



15-to-finish

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Background

The fundamental idea behind “15 to Finish” is linked to the concept of “academic momentum,” which is generally defined as attempting at least 15 credits in the first term or at least 30 semester credits in the first academic year. Taking 15 credits per semester is crucial for students aiming to complete a standard 120-credit bachelor's degree in four years or an associate degree in two years.

Key takeaways from the literature

The “15 to Finish” initiative is a nationwide effort encouraging students to take at least 15 credit hours per semester or 30 credits per year to increase on-time graduation rates. Research indicates that a higher course load is **associated with increased academic momentum** and a greater likelihood of success, with studies exploring its impact on various student populations, including low-income and first-generation students. While some studies show a **modest positive effect on credit accumulation and GPA**, particularly at certain institutions, the overall impact on timely graduation rates can be limited. The literature emphasizes the importance of **institutional commitment, data analysis, clear communication, professional development for staff and faculty**, and recognizing that a “one size fits all” approach may not be effective, with some students facing barriers that make a heavier course load difficult.

The literature presents a mixed perspective on the effects of “15 to Finish.” Some recent research, particularly a study on low-income, first-generation college promise program recipients at two 4-year universities, found the positive effects on academic outcomes were **modest**. This study showed benefits (credit accumulation, GPA) for students at one university but not the other. Importantly, this specific study did **not find conclusive evidence that graduation rates had improved** for the studied low-income, first-generation student group as a result of the policy. The effects can also vary by specific student characteristics (e.g., gender).

The literature also emphasizes that simply having the idea isn’t enough; the success of a “15 to Finish” campaign heavily relies on effective implementation.

Possible associated interventions/activities



Several key factors contribute to the successful implementation and effectiveness of a “15 to Finish” campaign. These factors emerged from literature reviews, institutional case studies, conversations with practitioners, and research evaluations.

These factors include:

- 1. Strong Institutional Commitment and Effective Leadership.** Obtaining support from college leadership is essential for driving change in student enrollment behavior. Commitment across campus, particularly from key stakeholders like academic affairs, student affairs, institutional research, and communications offices, as well as advisors, financial aid counselors, and faculty, is critical.
- 2. Making the Case with Data.** Using evidence-based data is crucial to persuade stakeholders, including faculty, staff, administrators, students, and parents, of the benefits of the “15 to Finish” strategy. Data showing that students taking 15 credits are more successful academically and financially can inspire action. Data can also be used to highlight existing attainment gaps and the potential of the campaign to narrow them.
- 3. Reaching All Key Stakeholders with Clear Messages.** Effective communication is vital, targeting everyone from internal staff to external stakeholders like students and their support systems (parents and caretakers). Messages should inform them of the academic and economic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. Clarity in messaging is paramount, ensuring all parties understand what the institution means by “15 to Finish.” Tailoring messages for different audiences is also important. Various channels can be used, such as presentations, posters, brochures, videos, social media, websites, text, and email messages.
- 4. Providing Professional Development to Internal Stakeholders** Training college professionals, especially advisors and faculty, is critical to change mindsets and ensure they are knowledgeable about the importance and benefits of students taking 15 credits per semester. Advisors are key in encouraging students and guiding them towards a 15-credit load. Professional development helps them understand the rationale and evidence, making them more likely to encourage students effectively.
- 5. Providing Incentives.** Offering both motivational and financial incentives can help increase the number of students taking 15 credits. Examples include banded tuition where the cost for 12-18 credits is the same, capping tuition beyond a certain number of credits, drawings for free textbooks for those taking 30 credits in their first year, and motivational events like signing pledges with related perks. While incentives can be effective, some institutions have successfully ingrained the “15 to Finish” strategy into the culture so that incentives are no longer necessary.



6. Engaging in Continuous Improvement Efforts. It is important to continuously assess the campaign's outcome, evaluating student performance, student experience, and the narrowing of equity gaps. Data analysis should be used to monitor changes in enrollment patterns and track increases in students enrolling in at least 15 credits. Using metrics like Early Momentum Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) can help predict longer-term outcomes from short-term measurements. Measuring, monitoring, and mending efforts based on data help the institution make adjustments to maximize the campaign's impact. This can involve refining the strategy, for example, by integrating it with academic maps, corequisite remediation, or math pathways, especially when data reveals persistent attainment gaps for specific student groups.

7. Avoiding a One-Size-Fits-All Model and Accounting for Institutional Culture. A successful campaign should be tailored to the unique culture of the institution. This implies that the specific implementation strategies may need to be adjusted based on the student population, resources, and existing practices. Addressing potential challenges for certain student populations, such as those working full-time or with other life obligations, and ensuring adequate support services are available are also implicitly part of successful implementation, though these are also highlighted as common criticisms or areas needing further research.

Related metrics and indicators:

The success of a “15 to Finish” campaign can be measured in several key ways:

1. Increased Student Enrollment in 15 or More Credits: A primary measure is the **increase in the percentage or number of students enrolling in at least 15 credits** per semester. This is often assessed by comparing enrollment data *after* the campaign implementation to previous semesters.

2. Impact on Academic Progression and Outcomes: Success is also measured by the effect on students' academic performance and progress. This includes tracking:

- **Credit Hour Accumulation:** Studies evaluate whether students subject to the policy complete a higher number of college credits.
- **Cumulative GPA:** Academic success can be measured by observing if students perform slightly better in their academic coursework.
- **Academic Performance Overall:** Institutions ensure students taking 15 credits are still performing well by monitoring their academic performance.



- 3. Improved Completion and Graduation Rates:** A core goal of the campaign is to increase graduation rates. Measurement includes:

 - **On-Time Graduation:** Assessing whether the policy leads to improved on-time graduation. Some research has shown that encouraging students to take 15 credits can result in more students completing on time.
 - **Overall Degree Completion:** Measuring the overall rate of degree attainment. While some studies have shown a positive relationship between credit momentum (taking 15+ credits) and improved on-time graduation and degree attainment, other recent research has found no significant effect on Year 4 or Year 6 graduation status for certain student groups.
 - **Tracking Graduation Rates Over Time:** Institutions like the University of Hawaii System track enrollment and graduation rates over several years to demonstrate the impact of their messaging.
- 4. Narrowing of Equity and Attainment Gaps:** A key measure of success is whether the campaign helps **close the disparity in educational achievement** between different student groups, particularly between underserved students (low-income, first-generation, racially/ethnically minoritized students) and their peers. This involves **disaggregating enrollment and completion data by demographics** (race, ethnicity, income) to see if attainment gaps narrow or disappear.
- 5. Use of Early Momentum Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Institutions use short-term measurements, like those related to first-year student performance (credit momentum metrics), to predict longer-term outcomes such as higher completion rates. Measuring how many students meet these early momentum metrics and the association between these metrics and student success are ways to formatively assess the effectiveness of the reform.
- 6. Evaluation of Campaign Implementation and Message Effectiveness:** The success of the campaign's delivery is also measured. This includes:

 - **Assessing Professional Knowledge:** Evaluating whether college professionals, particularly advisors, became more knowledgeable about the importance and benefits of students taking 15 credits after receiving training.
 - **Measuring Message Reach and Resonance:** Determining if students saw and received the campaign messages, what messages resonated the most with them, and whether college professionals encouraged them to register for 15 credits.
- 7. Continuous Improvement Efforts:** Success is also measured by the institution's commitment to continuous assessment and using data to refine the strategy. This involves



measuring, monitoring, and mending efforts based on data analysis to maximize the campaign's impact.

8. Economic Benefits to the Institution: While primarily focused on student outcomes, the success can also be seen in economic benefits for the institution due to increased student enrollment in higher credit loads.

Supporting literature

[NOTE: Many of these articles are on file at RPIE as PDFs and can be shared on request]

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