculty adviser to each student. Each quarter, students obtain approval from their advisers for their schedules and advice regarding progress toward their degrees. After the sophomore year, changing majors within the College is strongly discouraged. Students who have not completed essential lower-division math and science prerequisites are encouraged to enroll in summer programs to catch up. The Associate Dean for Academic Affairs monitors faculty and staff advising so that no student is overlooked.

The College's undergraduate office also regularly contacts students to ensure that they stay on schedule and meet deadlines. Beginning in 1997, the Registrar's Office began checking undergraduate records to make sure students had completed all prerequisites and were adequately prepared for sequenced courses. Since 1998, the Student Support Center has provided free tutoring services. Lastly, the College of Engineering *Announcement* provides a quarter-by-quarter schedule for each major in engineering and computer science that shows how degree requirements can be completed in four years.

- Each quarter, the College of Creative Studies at Santa Barbara reviews the files of all students who have earned 90-100 units to make sure that they are making adequate progress. The College also requires quarterly meetings between students and their advisers, and has begun to place registration blocks on students who did not turn in quarterly forms signed by their advisers. The program does not limit the number of units a student may take each quarter and is flexible about courses that satisfy general education requirements. This, coupled with the fact that students admitted to the College tend to be very well prepared and highly motivated, has helped students in the College graduate in an average of 3.75 years.
- At San Diego, the Applied Mechanics and Engineering Science Department assigns a faculty adviser to every major and pre-major. During 1996-97 the department implemented a system that triggers a summons from the advising office if a student gets off track. The Computer Science and Engineering Department has added more staff to help undergraduates progress through their programs. The Biology Department assigns faculty to advise majors, transfer students, and post-baccalaureate education students.

Realizing the need for a more integrated advising system, in 1998-99 Santa Cruz approved funds for a new position—Academic Advising Coordinator. The new Advising Coordinator helps develop online, web-based advising programs, facilitates career development of the professional advising staff, and seeks to engage the faculty more effectively in academic advising.

Providing More Counseling Electronically

Campuses also are making counseling more available to students through electronic means. Davis, San Diego, and UCLA, for example, have all recently introduced degree audit systems that promise to free up adviser time from the mechanical aspects of regular degree checks and provide more time for direct student advising.

- Degree Navigator, as it is called at Davis, was introduced online to campus advisers last year. Interfacing with the existing student database, the system contains the requirements for every major and minor at Davis. Using the system, students will be able to determine their general education and major requirements, learn how to change from one major to another, and track their overall progress toward graduation. The campus expects that the system will significantly help students make better choices about what courses to take and thus shorten time to degree. San Diego also expects that its new Degree Audit and Reporting System will allow students to check the impact of various course choices on their progress to degree.
- UCLA students can now request a copy of their own degree progress reports, which lay out all requirements students must fulfill prior to graduation. The reports also contain a list of courses already completed as well as those in progress, allowing students to see which requirements have been fulfilled and which must still be met.
- The College of Letters and Science at UCLA has introduced “My UCLA,” a web-based counseling tool that allows students to review their study lists and receive other information. Over the past two years, the College has also expanded its use of internet-based counseling tools. The Office of Academic Counseling, for example, now invites students to email questions that are answered by trained peer counselors and holds virtual counseling sessions daily. In addition, the College produces an online newsletter, which contains information about deadlines, policies, and procedures for students. The College believes that increasing access to information and counseling in these ways can help students plan more effectively for timely degree completion.

Developing New Administrative Initiatives

UC campuses are also developing a number of administrative initiatives to encourage students to complete their degrees in four years.

- In June 1999, the Academic Senate at Davis approved the redefinition of minimum progress as an average of 13 units per quarter (up from 12 units). Last summer, advisers began to emphasize the importance of normal progress toward a degree using the larger unit average per quarter.
- Effective fall 1999, departments at Davis also have the option of extending the drop date for classes that are not likely to be overenrolled. The campus now has two drop dates, one for heavily enrolled classes and one for other classes. The campus hopes that having two drop dates will enable students to replace an unsatisfactory class with something more satisfactory during the same quarter, thus helping them maintain an appropriate unit load.
- UCLA analyzes its undergraduate curricula to ensure that freshmen can complete their programs within four years and transfer students within two years; these analyses are

important elements of academic program reviews. In addition, before the Undergraduate Council of the Academic Senate approves proposed changes to majors, sponsoring units must demonstrate that the changes will not hinder students' timely degree completion.

- UCLA has also developed data sheets that summarize time to degree for each undergraduate department. These data sheets, which contain eight-year summaries, make it possible for departmental faculty to judge the progress of their students against others in their division or school. UCLA expects these data will be helpful in setting new goals for decreasing time to degree in a systematic way, department by department.
- San Diego has requested all academic programs to post year-long course schedules so that students can plan their courses for the entire year and not inadvertently miss a required course taught only in the fall. This is particularly important for students in highly structured majors or in majors with small enrollments where required upper-division courses are taught at most once a year.
- The College of Letters and Science at Santa Barbara is enforcing a long-standing policy that requires any student who has accumulated over 200 units to obtain permission of the College before enrolling. The College establishes a "Proposed Schedule of Graduation" with the student that specifies exactly what courses will be taken to achieve the most expeditious graduation. As the campus community becomes more aware of the 200-unit rule, the administration hopes that students will plan their academic programs better and that more will graduate within four years. The campus believes that consistent enforcement of this policy has the potential to reach more students than current finish-in-four programs.

Increasing Students' Engagement in Learning

Some campuses have also designed new programs to increase students' engagement in learning, and thus indirectly speed up time to degree.

- As part of its efforts to strengthen its General Education curriculum, UCLA, for example, is offering four innovative cluster courses for freshmen. Each cluster consists of a three-quarter sequence of courses addressing a common theme. The clusters are interdisciplinary and team-taught by some of UCLA's most distinguished faculty. Because they are highly demanding, they provide students with five units instead of the customary four. The campus hopes the clusters will shorten students' time to degree in two ways. First, as freshmen complete their clusters, they may see that they can manage more units and hence enroll for more units than past cohorts of students. In 1998-99, in fact, cluster freshmen completed an average of 15 units per quarter their first year while non-cluster freshmen averaged only 13 units per quarter. Second, the cluster experience is expected to increase students' excitement about learning. They may then select a major more quickly and become more involved in their academic work. The campus is exploring these hypotheses through ongoing assessments of the cluster courses.

Providing Financial Incentives

Campuses are also experimenting with financial incentives to encourage students to graduate more expeditiously.

- UCLA, for example, has piloted a program geared to seniors who at the end of spring quarter find themselves one or two courses short of graduation. By enrolling in a special summer session program, students are able to complete the courses they need quickly and at reduced cost. Eligible students are required to pay the summer session registration fee, but course fees are waived. Sixty-two of the 64 students who received waivers for summer 1999 received their degrees by the end of summer, shortening time to degree by at least one quarter. Summer Sessions offered the program again in summer 2000.

Learning More About Why Students Take Longer Than Four Years to Graduate

Lastly, some campuses are studying the factors that influence time to degree in order to develop more effective institutional responses.

- In spring 1999, about 50 staff and administrators at UCLA watched two student discussion groups, one composed of lower-division students and the other of seniors. Although the 25 students who participated in the discussion groups did not constitute a representative sample of undergraduates, the results revealed some important issues.

When asked specifically about time-to-degree plans, the vast majority of the participating students indicated that they intended to spend more than four years as undergraduates at UCLA. Reasons students offered were: a change in major or degree plans; the need to take fewer units to accommodate work commitments; involvement in extracurricular activities; internships; and the desire to take a broad range of courses. Without exception, these students believed that the value of such experiences fully justified their extended time to degree. Smaller numbers mentioned administrative obstacles to timely degree completion, including large numbers of prerequisites, difficulty enrolling in classes, or difficulty gaining acceptance to a desired major. In short, the focus groups suggested that some students not only accept but *prefer* a five-year degree. The campus believes that efforts to reduce time to degree will require modifications to the campus culture. The focus groups have generated more discussion about how to improve time to degree, and they will be repeated next year.

- The Undergraduate Council at UCLA, in collaboration with the Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research, has also developed a web-based survey directed to undergraduate students. Students will be asked how satisfied they are with the availability of departmental courses and departmental advising; with access to departmental facilities such as labs, computers and libraries; and with the extent to which the department helps students explore career options. The campus is piloting the survey with the Departments of Economics and Italian.

- San Diego is also currently studying the factors that extend graduation. In 1998, the campus interviewed a random sample of 44 students from each of the five colleges who had been enrolled for at least fourteen quarters. The interviews revealed that students in retrospect felt a strong need for more advising in their first year. Students also felt they could have planned their schedules better if they had known ahead of time—for the coming academic year rather than just the coming quarter—what courses were being offered. As a consequence, the campus has requested academic departments to provide students with a year-long schedule of classes.

In 1999, San Diego surveyed students who had graduated in thirteen quarters. Among the written responses to the questionnaire were the obvious concerns that persist in all these studies—the need for more financial aid, delays caused by students needing to work, or students changing majors. However, one new theme was that students admitted to underestimating the impact of occasionally taking a reduced academic load on their prospects for finishing in four years. Indeed, three-fifths of the students surveyed had taken ten or fewer units at least one quarter while enrolled at UCSD.

Concluding Remarks

The University's faculty and staff take seriously their responsibility to ensure that students move expeditiously through their curricula. Faced with an expected annual enrollment growth of about 3%, or 5,000 students per year through 2010, the University recognizes the importance of moving students through their curricula as expeditiously as possible. All UC campuses are generating new ideas, and new programs, to encourage students to complete their degrees in four years. One campus is exploring ways to reward academic units that decrease undergraduates' time to degree. Another campus has proposed rebating student fees in the final quarter for students who graduate in four years. Another campus wants to encourage students with academic deficiencies to enroll the summer before their freshman year and thus graduate a little sooner than they might otherwise.

However, the University's role is not simply to move students through as expeditiously as possible, but also to ensure that they gain the education and skills they need to function effectively as citizens, employees, and leaders. Despite the intensity and accessibility of services directed toward the four-year degree, some students, such as single or working parents or students experiencing academic difficulties related to diagnosed disabilities, will continue to require more time to complete their degrees. There may not be ready solutions to these problems, and it remains incumbent upon the university community to allow for the varying needs of students.