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Redefine 'Full Time' So Students Can Graduate on Time, Paper Suggests

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Salt Lake City

Seven out of 10 college students who fit the federal government's definition of being enrolled full time couldn't earn an associate degree in two years or a bachelor's degree in four even if they never changed majors, failed a course, or took one they didn't need, according to a new policy brief from Complete College America.

The report, released here on Tuesday at the nonprofit organization's annual summit of member states, is based on a survey of students' fall course loads at 158 public two-year and 171 public four-year colleges across 30 states.

As defined by the federal government for the purposes of financial aid, a "full-time student" must take 12 credit hours per semester. But to complete a degree on time, students who aren't attending summer school need to take 15 credit hours per semester, the report notes. Even among students who are classified as full time, fewer than half are doing that.

"Most students, across both sectors, are not taking the credit hours it would take to graduate on time, even if they do everything right," said Nate Johnson, principal consultant with Postsecondary Analytics, which conducted the survey with Complete College America.

Making 15 credit hours the standard course load would be a "game changing" strategy, says the group, which is promoting that and other approaches around the country as it works to improve college-completion rates. About 200 delegates from 34 states that have pledged to pursue the group's agenda attended the two-day meeting here.

Students who complete 30 credits a year are not only more likely to graduate on time; they're also less likely to drop out, according to the brief. Seventeen percent of students who completed 30 credits in their first year dropped out within six years, compared with 23 percent of those who took 24 to 29 credit hours in that first year.

Educators from Hawaii and Utah described "15 to Finish" campaigns that use social media to get the word out about course loads to students and their parents.

One challenge, though, is that the federal Pell Grant program and most state aid programs cap support for students at 12 credits per term. That creates a disincentive for them to take on more, according to another report prepared by Postsecondary Analytics.

Some states are trying to fill in the gaps for low-income students. Students in Minnesota who want to take 15 credit hours receive state grants that pick up where Pell leaves off. West Virginia is among the states where most public colleges charge a flat rate for full-time attendance, so taking 15 credits costs the same as taking 12.

Researchers at the Urban Institute and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College agreed, in a paper published this month, that Pell Grant rules penalize students who are trying to complete college on time. They recommended that those rules be changed to reward students who finish early.