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Students take more hours with initiatives, scholarships

BY MOLLY DISCHNER, ALASKA JOURNAL OF COMMERCE



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A University of Alaska effort to increase students' credit loads is starting to pay off.

The university announced Aug. 8 that more full-time students took more credits during the 2012-13 school year than the prior 10 years.

The UA System has been pushing for heavier course loads to help shorten the time it takes students to graduate.

According to the university, there was about a 10 percent increase from fall 2011 to fall 2012 in the number of full-time undergraduate students seeking baccalaureate degrees who took 15 or more credits per semester.

In the long run, that's cheaper for students, more efficient for the university and makes students more likely to graduate, said Saichi Oba, the UA System's associate vice president for Student and Enrollment Services.

Several factors are behind the increase.

The UA System has made a concerted effort to encourage progress toward degrees, the state Legislature has chipped in funding for advising and Gov. Sean Parnell made it part of his scholarship package.

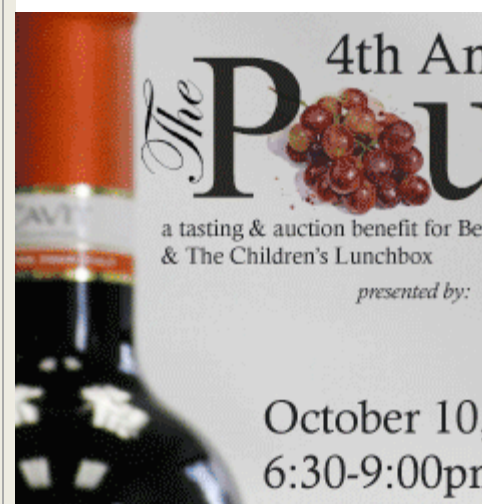
There's a clear economic benefit to taking a few more credits each semester, Oba said. The university estimates that it costs an extra \$10,000 for every additional year it takes to graduate — that includes things like living expenses, books and supplies, and supporting oneself while in school.

On top of that, Oba said, there is an opportunity cost of staying in school — that's the income lost by not starting a professional career. The university estimates that at about \$40,000 per year, he said.

That's an average of the starting salaries for graduates with a bachelor's degree. Some make significantly more, while others make less, Oba said.

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The university also benefits when students finish more quickly.

“It is less costly to move graduates through in a timely fashion,” Oba said.

A university has to provide fewer services per student, or degree, and has more room for incoming students.

Students also have better access to the classes needed for graduation when everyone is progressing more uniformly toward a degree, and can thus make better progress.

The university’s efforts to improve graduation rates and increase credit loads largely revolve around the messages it sends. The Shaping Alaska’s Future initiative includes a focus on student achievement and attainment, and improving graduation rates for higher education.

“The number one thing we can control is what we tell our students,” Oba said.

The university’s “[Stay on TRACK](#)” campaign is a part of that.

Stay on Track encourages a heavier load. The website component provides tips and resources for graduating on time.

Throughout the UA system, and much of the nation, full-time for an undergraduate is considered 12 credits, largely due to federal financial aid definitions. But it won’t lead to a degree in four years.

Taking 12 credits per semester for eight semesters only gets a student to 96 credits, Oba said.

The minimum requirement for a University of Alaska baccalaureate degree is 120 credits, although some programs require more than that.

At 15 credits per semester, a student can finish in four years.

Oba said the university is encouraging students to make steady degree progress by either taking 15 credits per semester, or 30 during the course of the year. The university has also encouraged students to meet with an academic advisor regularly and pay

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attention to the classes they're taking and their overall degree progress, Oba said.

The state has helped with that push by providing \$1.4 million in increased funding for academic advising in the last two years.

In a 2012 UA survey, students overwhelmingly said that more and better advising would help them graduate on time. Parnell's Alaska Performance Scholarship has also helped with the 15-credit push.

The scholarships require students to take a minimum of 15 credits per semester beginning in their sophomore year.

Last year, the first class of APS recipients was sophomores. This fall, three classes will be enrolled — and two will be subject to the credit requirements.

Each campus in the system has also found its own way to encourage the campaign.

At University of Alaska Southeast, students have an additional financial incentive to make progress, Oba said.

There, students who complete 15 credits in a semester receive a \$500 tuition waiver. That's inline with the 2012 survey, in which respondents said that free credits were the best incentive to graduate in four years.

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