

Low 4 year completion rate prompts graduation initiative

The UA system sees a graduation rate of 10 percent of their student in four years. At six years, the number increases to just 28 percent. Low graduation rates is just one of the issues UA hopes to address in their new “Stay on Track” campaign.

The new initiative rolled out at the beginning of the month and urges students to graduate within four years. Intended as an informational promotion, the program aims to make students aware of their progress in their degree programs.

“The campaign is really linked to the fact that President Gamble is requiring that we spend a greater attention in making sure that our students come to UA in a timely, and get out in a timely fashion,” said Theresa Lyons, a member of the committee that kicked off the program at UAA.

UA defines a full-time student as anyone enrolled in at least 12 credits. The Director of Public Affairs for UA, Kate Ripley, sees that number as being misleading.

“There’s no way you can finish in a timely manner at that pace,” Ripley said.

Ripley believes that students tend to take only the minimum 12 credits, and they think that is enough. But for students to meet the 120-credit minimum required for graduation, they would have to take 30 credits a year, the program stresses.

“The idea is just to let students know, if you take a heavier load you can get through school sooner and have less debt,” Ripley explained. “The more part time the student is and the longer they take in getting their degree, the higher likelihood they have of dropping out and not getting that degree.”

UAA has a large part-time and older student base, and some see the initiative as unrealistic. However, UAA has started to see a trend of younger students attending college right out of high school.

The program then, according to Lyons, is “really designed for students that are new to the university, that are seeking degrees, that have the potential to finish in four years.”

The 30 credits per year does not apply to every degree. Several degree programs at UAA require more than the 120 credits required for graduation. An art major needs 121 credits for graduation, and journalism majors must meet the 126 credits to graduate. Despite these variances, Ripley believes the program’s aim is still fundamentally sound.

“If you take more each year, you will finish sooner,” Ripley said.

While Lyons admitted, “we want to improve the actual graduation rate of our students,” the campaign does aim to benefit students.

The posters advocating for the program that are hung around UAA campus advertise the idea that by graduating a year earlier, students could save \$10,000. This figure stems not from tuition costs, but fees, books, and potential housing costs.

The program states that not only will students save money, but they will also enter the job field sooner.

“The longer you’re in school, the more you don’t have that degree and that marketability [in the work force],” Ripley stated.

Stay on Track is also discussing tuition incentives.

“I can tell you there is a tuition task force that President Gamble has put together,” Ripley said.

The idea would be to give senior students a break in tuition during their last semester in school, in order to help them achieve their goal to graduate. No proposal has been submitted as of now.

Some advisors have come to Lyons and the other members of the committee saying that most students cannot take the 15 credits a semester. But Lyons clarified that the program would be on a case-to-case

basis, and it is up to the student to keep in contact with their advisor to manage their workload.

“It’s for the student that’s able to. We don’t think it addresses all students,” Lyons said.

The website for the program has an option for students to make a “Finish in 4 Promise.” Students make a promise to graduate in four years and get entered into a drawing for prizes. According to Ripley, 54 students have signed up since the website’s launch last Monday.

Lyons indicated this initiative was the first of many on-going launches the students can look for. The next one will focus on part-time associate degree students.

“(The goal) is to create an incentive for students to come to school with an ambition of graduating at a particular time,” Lyons said.

In the end, this program is about providing for the students.

“The worst thing for me is a student who comes to the university, they maybe didn’t know what they wanted to do, they borrowed money, and then they leave,” Ripley said. “Not only do they not have a degree, but they have debt. That’s not a good situation.”

Lyons indicated a similar mind-set. “It’s always going to be what’s really in the best interest of the students,” Lyons said, smiling.

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