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# The University of Iowa's Four-Year Graduation Plan and Its Role in Advising

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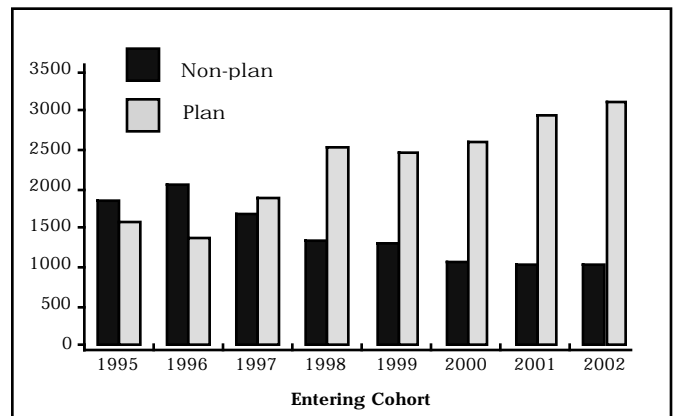
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## The University of Iowa's Four-Year Graduation Plan and Its Role in Advising

**How the plan works.** The University of Iowa first offered a Four-Year Graduation Plan to entering freshmen students in 1995. Students and parents learned about the plan during the summer orientation programs. We didn't need to "sell" the plan; the plan sold itself with more than 45% of the 1995 freshman cohort signing up. Since then, the popularity of the plan has steadily increased. In 2002, almost 75% of the new freshmen signed up (see the figure to the right.)



The Four-Year Plan is simple in design. It is structured as a contract between the University and the student in which both parties have obligations. The University promises that graduation in four years will not be delayed by the unavailability of courses. In turn, students promise that they will meet the benchmarks (called "checkpoints") that have been established for monitoring progress toward the degree. There are, of course, more details on both sides. For instance, students are offered the plan for only one major and they must take advantage of advising and early registration benefits and notify their major department in a timely way if they need help getting into a required class. The University responds in turn by helping the student get the course or courses that they need. Although the contract specifies that Iowa will pay the cost of tuition and fees if a student in good standing on the plan must take coursework beyond four years due to course unavailability, the University has never had to pay for additional coursework. The Four-Year Plan has encouraged better planning on the part of both students and departments, improving course availability for all students, not just those on the plan.

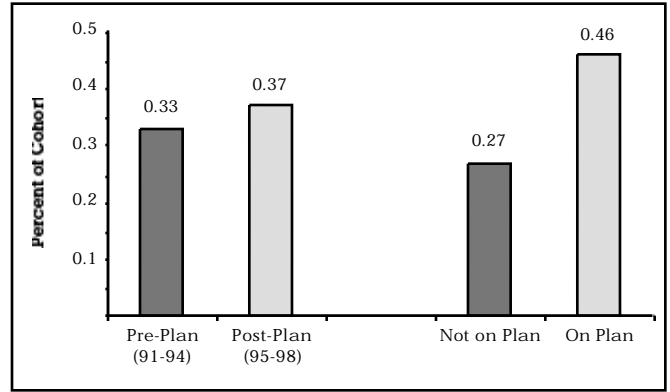
We now have data for four cohorts who had access to the plan. The leftmost columns in the figure following compare graduation rates for the four cohorts immediately before the plan was offered (1991-1994) and for the four cohorts since (1995-1998). For the pre-plan cohorts, only 33% graduated within four years.

For post-plan cohorts, the four-year rate is 37%. This 4% gain is meaningful because the data are measured across all students, whether or not they enrolled in the plan.

We can also compare graduation rates for post-plan cohorts according to whether students enrolled in the plan or not (rightmost columns in the figure).

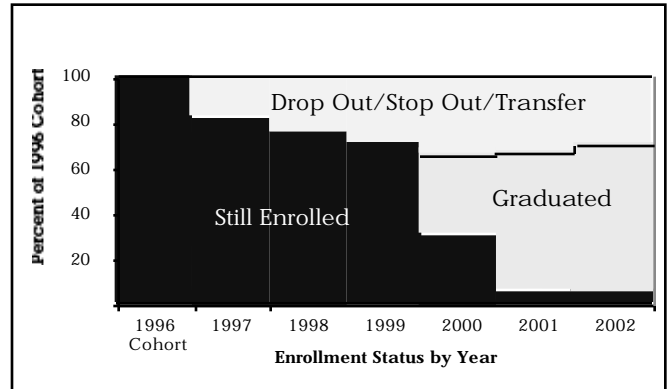
About 46% of students who enrolled in

the plan have graduated within four years. The rate for students from the same cohorts who did not enroll is 27%. Although students who enroll in the plan may differ from those who don't on a number of relevant factors, it is clear that setting a goal of four-year graduation helps students graduate in four years. We believe that the Four-Year Graduation Plan benefits students because it helps them understand that four-year graduation is an achievable goal.



**Attrition and time-to-graduation.**

Graduation rates measure the percentage of an entering cohort that graduates within a given number of years. The figure at the right shows that graduation rates reflect both time-to-graduation and attrition. The data follow the 1996 entering cohort over the six years since enrollment. The dark area



at the left represents the proportion of students who remain enrolled year by year. The area at the top area shows attrition, which starts at 17% after the first year and eventually reaches 35%. Graduation, shown by the remaining area, tends to occur in year 4 or year 5.

As is evident in the figure, very few students remain enrolled into the 6th year or beyond. This implies that the primary driver of four-year graduation rates is attrition rather than slow progress toward the degree. The table at the back of this report shows time-to-graduation (the number of years between first enrollment and graduation) for students in cohorts between 1988 and 1996 who have graduated within six years. As can be seen, time-to-graduation has fallen substantially in recent years, from 4.58 years for the 1988 cohort to 4.35 years for the 1996 cohort.

The Four-Year Plan contributes to timely graduation by helping students set goals and engage in long-term planning. Explicit long-term planning gives students a better sense of the “big picture” and how each semester contributes to their goals. Advisers in both our Academic Advising Center and in departments use the published “checkpoints” to help students plan for prerequisite sequences and for courses that may not be given every semester. Although this kind of information has always been available in the catalog for student use, the four-year graduation structure puts complex information into a context that can be easily understood by students, allowing them to feel that they are in charge of their own educations.

**Interventions aimed at reducing attrition.** Although we believe that students who graduate from Iowa do so in a reasonable time frame, we would like to reduce our attrition and thereby improve our four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates. Because attrition is greatest between the first and second years, we have focused our retention efforts on freshman students. More than 90% of all entering students at The University of Iowa receive individual professional advising at the Academic Advising Center for at least their first year. Students are required to meet with their advisers regularly for planning and registration. Advisers teach students how to: plan their academic programs of study; select courses each semester; explore possible majors; seek information on- and off-campus; and solve academic problems. Because academic advisers establish durable personal contact with students, they are a major force for student retention.

The Academic Advising Center also has developed, implemented and/or overseen a number of retention programming efforts aimed at first-year students. These are:

**The College Transition** is a traditional first-year experience course created especially for University of Iowa students. The course helps entering students make the transition to University academics and the University environment smoothly and successfully. Assignments emphasize self-reflection and improvement, as well as information and skills that students need in order to thrive at Iowa. The class is taught in small sections with an emphasis on class discussion. The course was first offered in 2001 on a pilot basis to 140 students and then in 2002 to 480 students. In fall 2003, we will offer the course to 1000 students.

**Courses in Common** is a block-scheduling program that provides first-year students with the opportunity to take two or three courses together with a group of about 20 other first-year students. Each CIC "option" is composed of general education or major courses that students typically take during their first semester. In fall 2002, about 1200 students enrolled in 60 different "options." A key benefit of CIC for students is the opportunity it provides to quickly establish social and academic connections. Indeed, around 95% of student participants

have indicated that they would recommend CIC to a friend. But instructors also report benefits, among which are that their CIC students have better attendance, class participation, and peer interaction than first-year students in general.

**IowaLink** is a first-year academic support program for recruited students who show potential for academic success but who do not meet The University of Iowa's admission standards. IowaLink helps students develop the knowledge and skills essential for academic success at the college level through a combination of instructional and academic support activities. Each student works with an academic support team composed of instructional and student services personnel. Required instructional components include a two-semester length first-year seminar, enrollment in specified general education courses and study groups.

**College Success Seminar** is a one-semester hour course designed specifically for first-year students who have been placed on probation. The purpose of the course is to teach students critical academic skills and to support them in making positive changes in their lives. Although CSS cannot prevent all these students from eventual dismissal, those who are motivated to change are helped in clearing probation and positioning themselves for a successful college career.

**OnLine@Iowa** introduces students to the broad range of electronic resources available to them at the University. The course consists of electronic assignments which students complete independently, at their own pace. A professor of Library and Information Science develops and oversees the course; teaching assistants answer students' questions and help keep track of their progress. This course has become especially important as we move increasingly to providing services and information to students through email and the world wide web.

In addition to the retention programs run by the Academic Advising Center, we also offer a variety of **Residential Learning Communities** which result from collaborations between Residence Services, a number of colleges and programs, and the Office of the Provost. Learning Communities are floors within residence halls in which students who share interests can live together and participate in special programming. The existing Learning Communities are: the Honors Community, Business Leadership and Entrepreneurship, International Crossroads, Women in Science and Engineering, Men in Engineering, the Health Sciences Community, and the Performing Arts Community. In fall 2003, we will open a new community for transfer students and in fall 2004 we will open a community for students interested

in writing. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences also offers a large selection of one- and two-semester hour **First-Year Seminars**. These are small-enrollment classes taught by regular faculty that introduce freshmen to the intellectual life of the University.

In summary, The University of Iowa approaches the task of achieving high graduation rates through a three-pronged strategy. First is the provision of professionally trained advisers who work individually with almost all freshmen throughout their first year and, in the case of pre-professional students, throughout all their undergraduate years. Second is the commitment of the University to a Four-Year Plan that is popular with students and their parents and that provides a vehicle for goal-setting and for communication among students, advisers, and parents. Third is the sponsorship of a variety of retention programs, each geared to encourage links between students and the academic and social communities at Iowa. Although it will be some time yet before we have data on our newer interventions, we believe that they will help us as much with retention as the Four-Year Graduation Plan has helped with time-to-graduation.

April 11, 2003

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Patricia Folsom, Director of the Academic Advising Center

**The University of Iowa - Years to degree information for students who graduate within six years**

| Cohort    | Males               |                     |                      |                      | Females             |                     |                      |                      | Total               |                     |                      |                      |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|           | # grad within 6 yrs | % grad within 4 yrs | % grad during 5th yr | % grad during 6th yr | # grad within 6 yrs | % grad within 4 yrs | % grad during 5th yr | % grad during 6th yr | # grad within 6 yrs | % grad within 4 yrs | % grad during 5th yr | % grad during 6th yr |
| Fall 1988 | 997                 | 45.6%               | 44.0%                | 10.3%                | 1,210               | 53.3%               | 39.5%                | 7.2%                 | 2,207               | 49.8%               | 41.5%                | 8.6%                 |
| Fall 1989 | 936                 | 45.4%               | 45.7%                | 8.9%                 | 1,103               | 54.6%               | 37.6%                | 7.8%                 | 2,039               | 50.4%               | 41.3%                | 8.3%                 |
| Fall 1990 | 767                 | 48.0%               | 43.3%                | 8.7%                 | 922                 | 56.3%               | 37.1%                | 6.6%                 | 1,689               | 52.5%               | 39.9%                | 7.6%                 |
| Fall 1991 | 781                 | 43.7%               | 46.4%                | 10.0%                | 946                 | 57.4%               | 36.8%                | 5.8%                 | 1,727               | 51.2%               | 41.1%                | 7.7%                 |
| Fall 1992 | 870                 | 43.9%               | 47.0%                | 9.1%                 | 1,113               | 56.1%               | 37.6%                | 6.3%                 | 1,983               | 50.7%               | 41.8%                | 7.5%                 |
| Fall 1993 | 814                 | 48.5%               | 43.1%                | 8.4%                 | 1,151               | 59.7%               | 33.2%                | 7.1%                 | 1,965               | 55.1%               | 37.3%                | 7.6%                 |
| Fall 1994 | 901                 | 47.4%               | 43.0%                | 9.7%                 | 1,167               | 58.3%               | 37.0%                | 4.7%                 | 2,068               | 53.5%               | 39.6%                | 6.9%                 |
| Fall 1995 | 916                 | 46.9%               | 44.7%                | 8.4%                 | 1,331               | 59.4%               | 36.4%                | 4.1%                 | 2,247               | 54.3%               | 39.8%                | 5.9%                 |
| Fall 1996 | 921                 | 47.9%               | 45.8%                | 6.3%                 | 1,281               | 66.5%               | 29.6%                | 3.9%                 | 2,202               | 58.7%               | 36.4%                | 4.9%                 |