

Department of Student Life Studies Four and a Half Year Graduation Study Fall 2015 and Fall 2016

Background

In the Texas A&M University 2015-2020 strategic planning process, the Provost's Office provided a working document with three goals and ten strategies for campus discussion.

(<http://provost.tamu.edu/initiatives/FINALSTRATPLANwitheditsv2.pdf>). Goal 1 stated that Texas A&M will "provide an outstanding educational experience for all students as evidenced by...timely graduation norms."

Although Texas A&M had the lowest time to graduation in the State of Texas, and the highest 4-, 5-, and 6- year graduation rates, the University ranked 15th among its 18 Vision 2020 peers in 4-year graduation rates. Therefore, the strategy is to "Commit to a University culture that values timely completion of degrees at all levels." According to the Texas A&M University Accountability website (2015), undergraduate students who started as First-Time in College in 2009, had a four-year graduation rate of 51%, five-year rate of 76%, and a six-year rate of 80%.

In a 2015 article for *USA Today College*, Anschuetz reported that students do not graduate on time because of students transferring to a different institution, lacking a plan/not using an academic advisor, and taking extra credits. In addition, students who delay graduation spend more money. Because students are not in the work world, they are also losing the salary opportunity.

Jones (2015) reported that 43% of students graduated in six years at four-year non-flagship institutions, while 68% of students at the flagship/very high research institutions graduated in six years. In addition, half of students at four-year institutions take 15 or more credits per semester. He proposed that some of the obstacles are poorly designed remedial courses, a culture that rewards enrollment over outcomes, broken credit-transfer systems, overwhelming/unclear choices for students, and lack of recognition of students balancing work and family with academics.

Pike (2013) looked at student characteristics and enrollment characteristics related to time to degree and found that SAT score, high school rank, high school academic intensity, full-time enrollment in the first semester, and not intending to transfer were statistically significant positively related to four-year graduation rates. On the other hand, being African American/Black and hours working for pay had a statistically significant negative impact on a four year graduation rate. Items that did not have a statistically significant impact included enrolling in a first-year seminar, participating in a summer bridge program, and being first-generation.

Literature suggests that 58% to 72% of undergraduate students are working, with 24% to 47% working at least 20 hours per week (Vaughn, Drake, & Haydock, 2016). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) reported that 40% of all full-time students (both undergraduate and graduate) were employed in 2013, which decreased from 52% in 2000. In four year public institutions, the percentage decreased from 51% to 40% in that same time period. Of those 40%, 7% worked 35 or more hours/week, 19% worked 20-34 hours/week, and 14% worked less than 20 hours/week. As a comparison, 76% of part time students were employed in 2013.

There has not been comprehensive assessment about why some Texas A&M University students take an extra semester to graduate, getting their diploma four and a half years after starting as a First Time in College freshmen in a fall semester. Anecdotal reasons range from students changing majors, having to re-take "weed-out" courses, and lack of job prospects, to students over-involved in co-curricular activities, having to work, and wanting to attend one more football season.

The pilot study included students who began at Texas A&M in the fall of 2011 as first-time, full-time freshmen and applied for graduation in the fall of 2015. The study was repeated with students who entered fall of 2012 and applied for graduation in the fall of 2016.

Method and Sample

The survey was developed using Qualtrics®, survey design software. The survey included nineteen quantitative questions and one qualitative question. The data was analyzed using SPSS®, a statistical software package, Microsoft Excel®, and Tableau®.

By November 1, 2015, 181 students were in their ninth semester and had applied for graduation. One person was removed from the pool because she was graduating with her master’s degree. Graduating students were sent an initial electronic survey invitation on November 19, with reminders on November 30, December 8, and December 15. Of the 181 surveys distributed through an email invitation, 90 people completed the survey, yielding a 50% response rate.

A second survey was distributed on December 2, 2016 with reminders sent December 7, 14, and 18. Of the 795 surveys distributed, 216 completed the survey, yielding a 27% response rate.

Results

Results will be reported as means, standard deviations (sd), and frequency percentages for the number of people (n) who responded to the question. For ease of reading, frequency percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent, so totals may not add up to exactly 100%. Summary themes are reported in this report; the entire list can be found in a separate document. The results will be illustrated in five sections: demographics, employment, involvement, academics, and overall.

Demographics

The demographics of the students who applied for graduation, as well as the students who responded to the survey are illustrated in Table 1. No group is under or over represented by survey respondents compared to the population.

Demographic	2015		2016	
	Population (n=181)	Respondents (n=90)	Population (n=795)	Respondents (n=216)
Male	45%	42%	63%	60%
Female	55%	58%	37%	40%
2 or more excluding Black	1%	1%	2%	2%
Asian only	5%	4%	5%	5%
Black only + 2 or more/1 Black	3%	2%	3%	1%
Hispanic or Latino of any race	20%	26%	26%	24%
White only	69%	67%	64%	68%
First generation	25%	21%	32%	30%
Not first generation	75%	79%	68%	70%
Agriculture (<i>graduating college</i>)	6%	7%	11%	14%
Architecture	3%	3%	6%	7%
Business	4%	8%	10%	10%
Education	6%	6%	12%	13%
Engineering	30%	37%	44%	42%
Galveston	7%	7%	Not Included in 2016	
General Studies	21%	14%		
Geosciences	1%	1%	1%	1%
Liberal Arts	7%	9%	10%	8%
Science	8%	6%	3%	3%
Veterinary Medicine	7%	3%	3%	2%

Table 1—Demographics of Four and Half-Year Graduates and Survey Respondents

Employment

Students were asked about their employment experiences throughout their time at Texas A&M University. Table 2 shows that as students persisted through the institution, the more they worked for pay. Beginning in the junior year, half or more of the respondents reported working 16 or more hours per week.

Did you have paid employment during fall and/or spring...?	% Yes		Of Yes, Avg Hours \pm S.D.	
	2015 n=88	2016 n=197	2015	2016
Freshman Year	4%	15%	12.0 \pm 6.3	13.6 \pm 4.9
Sophomore Year	12%	24%	14.2 \pm 5.7	15.2 \pm 5.5
Junior Year	15%	32%	16.0 \pm 5.5	16.2 \pm 5.3
Senior Year	17%	38%	15.3 \pm 6.5	16.2 \pm 5.8
This Semester	17%	37%	14.8 \pm 7.1	16.0 \pm 6.0

Table 2—Students with Paid Employment Experiences

Respondents were also asked about their summer employment. Over both surveys, about half (49%) worked for pay between their freshman and sophomore year, 65% between their sophomore and junior year, 72% between their junior and senior year, and 70% between their senior year and this semester.

As a final question about employment, respondents who had worked at any point during a fall or spring semester were asked if working throughout college was a barrier to graduating in four years, over both years, 68% said no, 24% said yes, and 8% were not sure.

There are a few fluctuations in year to year data of note in questions regarding work. Indicated under “% Yes” column of Table 2, the ratio of students working during the semester increased two to three times, but the average hours has not increased. More students are working for pay after their freshmen year (2015 – 44%, 2016 – 52%). More students indicated working throughout college was a barrier to graduating in four years (Yes), (2015 – 19%, 2016 – 26%).

Overall, as students progress through Texas A&M, more seek paid employment. Summer employment was more common than working during the academic year.

Involvement

Students have the opportunity to join and lead student organizations throughout their college career. Texas A&M currently recognizes over 1,100 student organizations with a variety of interests, time commitment, and cost. Student organizations provide a network and support system for students, as well as the opportunity to develop teamwork and communication skills. They also provide a means for students to apply what they learned in the classroom. Table 3 describes the frequency of student organization membership. Consistent over time, more than half of the students were involved in one to two organizations. Students graduating this semester cut back on their organization involvement.

In how many student organizations were you a member of...?	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	7+
Freshman Year	23%	56%	20%	2%	0%
Sophomore Year	15%	60%	23%	1%	1%
Junior Year	15%	62%	22%	1%	0%
Senior Year	19%	62%	17%	1%	0%
This Semester	41%	51%	7%	0%	0%

Table 3—Student Organization Involvement (n=284)

In addition, students were asked about their leadership experiences. Leadership in organizations can be more of a time commitment over being a member, and it offers a greater opportunity to develop Texas A&M learning outcomes, such as teamwork, communication, critical thinking, social responsibility, and cultural competence. While some students did not hold a leadership position, those that did chose to be a leader in one to two organizations. Many students cut back their leadership experience in their last semester.

In how many student organizations were you a leader...?	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	7+
Freshman Year	84%	15%	1%	0%	0%
Sophomore Year	60%	39%	1%	0%	0%
Junior Year	48%	48%	4%	0%	0%
Senior Year	52%	45%	3%	0%	0%
This Semester	80%	19%	1%	0%	0%

Table 4—Student Organization Leadership (n=284)

For the students who indicated some leadership experience at any time, they were asked if being a student organization member or leader was a barrier to them graduating in four year. The vast majority (82%) said no, while 12% said yes, and 5% were unsure.

Academics

Respondents were asked about their broader academic experiences, including internships/co-ops, summer school, study abroad, and changing majors. Table 5 indicates that most students enrolled in summer school at least once and had an internship/co-op. On the other hand, about half of the students changed their major at least once and most did not study abroad.

Tell us about some of your academic experiences.	0	1	2	3+	Mean (sd)
How many times did you enroll in summer school, NOT at Texas A&M?	23%	34%	28%	16%	1.37 (1.00)
How many internships and/or co-ops did you have in college?	25%	34%	20%	20%	1.36 (1.07)
How many times did you study abroad?	77%	19%	4%	0%	.92 (.99)
How many times did you change your major?	49%	40%	9%	3%	.66 (.76)

Table 5—Academic Experiences (n=283)

Next students were asked about the ease or difficulty they had registering for the classes they needed each year. At Texas A&M, the registration system is based on academic classification, so seniors register before juniors, etc. Table 6, on the next page, shows that the longer students were here, the easier time they had registering for the classes they need. What is unclear is if difficulty registering for classes in the earlier years caused students to fall behind in their progress to graduation.

What was your experience in registering for the classes you needed?	Very Easy (1)	Moderately Easy (2)	Moderately Difficult (3)	Very Difficult (4)	Mean (sd)
Freshman Year	27%	34%	28%	11%	2.23 (.97)
Sophomore Year	26%	42%	25%	7%	2.13 (.88)
Junior Year	29%	41%	23%	7%	2.09 (.90)
Senior Year	46%	36%	11%	7%	1.78 (.89)
This Semester	62%	28%	6%	5%	1.54 (.81)

Table 6—Class Registration (n=283)

Texas A&M University offers a wide variety of student success services. There are also off campus tutoring services. Respondents were asked how frequently they took advantage of tutoring, supplemental instruction, or the Academic Success Center resources. As seen in Table 7, freshmen seemed to take advantage of academic support services more than other years; as students progress, they tend to use those resources less frequently.

Did you use any tutoring (on or off campus), supplemental instruction (SI), or Academic Success Center resources?	Never (1)	Sometimes (2)	Frequently (3)	Mean (sd)
Freshman Year	32%	34%	34%	2.02 (.81)
Sophomore Year	34%	41%	25%	1.91 (.76)
Junior Year	60%	29%	11%	1.51 (.69)
Senior Year	80%	16%	4%	1.24 (.51)
This Semester	91%	6%	3%	1.12 (.41)

Table 7—Use of Academic Support Resources (n=283)

Respondents were asked if they were ever suspended for academic or conduct reasons for a semester or more. Nearly all students (96%) did not have that experience.

Overall

The final question asked students to describe in their own words their reason for staying at Texas A&M an extra semester or any barriers that kept them from graduating in four years. Many of the themes related to their academic experience, including changing majors or adding a minor; others were related to limiting course load, retaking courses, difficulty enrolling, or poor advising; a small group also contributed the timing to either requirements within their major or inherent difficulty. The second largest theme relates to involvement outside the classroom, including student activities/leadership, working for pay, or overcoming life conflicts. A final group made choices that necessitated an extra semester including: choosing not to leave in eight semesters, lacking motivation at various points in their academic career, or wanting another football season. A breakdown of smaller themes are outlined in table 8, on the following page.

Frequency	Category	Sample
114	Changing majors, adding courses/minor	[I] changed my major which added an extra semester
62	Desired lighter load/avoiding "overload"	[I] selected a moderate (~12-14 hours) course load throughout college, rather than 15+ hours per semester
53	Re-taking hours/failing courses	[I] failed a class that was required for my degree
46	Internship/co-op/student teaching	I did a co-op at the beginning of my senior year. So I was still only here for 8 semesters of class
27	Work	I worked and was involved on campus
22	Engineering	I am in engineering, unless I wanted to overload on classes there was no way I was graduating on time
15	Organizational involvement/leadership	Changing majors and being the president of a large organization caused me to take less hours for two semesters
14	Courses not available when needed/course conflict	Getting classes I needed was the main issue; about 40-50% of my core coursework required me to force request into them
14	Life event/illness	I took on extra responsibilities and needed to take less hours my senior year
9	Poor advising	I made a mistake with my schedule. One class that I needed to graduate was only offered in the fall and I did not have a prerequisite to take it fall of my fourth year
9	Participation in Corps	Extra courses required because of Corps of Cadets
8	Blinn Team/Transfer student	Did not fit in the correct classes due to transferring
6	Not motivated	I [put] off taking a difficult class and had to retake a prerequisite
6	Not ready to leave	...I didn't have a desire to graduate on time. I think 4.5 years is a perfect pace to work and be involved like I wanted with a rigorous degree
6	Study abroad	...adding a minor, studying abroad and working...made it difficult to squeeze in all the necessary credits into only [eight] semesters
5	Wanted another football season	By choice, more football, 40 years to work
5	Student athlete	I was a student athlete and did not feel comfortable taking more than 12 hours a semester
2	No transfer credits from high school	I had [zero] hours coming in from high school and then got behind in a couple classes

Table 8 – Qualitative themes (n=269)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Because of the small number of responses to the survey, the results may not generalize to the population of students who take four and a half years to graduate. From this study, there seemed to be many reasons that students graduated in four and a half years. Some of those are curricular (changing major, having an internship, etc.), while others are cocurricular (involvement, work, etc.), and others are personal (stress reduction, transition, etc.). Some of those, the institution can impact through academic advising/tutoring, reviewing course that have a high D/F/Withdrawal rate, and early career services interventions. Other strategies could include reviewing financial aid offers/packages, workload, and involvement to enable students to focus on completing courses in a shorter period of time.

Those interested in impacting 4 year graduation rates are encouraged to read all comments and share these results with interested stakeholders.

References

- Anschuetz, N (December 16, 2015). Breaking the 4-year myth: Why students are taking longer to graduate. Retrieved from <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/12/16/breaking-the-4-year-myth-why-students-are-taking-longer-to-graduate/>
- Jones, S. (2015). The game changers: Strategies to boost college completion and close attainment gaps. *Change*, 47(2), 24-29.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). College student employment. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ssa.asp
- Pike, G. (2013). *Time varying effects of student background characteristics, high school experiences, college expectations, and initial enrollment characteristics on degree attainment*. Association for Institutional Research Annual Meeting, Long Beach, CA.
- Texas A&M University. (2015). Undergraduate student retention & graduation. Retrieved from <http://accountability.tamu.edu/All-Metrics/Mixed-Metrics/Undergraduate-Student-Retention-Graduation>
- Vaughn, A. A. Drake, R. R., & Haydock, S. (2016). College student mental health and quality of workplace relationships. *Journal of American College Health*, 64(1), 26-37. Doi: 10.1080/07448481.2015.1064126

Report prepared by: Darby Roberts and Eric Webb, Student Life Studies

Report prepared on: July 10, 2017

Analysis prepared by: Katie Reed and Eric Webb, Student Life Studies

Electronic survey designed by: Tyler Harkrider

Services provided by Student Life Studies are funded, in part, by Texas A&M University Advancement Fees.

Find Student Life Studies on Facebook!