

# The Presidency

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## GETTING IT DONE

### The Attainment Issue

How to Graduate on Time

Attainment = Retention

Getting It Together



In 2015, the standard university categories in the United States—"four-year" and "two-year"—are alarmingly inaccurate. In fact, a recent Complete College America survey found that "only 50 of the more than 580 public four-year institutions in America have on-time [four-year] graduation rates at or above 50 percent for their full-time students." In Georgia, the average on-time graduation rate at public four-year institutions is under 30 percent.

Extended attendance and inefficient credit attainment are costing students and their families billions of dollars and diminishing earnings potential for our young workers. While not all students are able to attend full time and aim for on-time graduation, clearly we can—and must—do better.

Recognizing that imperative, the University System of Georgia launched Complete College Georgia in 2011 in alliance with Complete College America, an initiative that works with member institutions to develop and implement solutions.

Our challenge at Georgia Regents University (GRU) was great: When two universities consolidated to create GRU in January 2013, the *six-year* graduation rate of our undergraduate student population was just over 25 percent. And so we made improving student completion rates a top priority of our new university.



# How to Graduate on Time

By Ricardo Azziz

We aggressively and rapidly tackled our low graduation rate through a combination of programs to address the retention and progression of our students, many of whom had already successfully completed more than 90 credit hours. We initiated programs to boost student engagement, increase student academic and career advising, provide additional mental health support and counseling, and provide "completion promise" scholarships to assist students who are struggling financially. Our six-year graduation rate today, two years after consolidation, stands at 32 percent; still a work in progress, but dramatically better than just three years ago.

One of the more successful strategies to enhance student progression and on-time graduation is our 4 Years 4 U program, launched in fall 2013.

## Gaining Ground

Implementation of 4 Years 4 U required an overhaul of GRU's academic advising program to make it more robust, student-friendly, and accessible; a revision of our tuition structure to incentivize enrollment at 15 credit hours per term; and concerted efforts to market the existence of the program and its worthiness to students and parents.

One common impediment to an on-time graduation begins during the first semester of college life, when many students elect the minimum 12 credits required to be considered "full time" and qualify for financial aid.

Indeed, at GRU, only 8 percent of freshmen attempted 15 or more credit hours in the fall of 2012, with fewer than 4 percent actually completing these. With four-year bachelor's degrees requiring 120 (or more) earned credit hours, the 12-per-semester rate would add at least one more year to the typical college sojourn—an unnecessary expense for already budget-



constrained students and their families. It also delays the start of a career and the earnings that go with it.

Thus, a defining element of 4 Years 4 U is a written student pledge to make every effort to achieve graduation in four years. While neither contractual nor legally binding, the pledge is more than ceremonial. It cements in the minds of students, parents, and GRU advisors the desired goal—graduation in four years—while making all aware of the resources available to attain it.

In addition, students and their families are made aware of a prior tuition policy that allowed us to charge students a flat rate for 10 credit hours or more per semester. This financial incentive was quickly understood by parents and students alike.

## Real Results

Two years into the program, we are delighted with the progress being made. The number of new freshmen attempting 15 or more credit hours in the fall of 2013—the first year of 4 Years 4 U—rose from 8 percent to 71 percent, and the number who successfully completed 15 credit hours rose an amazing tenfold to 42 percent. In the fall of 2014, it was even higher: 90 percent of new freshmen signed the pledge and enrolled with 15 or more credit hours, and 56 percent of freshmen successfully completed them.

Of course, it's not enough to sign up—students have to succeed. To that end, we strengthened our student advisement program and added online academic planning and tracking tools for real-time assessment of student performance. As part of 4 Years 4 U, GRU's advising staff creates and sustains a two-way dialogue with freshmen and sophomores to educate our students on the benefits of on-time graduation and provides a methodical, well-guided approach for getting there.

We have also built up our campus experience, including expanded orientation and convocation events, as well as student leadership, academic, and social opportunities, all of which engage our students with university life and create the bonds

and competencies that will help them succeed.

Now that students are receiving the support they need to make steady progress toward graduation, the results have been dramatic. In addition to the significant increase in 15-credit completion, our retention rate

(freshmen who return for their second year)

has risen more than 3 percent since the fall of 2011, and their progression rate (freshman who progress to sophomore status) has increased from 15 percent in the fall of 2012 to 40 percent for freshmen who entered in the fall of 2013. Together, these metrics, along with our improving graduation rates, are clear evidence that our efforts to ensure student success are bearing fruit.

Of course, the true test for 4 Years 4 U will come in 2017, when the program's first class is scheduled to graduate. Nevertheless, we are heartened by the feedback from participating students and their parents. They are eager to see tangible evidence of a positive return on their collegiate investment, and rightfully demand more value for their money. A timelier graduation will help deliver that value.

4 Years 4 U alone won't solve all problems faced by students today. But it is a simple, efficient, and dramatic step in ensuring that life-altering degrees are earned more quickly and cost-effectively. ■



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