

Undergraduate Degree Success

Retention, Graduation, and Time-to-Degree Goals

In the following, we first propose Undergraduate Degree Completion Goals that the Task Force and campus adopt. We then provide background including:

- describing the existing campus goals statements and why we recommend revising them;
- defining the current campus graduation rate trajectory and the strong influence of first-year retention rates on graduation rates; and
- justifying setting the six-year graduation rate goal at no less than 80% based on benchmarks from other institutions.

In addition, we justify setting a four-year graduate rate goal and a transfer student graduation rate goal. We translate the six-year graduation rate percentage goals into specific numbers of individuals whose behavior we must change, to make the challenge more tangible.

Suggested Undergraduate Degree Completion Goals

Starting with the entering classes of 2013:

- Achieve a freshmen six-year graduation rate of at least 80% (the most recent rate is 73%);
- Achieve a freshmen four-year graduation rate of 60% (the most recent rate is 50%);
- Achieve comparable four- and two-year graduation rates for transfer students (the most recent transfer four-year graduation rate, at 82%, already exceeds the 80% target, the two-year graduation rate is 47%).

Note that the six-year rate for the entering freshman class of 2013 is based on graduation through the end of summer 2019 (data available in December 2019) and the four-year rate for the entering transfer class of 2013 by the end of summer 2017 (data available in December 2017).

Existing Statements of Undergraduate Degree Completion Goals—Why Revise?

Two of Campus Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor Galloway's [Five for 2015](#) goals for supporting student success address degree completion:

- Improving undergraduate retention and graduation, and

- Enhancing academic pathways to enable students to graduate in four years or fewer.

In her address to the Academic Senate, the CP/EVC more specifically articulated the goals of “increasing one-year retention by 2%, and reducing attrition after the second year to less than 10%.” Some planning documents (e.g., Chancellor’s Two-Year Goals statement) have attempted to simplify the expression of those goals by stating “increasing one-year retention by two percent, and reducing upper division attrition to less than 10%.” This is actually a misstatement since “upper division,” in terms of years since entry, would be the third year. Attrition after the third year is already between 7-8%. If even internal documents get these wrong, it is certain they are not stated clearly enough!

Stating the retention and graduation goals in terms of retention to the second year, and then subsequent attrition after year two, is problematic for several reasons:

- (1) Ultimately retaining more students is only desirable if it results in a greater number of students who graduate;
- (2) There is potential confusion between “second year” and “upper division” as noted;
- (3) They are more difficult to express than a simple statement of a single numeric rate goal; and
- (4) Poor academic performance in the first year is associated with attrition before the second year and with subsequent attrition. An improvement in ultimate graduation rates may require more “front loading” than an improvement of two points from the first to second year and an improvement of six points after year two.

We recommend stating the goal as a target six-year graduation rate as clearly defined and easy to remember. In addition, we recommend closing the gap between four-year and six-year graduation rates, including changing cultural expectations about time to degree. The best way to help an undergraduate with rising tuition levels is to ensure they graduate in as timely a manner (total quarters enrolled, total calendar time elapsed) as possible!

Without Intervention, What Is the Trajectory for Freshmen Six-Year Graduation Rates?

Historically, a specific cohort’s six-year graduation rate closely corresponds with its one-year retention rate. Certainly, the one-year retention rate sets the minimum achievable graduation rate. Prior to the 2010 entering class, the one-year retention rate had been relatively stable at 89%, with less than one-half a percentage point variation among entering freshmen cohorts since 2003. (The exception was the 2007 cohort, with a rate of 88%). The most recent one-year retention rate for the 2010 cohort is up by two percentage points, from 89% to 91% (with rounding). We will not know until the fall whether the one-year retention rate for the 2011 entering freshmen will continue the improvement seen for the 2010 cohort.

There has been ~16% additional attrition between the start of the second year and eventual graduation within six years. Given the observed relationship between one-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates and because one-year retention rates have been flat, an increase in the six-year graduation rate is unlikely without specific interventions or changes in campus practices until the 2010 cohort has had six years in which to graduate, by the end of (summer) 2015-16. If the pattern of 16% additional attrition after the start of the second year holds, the six-year graduation rate for the 2010 cohort will be 75%, an improvement of only 2% over the current rate.

Benchmarks: Six Year Graduation Rate Target of No Less Than 80%

Campus leaders have sometimes expressed a goal of achieving a graduation rate at least equal to the UC mean. Expressing the campus goal this way could be problematic in that the UC average is a moving target. This is further complicated by the fact that UC Santa Cruz rates are part of the mean, so as we improve the UC mean also improves. Nonetheless, the most recently available UC average six-year freshmen graduation rate is 80%. For appropriate comparative individual UC campuses, the rates are 82% for UC Irvine, 82% for UC Santa Barbara, and 80% for UC Davis. The most recent mean rate for all AAU campuses without medical schools is also 80%. For all schools categorized as "very high research" by the Carnegie Classifications, it is 78%.

Another method of arriving at a six-year graduation rate goal is to derive it from the recently articulated retention and graduation goals. A 2% improvement in the one-year retention rate, from 89% at the time the goal was articulated to 91%, minus a subsequent additional loss of less than 10%, results in a six-year graduation rate goal of at least 82%.

Rationale for Articulating a Four-Year Freshmen Graduation Rate Target

A specific four-year graduation rate goal has not been articulated. However, one of the CP/EVC's Five for 2015 goals is to ensure that there is a path for all students to earn their degree in four years or fewer by examining and streamlining major requirements. This could be expressed as an improved four-year graduation rate and/or as a decrease in average time-to-degree.

The freshmen four-year graduation rate at UCSC has been approximately 50% for the past six years. Slightly more than two-thirds of those students who ultimately graduate within six years do so within four years. Four-year graduation rates can be improved in two ways: by increasing the overall six-year graduation rates, assuming the current proportion holds, and/or by increasing the percent of six-year graduates who complete their degree within four years (improved time-to-degree without an improvement in six year rates). If we increase our six-year rate to 80% and we increase the fraction of six-year grads who graduate in four years to three-quarters, the resulting four-year rate is 60%. For comparison, the most recent four-year rates at other UCs are: UC Los Angeles, 71%; UC Berkeley, 71%; UC Santa Barbara, 67%; UC Irvine, 66%; UC San Diego, 57%, UC Davis, 52% (Davis has a lot of five year programs that somewhat bias their time-to-degree measure).

Rationale for Articulating Transfer Student Goals

Specific goals with regard to transfer students have not been articulated, nor are comparative data publicly available. We suggest setting the transfer student retention and graduation rate goals equivalent to those for freshman, correcting for the two-year offset. The four-year graduation rate for transfer students already exceeds the current six-year rate for freshmen and the proposed six-year freshmen target. Achieving a two-year rate of 60% for transfer students from the current rate of 47% will be considerably more difficult. Setting this goal appropriately needs further consideration by the Task Force.

Year by Year Improvements Required to Achieve Six-Year Goal

Achieving an improvement of 6-7% in six-year graduation rate will require losing a smaller percentage of students after the first year and in each subsequent year through graduation. The underlying patterns of year to year attrition will likely need to be different than patterns in recent years.

The actual number of additional students the campus would need to retain each year to achieve this goal is dependent on both the pattern of year to year loss and the size of the entering class (Table 1). Under the particular target scenario shown below, we need to reduce the student loss between entry and six-year graduation by fewer than 300 students to “move the needle” by the desired amount.

Table 1. Current and Potential Student Loss Patterns

	Y1 to Y2	Y2 to Y3	Y3 to Y4	Y4 to Y6 Graduation	Overall
<i>Current Pattern</i>					
Recent loss pattern	11.0%	10.0%	2.1%	3.9%	27.0%
Number lost from entering class of 3700	407	370	78	144	999
<i>A Target Scenario</i>					
Loss pattern to achieve goal	8.0%	8.0%	1.0%	1.0%	20.0%
Revised number lost from entering class of 3700	296	296	37	37	740
Reduction in number lost required	111	74	41	107	259