



TIME TO COMPLETION PROJECT

Many barriers that extend student time to completion can be addressed through improvements in policy and practice. States, systems, and institutions have begun to experiment with new ideas that hold real promise for promoting timely completion. Building on those experiments, Jobs for the Future's *Time to Completion* project has two goals:

- > Expanding what we know about time to completion through research and analysis; and
- > Advocating for policies and practices leading to more timely completion for a greater number of students.

BACKGROUND

To remain competitive in the evolving global economy, the United States must increase postsecondary credential attainment rates. The challenge is to improve the productivity of the U.S. higher education system so that more students graduate within existing resources.

However, the goal must be not just to increase attainment rates but to ensure that more students graduate *in a timely manner*. Extended time to completion—students accumulating excess credits and enrolling for additional semesters—is a critical barrier to increasing the productivity of U.S. higher education. Today, the achievement of an Associate's degree within two years or a Bachelor's degree within four years is no longer the norm.

Students are spending more time than ever to complete a postsecondary credential. Currently, fewer than half of first-time-in-college students who attend full time graduate with a Bachelor's degree within four years. At the same time, many community college systems report that students are graduating with average credit accumulations far exceeding the state standard for an Associate's degree. The average time to completion for a student who *transfers* to a Bachelor's degree-granting institution from a community college is 16 months longer than a student who began at such an institution. Nontraditional students, including those who delayed initial enrollment, attend part-time to work while enrolled, or have a family, are the students least likely to complete a degree in five years.

As students extend their credential or degree paths, they accrue more debt and delay reaping their increased earning potential. By utilizing campus resources and accumulating excess credits, these students cost institutions more money than those who complete on

time. In an era of diminishing resources and increasing enrollment demand, states and postsecondary systems need to explore new ways to move students more efficiently towards degree completion.

JFF APPROACH

Funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and in support of the Foundation's goal of raising the U.S. degree attainment rate to 60 percent by 2025, the *Time to Completion* project will:

- > Offer web-based policy resources;
- > Commission additional research to further illuminate student time-to-completion patterns;
- > Develop analytic tools for states, systems, and institutions to identify time-to-completion policy barriers and estimate the costs of extended time to completion;
- > Convene policymakers to address current challenges; and
- > Develop promising solutions to promote more timely completion.

This work is organized around an integrated policy framework for student progression identifying key policy levers that have the greatest impact on time to completion. Initial research points to developmental education, financial aid policy, transferring credit, and degree/program requirements as important policy levers for changes in current time-to-completion trends (see next page).

TIME TO COMPLETION POLICY FRAMEWORK

		STUDENT PROGRESSION			
		STARTING STRONG	PERSISTING		COMPLETING ON TIME
LEVERS		Developmental Education	Financing College	Transferring Credit	Degree/Program Requirements
FACTORS		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement testing • Student support programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal and state financial aid policies • Increasing tuition and fees • FAFSA regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulation agreements • Advising • Accreditation standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandated program credit hours • Infrastructure (course numbering, general ed requirements, etc) • Course offerings (when, where, how offered)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course design and delivery • Instruction/Faculty development • Advising 			
POLICY OPTIONS		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accelerated Credit • Supplemental Instruction • Learning communities • Modularized/leveled courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiated tuition structures • Performance funding mechanisms and formulas • Inclusive financial aid policy • "Just in time" grants and restructure timing of aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local, regional, system, state, multi-state articulation agreements • Common program requirements, common course numbering • Rewarding student retention and transfer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology and distance learning • Advising and student tracking mechanisms • Targeted performance indicators • Alternative performance outcome measurements

All *Time to Completion* resources will be available at www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/projects/pages/time-completion-ttc. Several features are currently available on the web site:

- > A brief video introduction of time to completion;
- > An overview of policy levers for changes in current time-to-completion trends;
- > An idea library detailing emerging time to completion ideas and solutions;
- > A database of time to completion policy and research; and
- > A set of high-leverage policy options for state and system policymakers to consider.

Early in 2010, JFF will develop and disseminate three tools for institution leaders and policymakers:

- > *A Time to Completion template*. The template will be a guide for college and university administrators on how to conduct a time-to-completion analysis, disaggregated by different student and institution factors. It also will discuss why documenting time-to-completion trends can be as important an indicator as cohort graduation rates.
- > *A Time to Completion policy audit*. Carrying out a time-to-completion audit will help system-level policymakers identify which policies facilitate timely degree completion. This tool, a step-by-step guide geared to those in systems offices making decisions on academic policies, will focus on identifying options that have the most leverage to improve time to completion.
- > *Time to Completion calculator*. This resource will measure the per-student cost of extended time to a degree. Created for state legislators and other state-level higher education policymakers, the calculator will be adopted for states that fund based on students' credit hours and/or annual student full-time equivalent enrollments.