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How to Help Students Complete a Degree on Time

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Baltimore

Speakers at a conference that opened here on Wednesday discussed policies and practices that states and colleges are using or considering to help more students complete an undergraduate degree or credential in a timely way.

The conference, "Time to Completion: How States and Systems Are Tackling the Time Dilemma," was organized by two nonprofit organizations, Jobs for the Future and the Southern Regional Education Board, whose goals include broadening college access and making higher education more affordable.

At the opening of the two-day event on Wednesday, officials with the Southern Regional Educational Board said they planned to start tracking the length of time it takes students in the organization's 16 member states to earn credits toward graduation.

Officials with Jobs for the Future announced new online tools the group is putting together to help institutions, system officers, and policy makers better understand different aspects of time-to-completion issues.

At one session, "Completion and Time: Research, Policy, and Politics," an economist presented findings from a study of national data showing that over all, students are taking longer to complete a four-year degree.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the proportion of students who completed a bachelor's degree in four years shrank by 13 percentage points, said Sarah Turner, a professor of economics and education at the University of Virginia and the author of the research.

These days earning a bachelor's degree takes at least five years, Ms. Turner said.

The decline, however, was found mostly at public four-year universities that are not flagship institutions, she said. In fact, at highly selective private institutions, the number of students

completing their degrees in four years increased by 8 percent between 1972 and 1992.

"This is very much a story of stratification," Ms. Turner said.

One explanation for the decline at public colleges, Ms. Turner suggested, is that students today often find it hard to finance their educations and have to work during college. Work is crowding students' time to take courses.

She offered a few policy suggestions, such as encouraging colleges to use early-assessment programs that provide students with information on how to complete their degrees on time.

At the same session, Stan Jones, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit group that works with states to increase college access and the number of degree earners, said institutions were not designed for working students, a group he called the "emerging new majority."

Working students tend not to have strong high-school backgrounds and usually attend college part time rather than full time, he said. "Yet we put them into the same system as other students and are disappointed that we don't get good results."

Mr. Jones advocates scheduling classes in a convenient block of time to make it easier for students with work and family commitments to attend and help them graduate faster.

"Time is really the enemy," he said.

Research shows that it now takes part-time students five years to complete a two-year degree, he said. The longer it takes students to complete their degrees, he said, the more likely it is that they will lose the motivation to do so.

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