Institutions of higher learning are using complex computer programs to keep students on track to graduate, are limiting student options when it comes to choosing classes, majors and minors, and even forcibly graduating students who have amassed significantly more credit hours than are needed to earn a degree.

Getting students to graduate, and in a timely manner, is at the top of the to-do list for many of today’s schools, and education officials are becoming increasingly thoughtful and creative in pushing students to earn a diploma in a reasonable amount of time.

Part of this new focus comes from an emphasis placed on timely graduation by President Obama, who has called for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. Though the United States once topped that list, in 2010 America ranked 12th among 36 developed nations for the proportion of college graduates.

In addition, findings from the Center on Education and the Workforce have directly linked a college degree with economic success. The organization’s 2011 report on the topic found that those with bachelor’s degrees will earn 84 percent more over a lifetime than those who hold only a high school diploma. Studies also show that the longer a student takes to earn a college degree, the less likely it is that the student will actually graduate.

Such factors have made college graduation a high priority, and not only at the White House. States are slowly changing policies to encourage schools to boost college completion rates, and influential organizations—like the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—have implemented noteworthy initiatives in this area.

According to Bruce Vandal, vice president of development and outreach at the Education Commission of the States, schools haven’t been accustomed to thinking hard about these issues and higher education hasn’t emphasized them. “We’re in the process of a larger systemic examination,” notes Vandal, who oversees the Education Commission of the States’ Boosting College Completion for a New Economy project. “We’re starting to think outside the traditional vision of a pipeline of students coming in one end and automatically going out the other. Now we’re thinking about the students who leak out.”

Mapping the Maze of Higher Education

One of the most significant reasons for delays in college completion—or failure of students to graduate—is the changing nature of today’s student body. According to a report by the non-profit Complete College America, 75 percent of today’s students juggle a combination of family, work and school while taking classes. Only a quarter of today’s students go to school full time, live on campus.
and have most of their bills paid by their parents. Today’s students often attend college part-time and are the first in their families to seek higher education, leaving them with few roadmaps to follow and fewer resources from which to seek advice.

That’s certainly the case at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn., where a large portion of students are first-generation college attendees, says Tristan Denley, the school’s provost and vice president for academic affairs.

“As much as we would like to think of higher education as a pathway, for most students it’s really like a maze,” Denley says. “From top to bottom, we’ve been trying to find ways to make this a much more elegant, transparent kind of process.”

The school has developed a number of strategies for getting students to graduate on time, including its new Degree Compass tool, launched about a year ago. Using an intuitive computer program similar to Netflix or Pandora, the tool recommends courses based on preferences and the path of other students with similar interests. Degree Compass helps make sure students stay on the most direct path to graduation, Denley says.

“Students are faced with a large number of choices and there’s lots of evidence out there to show that having lots of choices with limited information makes it very difficult to make good decisions,” Denley says.

Degree Compass takes into account a student’s transcript, their chosen major, unmet requirements and a host of other factors. On top of that, the program taps into a grade prediction engine that estimates the grade a student is likely to get in future courses. The program has been surprisingly accurate and helps steer students to needed courses where they’ll have the most success. The school’s mascot, the “Gov” (a caricature of a white-haired, mustached governor with a top hat), presents students with a limited list of courses with star ratings next to them to rank them in importance. The list also provides a link to register for the courses.

Limiting choices is a key method for helping students make their way to graduation swiftly, says Stan Jones, the president of Complete College America.

“We should be providing them with more help to get them into the right programs, but once they get there, the courses they can choose from should be more prescriptive,” he says.

The Influence of Performance-Based Funding

Some schools, like Austin Peay, are honing in on the problem. In part, that’s due to pressure from state lawmakers who in some states are enacting or considering policies to incentivize attention to the issue, says Dan Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis at AASCU. At least 20 states are currently implementing or considering the implementation of funding methods that reward institutions of higher education for a focus on college completion, he said.

“Performance-based funding has been a real key here,” Hurley notes.

According to Jones, of College Complete America, it’s important to realize, however, that the emphasis is not only on the number of graduates a school has, since schools can produce more graduates by just being more selective—the antithesis of many state school missions.

“We want them to produce more degrees either because they took more students or because they graduated more of the students they took,” Jones says.

Many experts cite Tennessee as a state heading in the right direction. In 2010 the state adopted the Complete College Tennessee Act, which shifts higher education funding from an enrollment-based system to an output-based performance system. Other states, like Texas, have created different incentives, including a system that causes colleges and universities to lose their state subsidies for students who exceed certain credit-hour thresholds. Connecticut encourages full-time
college enrollment by using full-time enrollment status as the norm when processing student financial aid applications; this seeks to show students that attending college full-time is often not as expensive as they think.

California schools are making changes to comply with the California State University graduation initiative, which strives to raise the freshman six-year graduation rate 8 percent by 2015-16, and cut an existing gap in degree-attainment by minority students.

As part of that effort, California State University, Northridge created “The Super Senior Project,” which aims to decrease the large numbers of seniors who continue to rack up credits but do not graduate, says Cynthia Z. Rawitch, the school’s vice provost. Another goal is to free up dollars for new students coming into the school, she says.

“The question was, how can we save a substantial piece of money for student aid without cutting or limiting access?” Rawitch says. The Super Senior Project “opens up more spaces for students so we can increase the size of the freshman class.”

The project, which has been in place for more than two years, uses a number of techniques to move students toward graduation. To start, students with more than 130 credits are targeted, since most of the university’s degree programs require 120 credits for graduation. Any student with more than 130 credits can’t enroll in courses unless they have filed for graduation, Rawitch says. As a preventive measure, students with more than 109 credits are sent a letter informing them of the procedure and urging them to start thinking about a graduation plan.

Students are also now limited to two majors and two minors, and can’t change a major or minor after a certain point in their college career. In addition, students are limited in the number of courses they can repeat during their academic career, and those with more than 150 credits have fewer opportunities for financial aid.

California State University, Northridge will also administratively graduate students who have earned over 140 credits if they’ve completed all of their degree requirements and a major, whether or not they’ve declared that major, Rawitch says. “None of this is intended to knock people’s socks off all of a sudden,” Rawitch says. “It’s been incremental and a fine tuning of existing programs.”

It’s working. The program has reduced the number of students with 140 credits by 56 percent, and students with 130 credits by 52 percent. The number of course repeats decreased by nearly 2,500 from Fall 2008 through Fall 2010.

A Strong Start Matters

Other schools are looking not at the end of a student’s college career, but at the beginning to keep students on track to graduate. At the University of Central Florida, there’s an emphasis on making sure students who transfer in from community colleges get their credits accepted and are already working toward graduation requirements when they walk on campus, says Tony Waldrop, provost and executive vice president.

UCF already has a direct partnership with four local community colleges, but next year is launching a pilot project with nearby Valencia College, the university’s biggest community college partner. The pilot project seeks to identify students who are likely to transfer to the university before they’ve even decided to do so, and then make sure they’re taking community college courses that fit into their likely area of study on the university campus.
The school now tracks students who applied to UCF but were not accepted and who then enroll at Valencia College. These same students are likely to transfer to UCF after getting their associate degree, Waldrop says, and they’ll get a letter encouraging them to visit advisers from UCF who are already working on the Valencia campus to help them map out their course of study. “We’ll encourage them to participate in the counseling and advising that students who have declared for UCF get,” Waldrop says.

Other schools are focusing on ways to help academically struggling students before they get to a point where they may consider dropping out. The Student Advising and Mentoring (SAM) Center at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas provides a variety of programs aimed at keeping students on track to graduate. But one key initiative is a first-alert program in which faculty members submit to the center the names of students who are faltering in class or failing to attend.

Advisers contact the student by e-mail, phone or letter and often meet with them to talk about any difficulties. Instead of viewing it as a punitive measure, students are often relieved, says Bill Fleming, the executive director of the SAM Center. “They feel like somebody cares, somebody knows they’re having trouble and somebody is here to help them,” he says.

The SAM Center employs other strategies as well. Students who are on academic probation after the first semester must participate in mandatory advising sessions before they can register for new classes. Students who want to repeat classes must get approval before registering. Any student Suspended by the university must be reinstated by their deans and participate in MAP—Monitored Academic Program—which includes a six-week group study-skill class and intense mentoring.

Officials at Austin Peay University in Tennessee are focusing on students who need remedial classes to get up to speed. Complete College America’s 2011 report, “Time is the Enemy,” found that remedial students are much less likely to graduate, and Austin Peay officials discovered much the same situation on their own campus.

So rather than enrolling students in a traditional remedial class for no credit, Austin Peay enrolls them in the standard credit-bearing class, but requires those students to meet an additional two times a week in a supplementary workshop to support them and provide enhanced instruction, Denley says. That way, students are earning credits from the start.

The program has been successful. Denley notes that, historically, only one in 10 students at Austin Peay actually earned credits for, say, a basic math class for which they had taken a traditional remediation course. Under the newer set-up of the “enhanced” class, seven in 10 now earn credit—starting them off on the right track toward graduation, he says. This approach also dovetails with the other efforts on campus to help usher students to the finish line on time.

“There is a difference between someone who has completed a course of study and someone who has taken a number of courses,” Denley says. “It’s incumbent upon us to try to help students make decisions to see it through to the end.”

Michelle R. Davis is a freelance education writer in the Washington, D.C. area.

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