

Stay On Track program revamped for upcoming school year

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As a new class of freshmen begin their college experience at UAA this fall, the last thing on their minds is what year they will eventually graduate. Most expect to graduate in four years, but few have a firm completion date in mind.

As part of University of Alaska's [Stay On Track](#) campaign, incoming freshmen were asked during new student orientation in August what year they planned to graduate before they even signed up for classes. Responses varied, but for many students 2016 or 2017 seemed like the distant future. Adding this question to the orientation process was intended to help students set goals for graduation and think about when they would actually complete a degree.

Introduced in October 2011, the Stay On Track marketing campaign and website offered information and strategies to "Finish In Four," encouraging students to take a full time class load of at least 15 credits per semester. The program was implemented in response to data that showed low graduation rates from University of Alaska schools. According to a [University of Alaska Completion Profile](#) published by the university in 2011, only 11.6 percent of full time students complete a bachelor's degree within four years and 28.3 percent of students finish within six years.

"Most students come in with the expectation that they are going to complete a bachelor's in four years, but then the decisions they make along the way do not afford them that opportunity," said Mary Gower, director of enrollment services at University of Alaska Fairbanks.

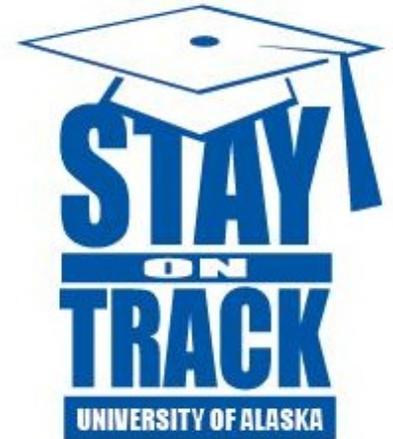
"The minimum requirement for federal financial aid is 12 credits, so that has just become the norm. We're doing some things to bring attention back to the fact that 15 credits is full-time and the minimum is 12 credits."

By taking longer to complete a degree, students not only pay more in rising tuition costs and university fees, but they also lose potential increases in income by not entering the workforce earlier.

According to [UAA enrollment data for Fall 2011](#), 11.9 percent of students across the University of Alaska system were enrolled in 15 credits or more. At UAA, where 60 percent of students are considered part-time, the average enrollment is nine credits per semester.

The message is gaining momentum, however, and last spring saw a 14.6 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in at least 15 credits.

Together



to gather more information and improve the scope of the program, the University of Alaska offered an online survey asking students, faculty and staff for feedback regarding the Stay On Track initiatives. 1,300 students responded

to the survey, and, while feedback was mainly positive, many students believed completing a degree in four years was unrealistic and unfairly stigmatized students who could only attend part time because of financial, work or family reasons.

“We want to de-emphasize the Finish In Four [message] this year,” said Bruce Schultz, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs.

“We recognize that students need to finish on their time and the best thing that we can do is identify the strategies that are going to support them to complete on their time. We want them to be aware that even if their capacity is only to take nine credit hours there’s resources available that they need to look into.”

Instead of asking students to “Finish In Four,” the Stay On Track campaign has been redesigned to focus on five key strategies for completing a degree program in the shortest time possible. They are:

- choosing a major within the first three semesters of enrollment
- taking at least 30 credits per year including summer classes
- registering early to get required classes
- cultivating an open dialogue with academic advisors
- maintaining good grades

“The goal here is really completion,” said Linda Morgan, director of [UAA's Advising and Testing center](#). “This is a big goal that you’ve set in your life to leave here with a college degree. I think that one thing that has changed this year is that the institution has changed the message just a little bit. We want to take into consideration that although it’s important that we stay on target we do acknowledge the fact that one size does not fit all. I think that was an unintentional thing that happened the first year it rolled out.”



Fore more information about the Stay On Track program, visit <http://www.alaska.edu/stayontrack/>.