

**Key Concepts:**

graduation rate

time management

syllabus

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

## Chapter 7

# Get to Graduation: Strategies for Earning the Degree

If you aren't already a bit shell-shocked from reading about the size of the college investment, we have another piece of reality for you to think about. As difficult as it is to finance your college investment, it is even harder to see real financial benefit from it! Why? On average, the six-year graduation rate for colleges and universities is a little better than 50 percent. What this means is that for every two college freshmen who start at a particular college this year, only one will actually have graduated from that same school six years from now.

A college degree differs from other purchases in that you don't actually get to have the market value of it until the very end. If you go to college for three years and only have a year left, you don't get credit in the job market for much more than a high school diploma. *Finishing is absolutely fundamental to making this investment pay off.*

Although it is in the best interest of everyone – the college, you, your family and society at large – that you complete your degree, the fact is, unlike high school, colleges are not set up to make sure that you graduate. As a matter of fact, until recently, colleges didn't care all that much about their graduation rates. Instead, the mentality was more of a “survival of the fittest” approach. Once a student

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was in, it was largely up to her or him to figure out how to get through to the end.

As we've already said, more people than ever are going to college, but the reality is that colleges were never set up to attract or educate everyone. Traditionally, colleges were created for the elite – for the people who had the financial resources (a lot of money) or the people who had a lot of academic talent or the really fortunate ones who had both. Because, until relatively recently, most people didn't need college degrees, these institutions tended to attract only those people who really wanted to go. Even when the GI Bill enabled soldiers to go to colleges and universities after World War II, only a relatively small percentage took advantage of the opportunity to get a degree. According to the U.S. Census, in 1952 (seven years after the end of World War II), only about 6 percent of people over the age of 25 had a college degree.

Although the economy has changed dramatically over the years, creating more demand than ever for a college degree, not much has changed inside many colleges and universities. Most still are designed for students with lots of academic talent, lots of money or both.

Colleges are starting to pay more attention to graduation rates, but most haven't found any magic bullet (or effective strategy) to transform the average 21<sup>st</sup> century high school senior into a college grad. This isn't meant (at least not entirely) as an indictment of the current system. Instead, we want to make sure you understand that the challenge doesn't end when you finally get that acceptance letter in your hand. That's when the real obstacle course toward your goal begins. For far too many students, getting into college turns out to be the easy part. Graduating is tough.

**GTG Strategy 5: Make your college career your full-time job.**

One mistake that prevents students from getting to graduation is thinking that their college work is a part-time, rather than a full-time, job. College classes are scheduled differently than high school, and sometimes it seems to students that they have enough free time to take on 20, 30 or even 40 hours of work outside of their college courses. *Big mistake!*

We know that the temptation to work is a big one, especially because college costs so much. But college is a full-time commitment. If you are really talented academically, you may be able to keep that 3.0 GPA while also working 30 hours a week; participating in a sport, club or other activity; and having an active social life. But most students *can't* manage all of this.

Remember, if you want to get the best return on your college investment, your focus should be on graduating in the shortest amount of time with a good GPA. Research shows that students routinely put in a lot of hours in jobs outside the college campus. Research also shows that making such an investment of time ultimately costs students in terms of their college investment.

**What Does This Mean for You?**

Students who work pay a price.

- Forty-six percent of all full-time students who work spend 25 or more hours per week on the job.
- Forty-two percent of these students reported that working hurt their grades.
- Fifty-three percent of all full-time students who work 25 or more hours per week reported that employment limited their class schedule, and 38 percent said that work limited their class choice.
- One in five full-time students who work spends 35 or more hours per week on the job.



## Strategy Tips

If you are a student who struggles, here are some steps you can take to improve your odds of making it to the finish line — graduation.

- Take your time. If you have trouble with academics, but you have the financing, take a lighter class load. Focusing on only four classes a semester might help you manage your work more effectively. Carefully managing your financial fund may make it possible for you to plan on a five- or six-year stretch. Remember, the ultimate goal is finishing.
  - Keep it small. Whether private or public, go for the small campus (not just small class size).
  - Ask for help. Many regional public universities offer remedial services in reading, math and study strategies. You just have to look for them.
  - Focus on personal development. Work for free on things that might help you figure out the first direction you want to take. Professors at smaller regional schools tend to be more accessible to undergraduate students because they almost never have teaching assistants or research assistants. Find the Student Services Center at the university and volunteer.



Think about the big picture: If you land a job paying \$8 per hour, the difference between working 30 hours a week and 20 hours a week will be about \$1,800 after taxes over the course of an academic year. If those 10 extra hours each week mean that you end up going an extra semester or an extra year because your work life ate into your college schedule, then those 10 hours actually cost you money. An extra semester costs a lot more than \$1,800. If working those 10 extra hours each week results in your GPA plummeting from a 3.0 to a 2.4, it could cost you even more in the job market after you graduate.

Colleges and universities talk quite a bit these days about developing critical thinkers. Well, critical thinkers

understand that sometimes a short-term sacrifice is necessary for long-term gain. Consider this a chance to hone your critical-thinking skills. Before you decide to stretch yourself thin by taking on more work hours than you can manage, try stretching your dollars. Give up your daily Starbucks habit, find a cheaper cell phone plan, slice one pizza run from your weekly routine. If you live off campus, get a roommate or even two, learn to cook and eat at home, or bike to class to save on parking and gas. Cut back and make your college career your full-time commitment. This will improve the odds that you make it to graduation – and make it in a reasonable amount of time.