CHARACTERISTICS OF EXTENDERS: Full-Time Students Who Take Light Credit Loads and Graduate in More Than Four Years

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The existing enrollment management and student-institution fit literature generally concentrates on two student populations: persisters and dropouts. This study investigates a third population that we call extenders—those ostensibly full-time students who take longer than normal to complete a bachelor's degree. By analyzing the transcripts and survey responses of undergraduates at a public research university, we identify three groups of extenders: financial need extenders, grade-conscious extenders, and special situation students. While all three types are visible in our transcript analysis, we find empirical support in the multivariate analysis only for the first two.

Extender behavior that is based on financial need is congruent with Cabrera's integrated model of student retention. However, there are few other congruencies between these findings and the student-institution fit literature. We found little influence exerted by the usual measures contained in other studies that have used concepts in the Tinto, Bean, Nora, and Cabrera models, such as academic and social integration, goal clarity, and encouragement by family and friends. Apparently these concepts and measures have little to do with student decisions to take lighter academic loads and to lengthen their graduation date. Extenders in this study are not negative about taking longer to graduate and are generally satisfied with their experiences.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This research addresses two types of behaviors by full-time undergraduate students: taking longer than normal to graduate, and registering for less than a full load of 15 credits. Three related public policy concerns interact to form the basis for this study. The first is a concern about the cost and productivity of higher education—a concern expressed both by the parents of college students and by the tax-paying public (Burke, 1993). Virtually every sector of the econ-
omy except education has made substantial gains in productivity over the years, and delays in college completion produce costly inefficiencies in the educational system (Johnstone, 1993). The second policy concern is an almost universal need for the efficiencies of good enrollment management by campuses. Considerable resources are devoted to the processes of recruiting, retaining, and graduating diverse populations of students in a competitive environment. The third concern focuses attention on effective academic advisement and access to courses that enable students to graduate on time. TQM and other customer-oriented management practices direct our campuses to become more flexible and responsive to student needs.

There appears to be a rising tendency for many full-time undergraduate students to take more than four years to graduate. National Center for Education Statistics data show that less than one-third of the college class of 1990 had graduated within four years. Large numbers of students who enter college as full-time freshmen are taking five and six years to complete a bachelor’s degree, so many that most national databases and college guidebooks no longer report four-year graduation rates, opting instead for five- and six-year rates. The Federal Student Right to Know Act requires two-year campuses to report a three-year graduation rate and four-year campuses to report a six-year rate. Does the longer time to graduation reflect a flexible system or a flawed one?

Certainly colleges and universities in the last 25 years have become more open and flexible institutions. Recognizing the diversity of today’s students and the complexity of modern life, many campuses make it easier than ever before for students to study abroad, to obtain work experience, to transfer to another campus, and to “stop out,” for a variety of personal reasons.

At the same time, state budget pressures in recent years have forced many campuses to reduce the numbers of both teaching faculty and support staff. One hears on the campus and reads in the Chronicle of Higher Education student complaints about access to needed courses, and about poor advisement. Ironically, these conditions come just as there is renewed interest in making it possible for students to speed up their studies and graduate in less than four years (Johnstone, 1993). Parents, legislators, and educators alike are concerned that students make satisfactory progress toward degree completion.

Those students we have chosen to call “extenders” have attracted much attention over the last several years. Several states—California, Florida, Oregon, and Texas among them—have taken or have proposed to take action against students characterized as staying in college too long and accumulating excessive credits. Policies aimed at charging students a higher tuition when they take more courses than needed to graduate have been introduced. Florida has set state caps on the number of credits that can be required of students in particular program areas. The University of Texas is concerned that its seniors are taking class seats away from new freshmen. While some lawmakers see this as a