

Reasons Why Your College Student Might Not Graduate in Four Years

Posted by: College Parents of America

According to national statistics, the average for students graduating from college is now five years rather than four years. Objectively, we may hear that statistic and find it moderately interesting. However, when it is *our* college student who may take more than four years to complete his college education, we may become not only very interested, but alarmed. We may have seen this coming or we may be taken by surprise. We may understand the reasons or we may not. We may consider the reasons sensible or we may find them ridiculous. We may take the news in stride or we may be angry and upset.

If it becomes clear that your student will need more than the perceived "normal" four years to complete her college degree, you and she will probably need to have a conversation. Whether the extra time is intentional or takes you both by surprise, you'll need to make some plans that may include some strategizing and altering of financial or other considerations. There are many factors that might cause a student to need extra time to complete a degree. Understanding some of the factors may help you to realize what has happened, or may help you and your student anticipate or prevent a delay. Here are a few factors that might affect your student's time to completion of her degree.

- Taking a light course load. Many students (and their parents) determine that they would like to take a lighter than normal course load for one or more semesters. A student may be concerned about doing well with a heavy load, or may have outside-of-school family or work obligations. Taking a lighter course load may make sense. A student who consistently takes a lighter load, however, will not accumulate enough credits to graduate in time.
- A change of direction or major. Many students are able to change from one major to another and not lose any time toward their degree. Of course, one factor may be the timing of the change. The earlier a student changes major, the easier the change may be. For some students, and some majors, changing major may mean adding additional courses and may mean extra time.
- Failing too many classes. A student who fails classes will need to make up credits and may need extra time.
- Withdrawing from too many classes. If a student withdraws from too many classes, she will need to make up the extra credits.
- Not keeping track of requirements. It is possible for a student to take an appropriate number of credits each semester, but fail to take certain required classes – either all college requirements, or requirements for the major. This student may be taken by surprise when she discovers that she has missed important classes and needs to take them later.
- Taking time off. Some students hit a stumbling block at some point during their college years. They may need an academic break, may encounter health issues, or may have family issues that require them to take a break. This may mean that the four year timetable is no longer appropriate.
- Lack of direction. Although entering college undecided about a major may be a very good thing for keeping options open, a student who takes too long to decide about a major may miss the opportunity to take certain courses in a timely sequence. He may need extra time to take required courses or course sequences.

- Transferring to another college. Many students transfer from one college to another and carry all of their previous credits with them. Your student may never miss a beat during a transfer. Other students may find that some of their credits will not transfer and that they will need extra time to make up for lost credits.
- Completing one (or several) internships. Many employers today look for experience on candidates' resumes. An internship – or multiple internships – is a good way for a student to set himself apart. Many students are able to complete internships for credit as part of their normal course load. Other students may decide that spending an extra semester to complete a prime internship will be worth the extra time spent as a student.
- Study abroad. More and more students today are spending some time studying abroad. Most students are able to study abroad and still graduate on time. However, if the study abroad opportunity slows down your student's progress, he will need to consider whether the life experience may be worth some extra time.
- Completing a double major. Depending on your student's goals, she may decide to complete a double major – combining two areas of interest. Again, many students are able to complete a double major without adding extra time. However, if your student makes a decision late, or plans to combine two complicated or complex majors, she may need extra time. The double major may be worth the extra time.
- Low GPA. Many colleges have a required minimum GPA (grade point average) for graduation. If your student has struggled and is below the minimum required GPA, he may need to spend an extra semester working to raise his GPA to acceptable standards.
- Taking extra classes. Your student may discover that there are some extra classes that will improve his marketability and/or career options. He may decide to spend an extra semester taking important classes that will benefit him when he begins his job search.

There are many factors that can affect your student's timetable for completing his degree. Some causes can be avoided, some can be anticipated, and some are unexpected. As a college parent, you may have little influence over these factors. However, understanding potential reasons, and possibly discussing them early with your student, will help everyone to remain open and flexible no matter what situation may arise.

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