

**TIME TO DEGREE:  
A REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE**

**Submitted for:** Information.

**Summary:** Goal 4 of *The Illinois Commitment* holds higher education accountable to annually increase the number of college and university students who earn a certificate or a degree and who do so in a timely manner, as appropriate to their circumstances and academic programs. Recognizing the complexity of the time to degree issue and the need to go beyond state information to better understand student degree patterns, the Board called for a statewide conference on time to degree. On March 29, 2000, a conference titled “Understanding Time to Degree; Different Students—Different Stories”, was held in Springfield, Illinois. This Board item provides a summarization of the key findings resulting from the conference. Also, attached is a copy of the conference report that was submitted to the Board by conference staff.

**Action Requested:** None.



STATE OF ILLINOIS  
BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**TIME TO DEGREE: A REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE**

The Illinois Board of Higher Education has been tracking the timeliness of degree completion since 1990, when under the Priorities, Quality, and Productivity initiative the policy context for undergraduate education was expanded to include a reduction in the time it takes undergraduate students to earn their degrees and increase graduation rates. *The Illinois Commitment* expands upon this policy initiative. Goal 4 of *The Illinois Commitment* holds higher education accountable to increase annually the number of college and university students who earn a certificate or a degree and who do so in a timely manner, as appropriate to their circumstances and academic programs. *The Illinois Commitment* recognizes that student circumstances may play a role in the time it takes a student to earn a degree and recognizes that institutions must provide an educational environment that is conducive to student progress and degree completion.

To assist the Board in tracking this issue, a shared enrollment and graduation data system was created in 1990 with the cooperation of the 49 community colleges and 12 public universities to better monitor student progress, retention, transfer, and degree completion. The creation of this data system was a major and necessary first step to better understand student enrollment patterns and academic progress. The data system, as currently designed, has limited potential in that it does not allow tracking by various student characteristics, which research has shown to be a crucial determinant in time to degree. The data system, currently housed on the campus of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, is in the process of being transferred to the offices of the Board of Higher Education. Once housed at the Board, the data system will be expanded, in cooperation with the public institutions, to allow analysis of timeliness of degree completion in light of student characteristics, while maintaining the confidentiality of individual student records. The expansion of the shared enrollment and degree data system will help provide the reliable and valid information necessary to follow through on the results and accountability required by *The Illinois Commitment* and to assist in making better informed policy decisions.

Over the last decade, the Board has produced several reports on the issue of time to degree. A June 1999 report titled *Persistence, Graduation, and Time-to-Degree* indicated that roughly 25 percent of entering freshman in the classes of 1987 through 1992 at Illinois public universities graduated within four years and about 55 percent graduated within six years. These figures are dramatically lower for black and Hispanic students. Only 6.4 percent of black students and 11.4 percent of Hispanic students graduated in four years and only 29.2 percent of black students and 38.7 percent of Hispanic students graduated in six years for the same entering freshman classes.

Recognizing the complexity of the time to degree issue and the need to go beyond state information to better understand student degree patterns, the Board called for a statewide conference on time to degree. On March 29, 2000, a conference titled “Understanding Time to Degree; Different Students—Different Stories”, was held in Springfield, Illinois. The conference, put together by public institution staff throughout the state, was intended to enhance understanding of the issues that affect students’ length of time to degree completion by drawing

upon the experiences of public institutions around the state. A report, written by conference staff, detailing the conference was presented to the Board and is attached to this document.

As shown in the attached report, presenters from institutions around the state indicated that their institutions have initiatives in place to shorten time to degree and improve degree completion. These initiatives include guaranteed tuition programs, changes in tuition structure based on course load, four-year graduation guarantee programs, and dual admission programs. For example, Western Illinois University has implemented a guaranteed tuition program and a graduation guarantee program. Many of these initiatives have only recently been implemented making it too early to reach conclusions as to their effectiveness. It is important that these initiatives be revisited in the near future to assess their impact.

Institutional studies presented at the conference suggested, in a number of instances, that institutional practices have little impact on time to degree. The implication being that the responsibility for time to degree be placed on the shoulders of the student. However, Illinois State University and Western Illinois University presented practices that positively affect time to degree. Illinois State University's restrictive course withdrawal policy has met with success. While Western Illinois University's dual enrollment compact with 18 community colleges keeps students on track for both the associate and baccalaureate degree. These two policies address two of the major determinants of longer time to degree – the number of withdrawals and untimely transfer. It is clear that institutional practices can make a difference.

The conference resulted in two major outcomes. One outcome was a re-thinking of the two- and four-year college experience. For many students, the two- or four-year timeframe is not appropriate. The principle cause is a change in student population demographics, from the traditional to the nontraditional student. This traditional timeframe may not be appropriate for two reasons. On one hand, there are those students that enter higher education with the expectation of earning a degree and, for whatever reason, take longer to complete. On the other hand, there are those students that enter higher education, not to earn a degree, but to enroll in a course or two. In both cases, completion of coursework that results in the desired objective is a success story. However, those students taking only one or two courses may remain in an institution's active student file long after successful completion, which can negatively impact institutional data on time to degree.

The second major outcome was that time to degree and degree completion are explicitly linked together. The ultimate goal of attending a higher education institution is the earning of a degree. Policymakers should be careful not to separate the time to degree issue from the degree completion issue, because policies designed to impact one may also impact the other, sometimes negatively. While it may be necessary for many students to embark on a longer time to degree path, it is important that they do so in an educational environment that is conducive to completion. The conference also resulted in several policy suggestions, which are described in the conference report. The suggestions are grouped into three categories: data collection, reporting, and information; articulation; and cost and aid.

The Board appreciates the time and effort that went into this conference and would like to thank the conference staff, presenters, and attendees for their participation. The conference provided the Board staff with a wealth of information, both from an institutional and student perspective. It reaffirmed that the issue of timeliness of degree completion is a multifaceted issue interwoven in a tapestry of student characteristics and behavior, as well as institutional policy. It was apparent that there exists a uniqueness in the combination of factors that effect time to degree at individual institutions. The conference was a start in the right direction and the Board

will continue to hold open dialogue with the public institutions on these issues. It also will be important that private institutions be included in future discussions on this issue. The Board will continue to monitor, study, and take appropriate action on initiatives already in place as well as the several policy initiatives that arose from the conference.

Time to degree and graduation rates will be major topics of discussion this fall as the staff visits institutions and agencies while constructing the fiscal year 2002 higher education budget.



**TIME TO DEGREE CONFERENCE REPORT**  
**MARCH 29, 2000**  
**SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS**

Why is Time To Degree an Issue of Concern

There is an expectation among parents, students, higher education staff, and legislators that a baccalaureate degree should be earned in four years and an associates degree in two years. The length of time it takes a student to earn a degree (Time To Degree) has been steadily increasing. Today it is not unusual to find students taking four to five years to earn an associate degree and six to eight years to earn a baccalaureate degree.

The time needed for students to earn a degree is a significant issue for administrators and legislators in terms of efficiency of systems and the use of taxpayer support. For students, Time to Degree impacts their introduction into the workforce. The foregone earnings plus the additional expense incurred by taking more classes than necessary, can be a burden on the student and his or her family. In addition, when a student takes a seat in a course, he or she ultimately does not apply toward the degree, the enrollment may deplete resources at the institution and burden the taxpayer who subsidizes that enrollment. For the staff of institutions of higher education, Time to Degree is, on the one hand, out of their control—the student decides if and when he or she will take courses—and on the other hand shaped by the services, the opportunities, and the systems it provides its students, faculty, and administrators. Many factors such as part-time status, remediation, and parenting are a part of a student's life circumstances that ultimately result in his or her time to degree, just as many policies at the institutional level affect time to degree, such as tuition costs, scheduling of courses, and services offered.

Given today's student demographics, it must be recognized that it will not be possible for many students to complete a degree in two to four years. However, it is incumbent upon state and institutional policymakers to provide an educational environment that reduces, to the greatest extent possible, the impediments that lead to an increase in the time it takes to earn a degree. Policymakers must not lose sight of the fact that the ultimate goal is degree completion. Reduction in timeliness of degree completion must be tempered with this goal in mind.

The primary goal of higher education is to educate students in a systematic process that culminates in degree completion. The state benefits, as well as the student, when the degree is awarded, but when a student drops out and does not complete the degree, the resources are wasted throughout the entire system of higher education; the student, the faculty, the institution, and the taxpayer all lose. The balance must be then that policies promote efficient use of resources while not harming those students who might not fit the traditional time frame of enrollment. Policymakers in higher education need reliable and valid information, not anecdotes or broad generalizations, to make informed decisions on complex policy issues, such as timeliness of degree completion.

**Conference Organization**

Fifteen people from a cross-section of researchers, faculty, and administrators were asked to address some of the factors that relate to Time to Degree. In addition, Dr. Clifford Adelman, of the U.S. Department of Education, generously agreed to lead the discussion with a presentation based on national data. The 85 attendees included many of the higher education institutions in the state and the presenters represented both universities and community colleges. The conference opened with introductory remarks by Keith Sanders, Executive Director of the Illinois

Board of Higher Education, and Virginia McMillan, Executive Vice President of the Illinois Community College Board. Their opening remarks zeroed in on the issue and set the tone for the rest of the conference. Taking longer than four years to earn the degree can be necessary for many students. However, efficiency is also an issue of concern for the state, institutions, and students in terms of efficient use of resources from both an expenditure and income perspective.

The conference was divided into four general sections: a national perspective, student-influenced factors, student stories, and institutional-influenced factors. The presentations on student-influenced factors were given primarily from an institutional research perspective and communicated many facts on Time to Degree. Over lunch, participants heard from a dean on his specific responses to students on problems of graduation and time to degree and from a sociologist on students' attitudes and beliefs that might affect time to degree. The institutional portion of the conference included presentations of specific institutional strategies Illinois institutions have adopted in order to facilitate student progress. The conference concluded with a group discussion to synthesize the findings.

### **Keynote Presentation**

Dr. Clifford Adelman, a noted researcher at the United States Department of Education, was the keynote speaker and set the national background for the participants. One of his most recent publications, *Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment* is a comprehensive view of the factors that contribute to earning the bachelor's degree, including the issue of time to degree. He began his presentation by illustrating the pervasiveness of factors that increase time to degree.

He stated that our students are diverse and routinely behave in ways that make success *and* efficiency less likely to achieve simultaneously. It is increasingly difficult to identify part-time students because of the excessive number of drops, withdraws, incompletes (DWI), and no-credit repeats. In fact, 20 percent of full-time students become part-time by virtue of DWI and one out of nine students drops, withdraws, receives an incomplete, or repeats 40 percent of his/her courses. In the periods of 1972 to 1984 and 1982 to 1993, the growth of DWI's went from four to eight percent. Clearly, given these course-taking patterns, time to degree is lengthened beyond four years for many students.

Transfer is another issue. Across the nation, 60 percent of our students will attend more than one institution and 40 percent cross state lines in the process, patterns that cause policies to collide across institutions. Thirty percent of the transfers from lower to upper-division schools leave community colleges and jump to four-year institutions before completing one semester. Their degree completion rate is 30 percent below that of students who stay at the community college for one semester before transferring to a four-year school. Transfer has a negative impact upon finishing, but for all transfers the impact is not large.

What doesn't make a difference in time to degree? Dr. Adelman answered: The SAT score, grades in college, and the need for remedial work. The most serious remedial problem is reading. About one out of three students who need remedial reading finish associate's or bachelor's degrees while just over half of students with no remedial course finish these degrees. But, needing remedial reading does not affect time to degree, it affects whether a student gets a degree. Student work or college work-study does not affect time to degree, though classic college work-study is one of the ways to keep students enrolled. A scholarship does not affect time to degree, rather it affects whether a student finishes a degree, but only if the scholarship is received in the first year of college.

Dr. Adelman went on to cite several other factors and their relationship to time to degree. The credit ratio, the proportion of credits earned versus the proportion attempted in the first year, does not affect time to degree. The academic intensity of high school curriculum, the number one determinant of getting a degree, is not a significant determinant on time to degree. Starting at a four-year college has no affect on time to degree, though it does on degree completion. Continuous enrollment is the largest determinant of finishing a degree and continuous enrollment is the most powerful post-matriculation predictor of time to degree. The freshman grade point average has an effect on time to degree and students that earn fewer than 20 credits in the first year have a longer time to degree. Men tend not to finish degrees in four years and men are over-represented in the undergraduate fields with higher credit requirements, such as engineering and architecture. Business, one of the most gender-neutral fields, shows a lower time to degree than other fields.

Given the level of information that is currently available, it is possible to predict only 27 percent of the variance of time to degree. This lack of predictability of time to degree suggests that some factors affecting time to degree have not been identified and, thus, it might be difficult to change public policy in a manner that has a significant impact on time to degree until this problem is better understood.

### **Institutional Policies and Programs**

Although students maintain a great deal of control over the time it takes to earn a degree, an institution has the responsibility to ensure its environment is conducive to successful completion. Some institutional practices, procedures, and policies have been shown to lead to an increase in the length of time it takes a student to earn a degree.

#### Drop/Add Policies

Liberal drop/add policies can encourage students to enroll in more courses in a semester than can be successfully completed. A student who “loads” up on courses each semester tends to successfully complete fewer courses than if he or she maintained a normal course load. Joe Rives from Illinois State University reported on the advantages of having one of the earliest withdrawal deadlines in the state. First, the earlier in the semester the student withdraws, the higher the student’s refund. Second, an early withdrawal provides feedback about a student’s educational process. At Illinois State University, the majority of students have had no withdrawal hours (60 percent) or between two and three withdrawal hours (27 percent). Illinois State University has discovered that the median time to degree rates are approximately four years for students with no withdrawal hours, five years for students with a record of one or two withdrawals, and six years for students with three or four withdrawals.

#### Dual Admission

Charles Gilbert from Western Illinois University described a compact between Western Illinois University and 18 community colleges that gives prospective students admission to both the university and the community college. The program encourages students to complete the Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree at the community college followed by the bachelor’s degree at Western Illinois University. The key to the program is the academic advising the student receives. The student’s courses from the community college are evaluated through the Audit of Requirements for Degrees system at Western Illinois University. This program gives students routine and timely feedback on their progress and keeps them on track to enrolling in the courses they need to complete a degree at the transfer institution.

### Bottleneck Courses

Another institutional factor shown to increase a students' time to degree is lack of required course offerings. Students often indicate that the courses they need are not available and thus they are not able to graduate on time. To investigate this issue, Gordon White from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale examined 15 transcripts of students who received a Social Work degree over the last three years but had not taken a required statistics course at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in Social Work. This course is a prerequisite to a senior-level research methods course. Of those students, ten took the required statistics class at a community college, three took the course in another department, and two apparently had the requirement waived. Although the statistics requirement had not delayed time to degree for any of the students, it is apparent that most of the 15 students investigated took a statistics course outside of the department. The transcripts of the 13 students who had specifically taken a statistics class in 1995 and 1996 were examined further. All but one of those students graduated within two years of taking the class so it appears they proceeded through remaining courses successfully. In addition, five of eight majors with large enrollments appeared to have at least one course that did not have sufficient annual capacity to cover the number of students earning a degree. In as much as the students did graduate, it must be assumed that the equivalent course was taken outside the major or at another institution. None of the majors appeared to have a longer time to degree than the general population of graduates. In this study, by reviewing transcripts, not anecdotes, it was found that at this institution course availability of required courses had no significant impact on time to degree.

### Four Year Guarantee

To ensure that students know the institution is serious about offering the courses necessary to complete a degree in a timely manner and to encourage students to plan accordingly, some institutions are offering a four-year guarantee. Alan DeRoos described Western Illinois University's four-year undergraduate graduation guarantee program that started with freshmen entering in the Fall of 1998. Only a few students are currently participating in GradTrac, but changes in program management seems to have increased interest in the program across the campus. Regardless of the number of students involved, GradTrac is symbolic of a willingness and commitment on the part of Western Illinois University to support the best efforts of students to achieve their degrees on schedule.

### Pricing Models

Some institutions in Illinois have instituted pricing models as a way to encourage students to take only the required number of courses necessary to graduate and hopefully lessen the time to degree. Julia Abell presented Eastern Illinois University's new tuition structure. For freshmen beginning in Fall 1999, the same per credit hour charge of \$94 was assessed regardless of the number of hours taken. Previously, tuition differed by full- or part-time enrollment status. Full-time students were charged a set amount, \$1,094 in 1998-99 for 12-18 hours, while part-time students were charged at \$91.25 per credit hour for up to 12 hours. This change has had no appreciable effect on student enrollment to date. In fiscal year 1997, freshmen averaged 14.93 hours per term while in fiscal year 1999 the average is 14.94 hours per term.

Charles Gilbert indicated that at Western Illinois University, all entering undergraduate students are automatically included in a tuition guarantee that freezes the per-hour rate the student will pay over a four-year period, including tuition, fees, and room and board. Students must meet certain conditions. Though it is too early to make any definitive statements about the impact of the tuition guarantee on enrollment and, in particular, on time to degree, preliminary analysis indicates that the level of student credit hour production appears the same when comparing the ratio of headcount enrollment to full-time equivalent enrollment for Fall 1998 and Fall 1999.

However, it is important to note that course withdrawals have decreased by eight percent since the start of the tuition guarantee.

Daniel House presented Northern Illinois University's new graduated tuition plan initiated in the 1998-1999 academic year. The new plan responds to the need to maintain affordable college costs. Because there is a direct relationship between course loads taken per semester and subsequent time to degree, it was recognized that the group of students attempting 12-14 hours have the greatest potential for enrolling in additional courses and shortening their time to degree. Consequently, a tuition plan was implemented where the tuition charge per credit hour declines as more credit hours are taken. After beginning the tuition plan, there has been a notable and statistically significant increase in the percentage of Northern Illinois University undergraduates who have taken 15 or more hours, from 49.4 percent to 52.1 percent. The presenters noted that a four-year contract plan for new freshmen is of limited utility for this university given its large number of transfer students, for whom a four-year plan is inappropriate, and working students, who will need longer than four years to earn the degree. The Northern Illinois University plan is valuable for all its students no matter whether part-time or full-time.

### **Presentations on Student Characteristics**

Today, more and more individuals are entering or returning to college than in the past. Students come from all walks of life and age groups, and all bring personal circumstances that impact their college career path. The traditional student model no longer holds true for the vast majority of students. Only one in six students fits into the traditional student model, i.e., 18 to 24 years old, single, not working, living on campus, and enrolled full time. It is inevitable that this change in student population will have profound impact on the length of time it takes to attain a degree.

#### Part-Time and Non-Continuous Enrollment

One factor that effects time to degree is part-time and non-continuous enrollment. Students often enroll part-time work because of the demands of family, job, or other responsibilities. A presentation by Julie Smith at the University of Illinois at Chicago demonstrated that part-time enrollment is on the rise at this campus where less than five percent of freshman are enrolled part time, but 22 percent are part-time students by the time they are seniors. In some cases, students may have used up financial aid eligibility by the time they become upper classmen. This means they might become more part-time in order to make up for the loss of financial aid. Surveys find that close to 75 percent of all undergraduates at UIC are working during the school year, and of that number about 25 percent are working 26 hours or more per week. More than 70 percent of students at UIC take five or more years to complete their degrees, and over 40 percent take six years or more to finish.

#### Remediation and the Associate's Degree

Elizabeth Reis from Moraine Valley Community College indicated that at the community college level, students are more likely to be part-time than at upper-division institutions. About ten percent of the students who eventually earn associate degrees take more than ten years, and some take as long as 20 years, to complete a degree. This small number of students drives up the average time to degree across the institution. On the other hand, a third of the students are traditional in that they complete the associate's degree in 2 to 2.5 years. The average time to an associate degree ranges from 5.2 years for all students at Moraine Valley, 4.2 years for students who are full-time their first semester, and 7.8 years for students who are part-time their first semester. College-ready students, students who do not take remedial courses, average about 3.6 years to earn an associate's degree. The need for remediation, especially for students in

community colleges, appears to contribute to longer than the traditional “two-year” associate’s degree.

#### Remediation and the Baccalaureate Degree

Harlan Schweer from the College of DuPage indicated that students requiring developmental coursework spend, on average, just over one term (one quarter) longer in completing the associate’s degree than students who do not receive remediation. Further, remediation does not seem to play a significant role at the baccalaureate level for transfer students. The time spent moving from an associate’s degree to a baccalaureate degree differ by only 0.3 years between those with no developmental course work and those with communication-related or multiple developmental courses.

#### Family and Employment Responsibilities

As shown in a presentation by Antonio Gutierrez from the City Colleges of Chicago, age is also a significant factor. Students under the age of 23 have a median time to degree of 6 semesters, while those over the age of 40 take a median of 11 semesters of enrollment to complete an associate’s degree. Also employment slows down progress to the degree. Students who are not employed, or who are employed part-time, average eight semesters earning an associate’s degree, but those who are working full-time average ten semesters to earn a degree. Likewise, family responsibilities lengthen time to degree. The median time to degree for non-working couples without children is eight semesters of enrollment with one semester of stop-out, while non-working single parent households average a degree in eight semesters with three semesters of stop-out. Employed spouses with children in the family required eleven semesters of enrollment and four semesters of stopping out.

### **Presentations on Student Behavior**

#### Excessive Hours

Student behavior can also affect the length of time it takes a student to earn a degree. Anecdotes abound of the “professional student,” however, the evidence does not support widespread incidence of Illinois students taking excessive hours. A presentation by Gayle Layman from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign showed that a small number of students (eight percent) earn over 150 hours while completing a baccalaureate degree, a degree usually requiring 120 hours. Accumulated extra hours can occur because a student transfers hours from a previous institution that are not applicable to the degree, the student changes majors one or more times, or the student earns two degrees. All of these factors contribute to increased hours beyond the minimum. Examination of student records also reveals that some students earn hours beyond the minimum because they pursue additional certification (e.g. aviation, or additional competencies), a secondary interest (e.g. foreign language, music, drama), external certification or scholarship requirements, or take remedial work. Little evidence was found that the students studied took unnecessary courses due to poor advising or lacked access to required courses.

#### Changing Majors

Marilyn Murphy from the University of Illinois indicated that changing majors can contribute to a lengthened time to degree, however, it appears that changing majors positively effects degree completion; although it may take longer to earn the degree after changing majors, earning the degree is more likely if the student finds a fit in a major. At the University of Illinois at Chicago about 50 percent of all students change major, but most do so only once. Holding constant other factors such as the ACT score, class rank, grades earned in college, and the number of semesters enrolled, a change of major increases the likelihood of earning a degree by over 40 percent. Long-term graduates are more likely than short-term graduates to take fewer hours per

term, earn a lower cumulative grade point average, change majors more times, and be minority students. The single greatest factor contributing to longer time to degree is the number of hours earned per semester. Earning just one more hour per semester, on average, while holding other factors constant, increases the chances of becoming a short-term graduate by more than five and one-half times. When possible and appropriate, students could shorten the time to degree by completing just one more course per year. Completing courses is the key, not just enrolling in courses.

### Student Advisement

While some students believe that they can improve their grade by simply repeating a course, experience indicates otherwise. Thomas Glenn presented an analysis of University of Illinois at Chicago Engineering students enrolled in math courses. The analysis revealed that students have about a 50 percent chance of earning exactly the same grade in a repeated course, a 15 percent chance of earning a higher grade, and a 35 percent chance of earning a lower grade. Students commonly blame their predicaments on bad advising, however, after the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Engineering began requiring students to sign advisory agreements, the college found that students often forget or ignore the agreement. Staff and faculty often take for granted that students will read and follow the prerequisites listed in the course catalogs or will enroll in the courses advisors recommend, but they often do not. Doing something as simple as upgrading registration computer systems to check pre-requisites would yield improvement in student course-taking patterns.

### **Suggestions for Higher Education Policy and Practice**

The suggestions for policy and practice resulting from the conference are:

#### Data Collection, Reporting, and Information

- The Board needs to look closely at the shared enrollment and degree data systems and reorganize them to conform to the lessons learned at this conference. This may mean the addition of student information that allows for the distinction between different student populations, such as part-time students, in analyzing trends in time to degree. Improved data systems will result in better informed time to degree policies.
- The state of Illinois benefits when its students are successful in earning their degree. The state further profits when that success is obtained with an efficient use of resources. Students, families, and institutions should be aware of the advantages of efficient progress to the degree and work toward that goal. It is suggested that the Board implement a student or consumer information system that promotes awareness of higher education opportunities.
- A new vocabulary may be needed to adequately address the change in student population and both new and current policies should conform to the new vocabulary. The current categorization of students does not sufficiently capture the nature of today's student population. For example "traditional" versus "adult" is not a useful dimension and "full" versus "part-time" may not adequately capture the students we enroll today. The Board should draw upon the expertise of the institutions and agencies to develop a common vocabulary.

## Articulation

- Improved articulation between secondary education, community college, and four-year institutions will improve student preparation and thus provide opportunities for improved time to degree and completion. The current P-16 initiative is a case in point.
- The better prepared students are for college, the more likely they will not only complete the degree but do so in a timely manner. The use of Advanced Placement (AP) Courses is one method to prepare many students for the rigors of college education. The state should take steps to ensure students across the state have access to AP courses.
- For those students who are under prepared, whether recent high school graduates or returning adults, remediation may be a necessary step to successful completion. Alternative delivery methods for remediation should be encouraged and supported.
- Dual enrollment, life-experience credit, and the proliferation of alternative delivery systems, including on-line courses, will positively affect time to degree. The state and institutions should study how these initiatives impact time to degree and, where appropriate, implement them.

## Cost and Aid

- The presence of a tuition guarantee or graduated tuition plan may communicate to students that timely progress is a priority for the institution and should be for students as well. It may be helpful for institutions to provide data on the “hours remaining to degree” rather than the “hours earned” to focus students on the goal of the degree. Institutions that have adopted graduated tuition plans, per credit hour tuition, and tuition guarantees should document their impact on retention and time to degree for all students. As this information is gathered, it should be shared with the Illinois higher education community so that all institutions can benefit.
- Economic forces dictate the speed at which a student can progress to the degree. When resources are sufficient, students are more likely to attend full-time. Making adequate financial aid and gainful employment available may shorten time to degree. Because financial-aid policies are generally geared to the traditional student, the state should explore alternatives that reward timely completion for all students.

## Conclusion

There are as many different stories as there are students. One participant put the issue well: “Students are not unitary; our policies need to reflect the differences in students.” A simple policy advocating a shorter time to degree for all students, may do more harm than good for the nontraditional student, the student who needs some remedial course work or might not be able to enroll full-time. The unintended consequences of too restrictive shorter time to degree policies may make graduation less attainable for some students.

Time to degree is an issue that cannot be separated and treated in singular fashion. It is so closely tied to graduation that action on one may affect the other, perhaps negatively. The goal is for students to finish and to finish well; completion should be the primary goal, not speed. Yet the conference participants recognized that students forego income, and institutions sacrifice

efficiency and taxpayer support, when students take longer than necessary to complete the degree. Institutions must take responsibility to ensure that “nontraditional” students are able to move through the system as quickly as appropriate for their circumstances.

Students should be practical and realistic in planning their course loads. Evidence shows that steady progress leads to successful completion of the degree. Students should consider their total commitments to family, work, commuting, and school when registering for courses and establishing their course loads. The simple fact is that uninterrupted enrollment, even if part time, is the single greatest factor in reducing time to degree. Programs and policies should facilitate re-enrollment and should encourage students to enroll for consecutive semesters. Students are better off to take lighter loads over consecutive semesters than enrolling for heavy loads intermittently. Given the change in student population demographics, some students are going to take longer than four years to complete the degree. The conference made this point abundantly clear and policymakers need to come to terms with this reality. Policymakers should focus on creating an educational environment that facilitates as timely a degree completion as possible given a student's unique circumstances.

To facilitate this behavior, advisors and advising systems should be diligent in checking that students have met the prerequisites for courses in which they enroll; that students understand the time needed to adequately master course material; that the time available matches students' course loads; that the courses they take, especially in transfer, are applicable to the degree they seek; and that students understand the benefits of shortening their time to degree. Institutions may need to provide special help for some students, but they also may have to convince these particular students that they, in fact, need assistance.

It is hoped that the research presented at this conference will encourage staffs at other institutions to review the patterns prevalent at their institutions and that this will stimulate additional research to be undertaken and circulated. Information should be shared so that the success of one campus can be replicated, and the initiatives that do not work as well can be avoided.



Appendix A  
List of Conference Presenters

- Julia Abell, Director of Planning and Institutional Studies at Eastern Illinois University
- Clifford Adelman, Senior Research Analyst at the U.S. Department of Education
- Alan DeRoos, Registrar at Western Illinois University
- Charles C. Gilbert, Director of Institutional Research and Planning and Associate Professor,  
Department of Information Management and Decision Sciences at Western Illinois  
University
- Thomas E. Glenn, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Affairs in the College of Engineering at  
the University of Illinois at Chicago
- Antonio Gutierrez, Associate Vice Chancellor for Planning and Research at the City Colleges of  
Chicago
- J. Daniel House, Director of the Office of Institutional Research at Northern Illinois University
- Kimberly D. Kendall, Advisor, Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-  
Champaign
- Gayle Layman, Assistant Director of the University Office for Academic Policy Analysis at the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Virginia McMillan, Executive Vice President of the Illinois Community College Board
- Marilyn M. Murphy, Associate Director of the University Office for Academic Policy Analysis  
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- Elizabeth Reis, Director of Institutional Research at Moraine Valley Community College
- Joseph Rives, Office of Planning, Policy Studies, and Information Systems at Illinois State  
University
- Keith R. Sanders, Executive Director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education
- Harlan Schweer, Director of Research and Planning at College of DuPage
- Julie M. Smith, Director of the Office of Data Resources and Institutional Analysis, at the  
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- Gordon W. White, Associate Director of Institutional Research and Studies and Assistant  
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