



## How Long do Students Take to Graduate in the State University System?

### Average Time-to-Degree

Students who took the traditional path to a bachelor degree—those who started and finished at the same institution—averaged 4.3 years to complete their degrees at State University System (SUS) institutions in 2002-03. 12.4% took 3.5 years or less, 54.2% took 4 years or less, 69.5%

took 4.5 years or less, and 86.5% took 5 years or less. (See “Definitions” at the end of this Information Brief.)

Of the graduates from larger degree programs, those in Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Sociology took the longest time to graduate. Those in Speech Pathology, Management Science and Advertising took the shortest time.

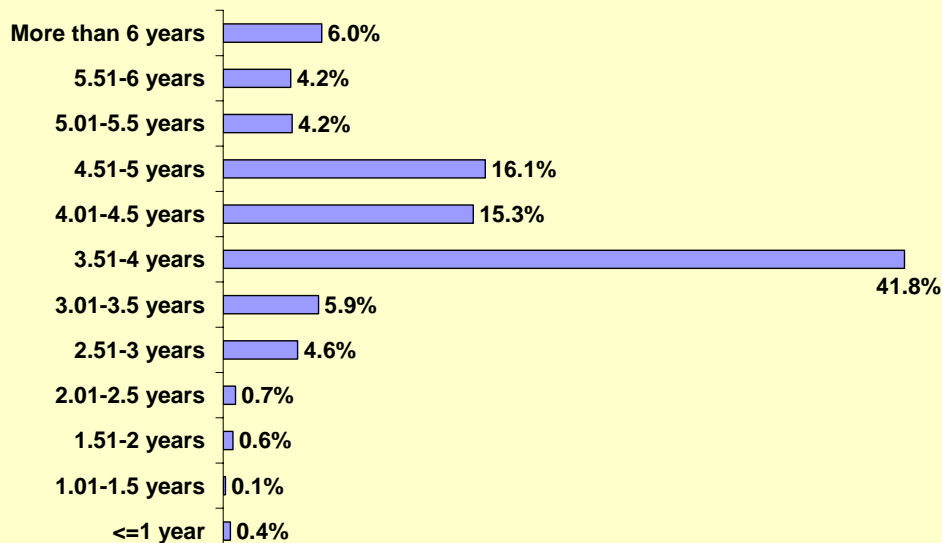
Graduates who transferred from Florida Community Colleges with AA degrees took an average of 2.7 years to finish their bachelor degrees.

### Time-to-Degree and “Graduation Rates”

Time-to-degree is a measure of how long students took from admission to graduation. Graduation rates are a measure of the odds that a student who starts at an institution will finish a degree there within a certain period of time. Unlike time-to-degree, graduation rates are reduced by students who leave an institution as well as by those who take longer than a certain length of time.

The six-year graduation rate for the SUS is 61% (See Information Brief 2004-01). Many students transfer out of the SUS or leave education altogether. Yet, of the beginning students who do graduate, 94% take six years or less—their “time-to-degree.”

Percent of 2002-03 Graduates Completing Within Specified Time (Native Students)



Time-to-Degree for Native SUS Graduates, 2002-2003 (Majors with More Than 100 Graduates)		
LONGEST TIME-TO-DEGREE		
	Avg. Yrs.	# of Grads
Civil Engineering	5.1	118
Mechanical Engineering	5.0	157
Sociology	4.8	207
Electrical Engineering	4.7	192
Recreation/Leisure Studies	4.7	116
SHORTEST TIME-TO-DEGREE		
	Avg. Yrs.	# of Grads
Radio & TV Broadcasting	4.1	139
Public Relations	4.0	156
Advertising	4.0	190
Management Science	3.9	126
Speech Pathology and Audiology	3.7	122

“excess” credits were earned in upper-division courses. On average, graduates had earned 3.9 excess hours of upper-division courses. These accounted for 24% of excess hours.

Other sources of “excess” hours included lower division courses (1.2 hours per graduate, or 8% of the total),

courses transferred from other SUS institutions (0.7 hours per graduate or 5% of the total), and courses the university counted as “used toward the degree” but that were in excess of the catalog requirement. These might include a 4 credit course used to satisfy a 3 credit requirement, for example. These accounted for 2.2 hours per graduate, or 14% of the total.

## What Factors Affect Time-to-Degree?

The number of years students take to graduate is determined by:

- 1) The total number of credits students attempt to earn their degree.
- 2) The average course load attempted by students, or the “intensity” of their attendance pattern.

## Total Numbers of Credits Attempted

Of the two factors affecting the length of time to graduate, only the total number of credits attempted significantly affects the capacity of the system or the cost to the state. A student who takes 6 credits a term may take ten years to finish, but is only taking up half as much space as a student who takes 12 credits a term and finishes in five years. On the other hand, a student who takes 150 credits to graduate has taken up 25% more class space than one who takes 120.

Credits taken by students that are not required for their degree are classified as “excess” hours.

The biggest source of “excess hours” are courses that students withdraw from, fail, or repeat in order to earn a higher grade (for example, if a student earns a D but needs a C to move to the next course in a sequence). On average, SUS graduates had 4.2 hours of withdrawn, 2.4 hours of failed, and 1.5 hours of repeated courses. These accounted for 50% of all “excess” hours in the State University System.

The next largest group of

Types of "Excess" Credit Attempted by the 35,300 SUS Graduates in 2002-03 (Single Major, First Bachelor Degree Only)		
	Average	Total
Catalog Hours Required	120.9	
Total Hours Used Toward Degree	123.1	
Difference	2.2	78,280
Excess Lower Division Credit Earned	1.2	43,238
Excess Upper Division Credit Earned	3.9	136,322
Withdrawn Courses	4.2	149,610
Failed Courses	2.4	84,966
Repeated Courses	1.5	51,869
Hours from Another SUS Institution	0.7	25,701
Total Excess Hours	16.1	569,987

## Why do Students Accumulate Excess Hours?

Without asking students directly, it is difficult to tell.

Students who change majors have more excess credits due to withdrawals, repeats, and failed courses, as well as more excess upper division credits earned than students who do not change majors. Some students may find they are not prepared for the level of math in an engineering or accounting major; some may change their minds about their major.

In fact, most students do change majors for one reason or another over the course of their careers. Of the 2002-03 graduates, 65% changed majors at least once. Some changes, such as from business to finance, may involve few or no additional courses if done early enough, but others, such as from chemistry to accounting, may result in new course requirements. Those chemistry courses, whether passed or failed, are unlikely to help with the accounting degree.

Excess credits may also be accumulated when students choose to take additional courses that are not required. This may happen, for example, when

- math majors who want to become teachers

take additional education courses,

- education majors take additional courses in the subjects they plan to teach,
- students who need fewer than 12 credits to graduate in their last term take additional courses in subjects related to their degree, or
- business majors take courses in biology or chemistry to help get into medical school or get jobs in the pharmaceutical industry.

Finally, some transfer students have to take foreign language, even though it does not count toward the degree. While students entering the SUS directly from high school are

SUS Courses Contributing the Most Excess Credit Earned, 2002-03 Graduates		
Course Number	Course Name	Total Credits Earned and Not Used Toward Degree
SPN 120	Spanish I	2,246
ECO 100	Managerial Economics	1,759
CHM 046	General Chemistry II	1,328
SPN 121	Spanish II	1,315
ACG 021	Principles of Financial Accounting	1,290
PHY 053	Physics 1	1,211
ECO 023	Microeconomics	1,143
PHY 054	Physics 2	1,106
BSC 011	Principles of Biology 2	1,096
MAR 023	Principles of Marketing	1,092

required to have taken high school foreign language, transfer students who did not take a foreign language in high school have to make up the foreign language admission requirement before they can graduate.

## “Intensity” of Student Attendance

A normal “full-time” load is considered 12 or more credits. In fall 2003, 76% of all SUS undergraduates were full-time. Students are more likely to be full-time when they start out. While 94% of freshmen were full-time, only 64% of seniors were taking 12 or more credits.

Students may take lighter course loads in order to take more challenging courses or keep up their grades—to maintain scholarships or qualify for admission to particular majors, for example—but the need or desire to work may be the biggest factor limiting students’ ability to take more credits.

The more students work, the fewer credits they take, and vice versa. Wage records from the Florida Education, Training and Placement Information Program (FETPIP) show that 60% of students who were taking 9 credits in fall 2002 were employed, with median earnings of \$4,058 for the quarter. This is equivalent to working 39 hours a week at \$8/hr or 31 hours a week at \$10/hr. On the other hand, only 46% of those taking 18 credits were found employed, with median earnings of \$1,620, equivalent to working 16 hours a week at \$8/hr or 12 hours at \$10/hr.

## Employment and Earnings of Fall 2002 SUS Students by Course Load

Students taking . . .	# Employed	# Not Employed	% Employed	Median Wages of Those Employed	Equivalent Weekly Hours at Minimum Wage	Equivalent Weekly Hours at \$8/hr	Equivalent Weekly Hours at \$10/hr
9 Credits	7,052	2,833	60%	\$ 4,058	61	39	31
12 Credits	17,663	13,677	56%	\$ 2,180	33	21	17
15 Credits	7,187	7,250	50%	\$ 1,779	27	17	14
18 Credits	872	1,041	46%	\$ 1,620	24	16	12

SUS Undergraduates Enrolled Fall 2002, Fourth Quarter 2002 FETPIP Earnings

Students who take fewer courses may also have more family responsibilities that are not captured in this data.

Interruptions in attendance also reduce the rate at which students earn credits. More than half (55%) of all students who started in 1997-98 had "stopped out" (that is, interrupted their studies for at least one fall or spring term) by 2002-03. Interruptions may occur when students need to work, become ill or need to take care of family members, or when they have academic or financial difficulty maintaining continuous enrollment.

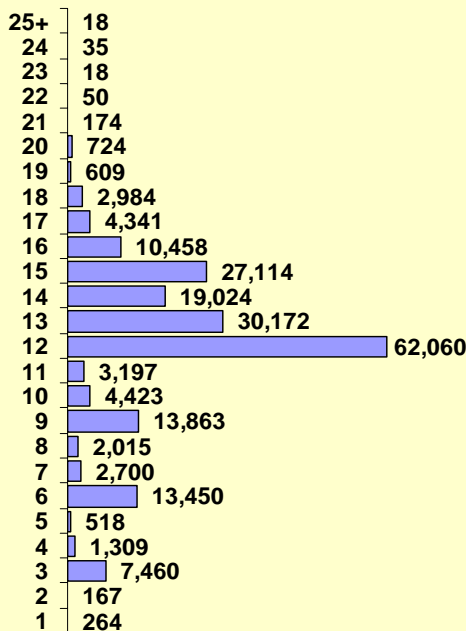
## Definitions

Time-to-degree was calculated assuming a May 7 degree date for spring, December 21 for fall, and August 7 for summer term graduates. The number of years to degree was the difference between this date and the starting date of the term admitted, using assumed dates of August 24 for fall, January 2 for spring, and May 7 for summer terms. In Information Brief #1, an average 4.4 years to degree was reported based on a calculation that used only the month and year for degree and first term attended. Using assumed dates produces a more accurate estimate.

report is available through [www.cepri.state.fl.us](http://www.cepri.state.fl.us).

The National Center for Education Statistics' report, *Baccalaureate and Beyond: A Descriptive Summary of 1999-2000 Bachelor's Degree Recipients, 1 Year Later -- With an Analysis of Time to Degree* is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003165.pdf>. Although definitions and methodologies are somewhat different, findings in this report are very similar to Florida's time-to-degree figures. Nationally, public institution graduates who did not transfer took an average of 52.9 months (4.4 years) to graduate (see page 34 of the report).

**Credit Hours Attempted by SUS Undergraduates, Fall 2003**



## Where Can I Learn More?

The Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement's study, *Postsecondary Progression of 1993-94 Florida Public High School Graduates: 2002 Update*, examined time-to-degree (measured in number of terms enrolled) for 1993-94 high school graduates who had received bachelor degrees by 2002. The study found that the biggest factors in time-to-degree were students' high school GPA, interruptions in attendance, and the major course of study pursued. The

*Planning and Institutional Research  
Division of Colleges and Universities  
Florida Department of Education  
325 West Gaines Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399  
850-245-0470  
chancellor@fldoe.org*