

Time to Degree at Oakton: Summer School, Developmental Courses, Transfer of Credits, and Continuous Enrollment



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Introduction

Nationally, “time to degree” is an issue attracting attention from policy-makers and the public, who are concerned about time it takes students to complete their college studies. While a host of factors affect time to degree, some within an institution’s control and some not, most reports about institutional effectiveness and accountability use some measure of time to degree as an indicator of quality. The most common measure is probably the National Center for Education Statistic’s Student-Right-To-Know graduation rate survey, which for community colleges measures the percent of first-time, full-time students who complete their associate degrees or certificates within 150% of the time required for a full-time student to complete the curriculum. For associate degree students, this is translated as three years. Oakton’s graduation rate is 10-12 percent, less than peer institutions in the area.¹

However, “time to degree” can also be defined differently, and in a manner more suitable for colleges whose students attend on a part-time basis and may stop in and stop out over the years. This way is to look at the number of terms of attendance that it takes a student to earn the degree. How long, as measured by terms of attendance, does it take a student to earn an Oakton associate degree in a transfer area?

The purpose of this report is to examine “time to degree” in several ways. One is by looking at summer school attendance, because by attending summer school, students may reduce the number of calendar years it takes to earn a degree. The second perspective for examining time to degree is by examining several key factors that might affect the number of terms it takes a student to earn the degree.

Overall, the report is intended to shed light on students’ use of summer school and other factors affecting the time it takes them to earn an associate degree. The study is based on the 1449 students who earned an associate degree in a transfer field between spring 2000 and summer 2005.

Summer School, Developmental Courses, Transfer of Credits and Continuous Enrollment

Summer School

One way in which students can accelerate their time to degree, reduce their loads during regular fall and semester terms, and / or smooth their attendance over 12 months rather than just 9 months, is by enrolling in summer school. One purpose of this research report is to examine the use of summer school by Oakton students who received associate degrees in transfer

¹ The graduation rate data published by the National Center for Education Statistics includes students who received certificates as well as associate degrees. Oakton has now begun to audit students’ records and award certificates to eligible students who did not apply for them. Approximately 600 certificates were awarded in the 2004-05 year using this approach. Eventually this may boost the graduation rate, but it will be several years before we will know.

programs between spring 2000 and summer 2005. The report also provides insights that may be useful for advising students with respect to summer school attendance and for marketing summer school.

Oakton regularly attracts approximately 6,500 students for the summer term, with more than 9,000 course enrollments. Many conversations within the college note the large percentage of summer students who attend Oakton in the summer only, primarily to transfer credits to their home colleges and universities. Less attention seems to be paid to Oakton students who also take courses during the summer, although 58 percent of summer school students take Oakton courses in the regular academic year preceding and/or succeeding their summer terms, and 46 percent of summer school students are continuing from the preceding fall or spring.

A major new study of community college students by Clifford Adelman (2005) notes the importance of summer school attendance for successful students. For example, Adelman found that for high school class of 1992 students who started their postsecondary careers at and earned any credits from community colleges, the probability of transferring to a four-year school was 38.2 percent greater for students who earned more than 4 credits in summer school than for students who earned no summer school credits (pp. 85-86). He also found that of this group of students, earning any credits in summer school increased the probability of completing a bachelor's degree by 20 percent (p. 114). Adelman summarizes his findings about summer school by stating that "In accelerating student momentum toward degrees or transfer, the histories we read tell us to treat the year as a calendar year, not an academic year. Successful students themselves use the summer terms ... and rearrange their temporal furniture so as to attenuate stress in the other terms of the calendar year" (p. 119).

We looked at the number of terms, including summer, students attended Oakton through the term in which they received their associate degree; the number of summer terms they attended; and the percent of terms represented by summers. Findings are in Table 1.

As data in Table 1 show, 40 percent of degree recipients attend Oakton for six or fewer terms before earning their degree, another 37 percent attend for 7-9 terms, and the remaining 23 percent are at Oakton for 10 or more terms before completing their associate degrees. Two-thirds of degree recipients attend for at least one summer session.

Table 1
All Terms, Summer Terms, and Pct Summer Terms Attended
Transfer Associate Degree Recipients, Spring 2000-Summer 2005

All terms attended, including summers			Summer terms attended			Percent of terms represented by summer		
Number all terms	Number students	Pct. students	Number summer terms	Number students	Pct. students	Percent terms	Number students	Pct. students
			0	476	33%	0	476	33%
1	6	<1%	1	465	32%	< ¼	537	37%
2	20	1%	2	313	22%	¼ - ½	389	27%
3	43	3%	3	146	10%	½-3/4	43	3%
4	82	6%	4	38	3%	> 3/4	4	<1%
5	183	13%	5	7	<1%			
6	235	16%	6	2	<1%			
7	217	15%	7	0	0%			
8	173	12%	8	2	<1%			
9	147	10%						
10	93	6%						
11	65	4%						
12	55	4%						
13	40	3%						
14	23	2%						
15	20	1%						
16	9	1%						
17	13	1%						
18	12	1%						
19	3	<1%						
20 or more	9	1%						

To enhance our understanding of students' progress to their associate degrees, we next examined the number of terms and attendance in summer terms based on three factors that affect progress: need for developmental courses, credits transferred to Oakton, and continuous versus discontinuous enrollment.

Developmental courses

Table 2 presents data about the need for developmental courses among associate degree recipients. Data are based on students' initial course placement results in reading, writing and mathematics. As the data indicate, approximately one-quarter of the associate degree recipients initially placed into developmental reading/writing or had no placement tests. Because English 101 and English 102 are required for the degree, students without placement tests had undoubtedly taken at least English 101 at another college or university. Nearly half the associate degree recipients (46%) initially placed into developmental mathematics (below the 100 level). Recall that MAT 120: Intermediate Algebra is a prerequisite for any math course that meets general education requirements. Thus nearly half the degree recipients needed at least two math courses (developmental and MAT 120) before being able to take their general education math course. Looking at all subjects, 40 percent of degree recipients required no developmental work, 35 percent required work in one subject, 18 percent in two subjects, and 7 percent in all three subjects.

We did not examine the level of developmental coursework required within each subject; e.g., some students may have needed just one developmental course in a subject such as mathematics, while others may have needed several courses just to reach the college level in that field.

**Table 2
Need for Developmental Courses Among Associate Degree Recipients**

Subject and Developmental Level	Number of Students	Pct. Of Students
Reading		
Developmental	325	22%
College-level or no test	1,124	78%
Writing		
Developmental	348	24%
College-level or no test	1,101	76%
Mathematics		
Developmental	667	46%
College-level or no test	782	54%
Number of subjects in which placed into developmental		
0	575	40%
1	614	35%
2	254	18%
3	106	7%

We next looked at the mean number of terms it took degree recipients to complete their studies by the number of areas in which they needed at least one developmental course. Table 3 provides findings.

Table 3
Terms for Degree by Number of Developmental Course Subjects

Number Development Course Areas	Number of Students	Mean Terms of Attendance	Std. Dev.
0	575	6.7	3.4
1	514	8.0	2.8
2	253	9.2	3.5
3	106	9.4	2.8

Key findings are that 60 percent of associate degree recipients needed at least one developmental course, and nearly half (46%) required developmental mathematics. The need for developmental courses among associate degree recipients is clearly one factor affecting the length of time and/or number of terms needed to complete the degree.

Credits Transferred to Oakton

A second factor affecting time to degree and terms of attendance is the number of credits transferred to Oakton from other colleges and universities. We were able to tabulate the total number of transferred credits, but did not scrutinize them to determine how many applied to the associate degree. As data in Table 4 show, two-thirds of Oakton degree recipients earned all their credits at Oakton, and only one-third transferred credits to the College. Oakton requires that at least 15 of the last 21 credit hours be taken at Oakton. Thus a student can use a maximum of 45 transfer credits for the associate degree; 18 individuals transferred more than 45 credits to Oakton. The mean and standard deviation (s.d.) of credits transferred reveals that the average is equal to approximately 1 ½ semesters of full-time study based on 15 credits per term, and two-thirds of students transferring in credits transferred between 8 and 38 credits. We next looked at the mean number of terms it took degree recipients to complete their studies by the number credits transferred to Oakton. These findings are also included in Table 4.

Table 4
Credits Transferred to Oakton By Associate Degree Recipients and Terms for Degree

Number Transfer Credits	Number of Students	Percent of Students	Mean Terms of Attendance	Std. Dev.
0	945	65%	8.3	3.2
1-9 credits	110	8%	8.9	4.0
10-18 credits	121	8%	7.6	2.6
19-27 credits	88	6%	6.5	3.2
28 or more credits	186	13%	5.5	2.9
Mean credits transferred by students who transferred 1 or more credits: 23.2 (s.d. 15.0)				

The key findings here are that two-thirds of Oakton’s associate degree recipients take all their work at Oakton, and that of the remaining third, many transfer in the equivalent of about one year of work. Findings also show that, not surprisingly, associate degree recipients who transfer in more credits also attend Oakton for fewer semesters than those who don’t transfer credits, with one exception. Students who transfer 1-9 credits to Oakton actually take more terms to complete their degrees than students who have no credits from other institutions.

Continuous versus Discontinuous Enrollment

To examine continuous or discontinuous enrollment at Oakton, we calculated the number of possible terms of attendance, including summer, between the first term a student was at the College and the term in which the associate degree was awarded. We called this “elapsed terms.” The range was from one to 85 terms between the first term of attendance and the term in which the degree was awarded, with a mean of 12.2. Just over one-half the degree recipients (52%) graduated in nine or fewer terms, another 25 percent graduated in 10-13 terms, and the rest took longer than 13 terms to complete their associate degrees.

These data do not indicate, however, whether students were actually at Oakton in all possible terms. Therefore, we next calculated the percentage of possible terms of attendance in which a student was actually at Oakton, including summer terms. We did this by dividing the number of terms of attendance by the elapsed terms of attendance, calling the variable “continuous attendance.” Seventy-five percent of degree recipients attended in two-thirds or more of the possible terms they could come to Oakton. Recalling that summer sessions constitute approximately one-third of all terms, this suggests degree earners do not stop out for long periods of time. While there are, of course, exceptions (four percent of degree earners took 10 years or more to complete their degrees), a key finding is that continuous enrollment is a factor associated with degree completion.

Concluding Observations

This brief report is intended to provide insights into the attendance patterns of students who earn associate degrees in transfer areas at Oakton, and to examine the terms it takes a student to earn a degree by the need for developmental coursework, transfer of credits to Oakton, and continuous enrollment.

Attendance during the summer session is an important aspect of completing an associate degree at Oakton. One-third of the graduates attended at least one summer term, and another third attended two or more summer terms.

Not surprisingly, degree recipients who required more developmental courses attended Oakton for more terms than those who did not need developmental work. Graduates who transferred more than 9 credits to Oakton required fewer terms as well. Finally, most graduates enrolled on a fairly continuous basis before completing their degrees. While public relations stories and anecdotes showcase students who take years to earn their degrees, findings from this study indicate that most graduates do not stop out for long periods of time or extend their studies over many years.

These findings may be useful to advisors assisting students with their college and enrollment plans at Oakton, and to those creating marketing plans for the College. Clearly, summer school is an important component of the path toward an associate degree at Oakton.

References

Adelman, C. 2005. "Moving Into Town-and Moving On: The Community College in the Lives of Traditional-age Students." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.