Highlights
2010 Degree Completion Experience Survey

Introduction:

The Degree Completion Experience Survey focuses only on students who have taken or were taking longer than the Traditional Timeframe (less than 5 years for Secondary students, less than 4 years for Transfer students, and less than 3 years for Second Degree students) to graduate. The population sample includes (a) students who have graduated between academic years 2005/06 and 2009/10 and (b) students who have not yet graduated and were registered in academic year 2009/10 or Fall 2010. Among those in (a), their average age is 26.9 years. About 46% of these students have a graduating GPA ≥3.00. Their average admission GPA is 3.36 and 53 percent are female. In contrast, among those who graduated during the same period but within their Traditional Timeframes, their average age is 25.3 years. About 52% have a graduating GPA ≥3.00. Their average admission GPA is 3.40 and 63% are female. Among those in (b), their average age is 27.9 years. About 29% of these students have a cumulative GPA ≥3.00. The overall average admission GPA of the group is 3.43 and 51 percent are male.

The survey was conducted in Fall 2010 to understand why some students take longer than the traditional timeframes to complete a bachelor degree at SFU. In particular, one of the goals is to determine among students who took or are taking longer, whether they planned to take longer than the Traditional Timeframe or took longer because of other reasons. A summary of the findings is found below and the full report is available on the Institutional Research and Planning web-site: http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/irp/surveys/degreecompletion/degreecompletionreport.pdf

Methodology and Response Rate:

The Degree Completion Experience Survey was administered online to students who received their invitations via email. Students who have graduated (referred to as “Delayed Graduates”) was selected based on the following criteria:

- student has graduated with their first SFU undergraduate degree,
- graduation occurred within academic years 2005/06 and 2009/10, and
- student took five1 or more years to graduate, or:
  - four or more years, if student was a college or university transfer student
  - three or more years, if student was a second degree student

Students who have not graduated (referred to as “Delayed Students”) were selected based on the following criteria:

- student last registered in academic year 2009/10 or Fall 2010,
- student is registered in a degree-level program, and
- student has been at SFU for five2 or more years, or:
  - four or more years, if student is a college or university transfer student
  - three or more years, if student is a second degree student

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1 Based on the number of elapsed terms from term of admission to graduation term.
2 Based on the number of elapsed terms from term of admission to last registered term.
A total of 3,535 students responded to the survey, for a response rate of 35.8%. Assuming that the sample is representative, proportions calculated on all respondents are accurate within ± 1.7%, 19 times out of 20. Of the 6,982 Delayed Graduates, 2,391 responded to the survey producing a response rate of 34.2%. Assuming that the sample is representative, proportions calculated on all respondents are accurate within ± 2.0%, 19 times out of 20. Of the 2,891 Delayed Students, 1,108 responded to the survey, for a 38.3% response rate. Assuming that the sample is representative, proportions calculated on all respondents are accurate within ± 3.0%, 19 times out of 20.

**Results Highlights**

1. **What is the expected completion time among Delayed Graduates and Delayed Students when they begin their time at SFU? How do expected completion times compare with the traditional timeframe?**
   - Among Secondary respondents, 68% expected to take 4 years or less, 30% expected to take 5 years, and about 2% expected to take 6 or more years to complete their degree.
   - Among Transfer respondents, 34% expected to take 3 years or less, 45% expected to take 4 years, and about 21% expected to take 5 or more years to complete their degree. In addition, among transfer respondents with:
     - 1 - 30 transfer credits, 58% of them expected to complete in 4 years while a combined total of 18% expected to complete their degree in 3 or less years.
     - 31 - 60 transfer credits, 43% expected to complete their degree in 4 years while 36% expected to complete their degree in 3 or less years.
     - 61 - 90 transfer credits, 32% expected to complete in 4 years while 41% expected to complete their degree in 3 or less years.
   - Overall, 57% of participants expected to complete their degrees within their respective traditional timeframes, and an additional 34% had expected to take only one extra year. It appears that the majority of students had planned on graduating without delay.

2. **By how much did Delayed Graduates exceed the traditional timeframe and their expected completion times?**
   - Overall, Delayed Graduate respondents completed their degrees 2.1 years past the traditional timeframe. Furthermore, the average time taken over the traditional timeframe was calculated by basis of admission with the following results:
     - Secondary: 1.9 years
     - Transfer: 2.6 years
     - Second Degree: 2.2 years
   - Among the Secondary Delayed Graduate students who expected to graduate in:
     - 1, 2, 3, or 4 years, 100% of respondents completed their degree later than expected.
     - 3 years, the majority (53%) took 7 – 9 terms longer.
     - 4 years, the majority (48%) took 4 – 6 terms longer.
     - 5 years, 48% took 1 – 3 terms longer, while 18% graduated earlier or in the same time as expected.
     - 6 – 9 or more years, the majority (41%) graduated earlier than or in the same time as expected.
• Among the Transfer Delayed Graduate students who expected to graduate in:
  o 1 or 2 years, no respondent graduated earlier or within that timeframe.
  o 3 years, the majority (41%) took 4 – 6 terms longer.
  o 4 years, the majority (43%) took 1 – 3 terms longer.
  o 5 years, the majority (56%) graduated earlier or in the same time as expected.

• Among Transfer Delayed Graduate students who expected to complete in 4 years, and who had:
  o 1 – 30 credits transferred, 25% completed in 4 years and 1 term.
  o 31 - 60 credits transferred, 23% completed their degree in 4 years.
  o 61 – 90 credits transferred, 67% completed their degree in 4 years and 2 terms.

3. How important is it for students to graduate within their expected completion times? Did Delayed Graduates who felt it was important graduate sooner?

• 69% of respondents felt it was ‘Very/Somewhat’ important while 30% didn’t feel it was important.

• Among Secondary respondents, the data shows that:
  o Those who indicated 4 years, 62% said it was very/somewhat important to complete in their expected time.
  o Those who indicated 5 years, 68% said it was very/somewhat important to complete in their expected time.

• Among Transfer respondents, the data shows that:
  o Those who indicated 3 years, 75% said it was very/somewhat important to complete in their expected time.
  o Those who indicated 4 years, 76% said it was very/somewhat important to complete in their expected time.

• The relationship between how important it is for a student to complete within his/her expected completion time and the number of years exceeding the traditional timeframe was investigated and found not to be statistically significant ($r_s=0.041$, $p=0.051$). In other words, the students who believe it is important to graduate within their expected completion time are not graduating any sooner than students who believe it is unimportant.

4. What are the key factors that delay graduation among Delayed Graduates and Delayed Students? (see Figure 1)

• The top 3 reasons cited by both Delayed Graduate and Delayed Student respondents are:
  o Course availability issues
  o Worked full-time or part-time
  o Took a reduced course load

5. What are the course-related reasons for delayed graduation?

• Course availability is the most cited reason by both Delayed Graduate (56%) and Delayed Student (65%) groups for taking longer than 4 years to graduate.

• Both Delayed Graduates (46%) and Delayed Students (52%) indicated that they encountered course availability issues more often in Upper Division compared to Lower Division.
• The top 3 issues for both Delayed Graduate and Delayed Students in both Lower and Upper Division are:
  o Full courses,
  o Courses were/are not offered in the desired term, and
  o Courses had a scheduling conflict with other courses for which students registered for.

• 17% of Delayed Graduate respondents compared to 30% of Delayed Students said they encountered course availability issues with their WQB courses. Please note that requirements for completing WQB courses only came into effect in the Fall of the 2006/07 academic year.

Figure 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Taking Longer to Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course availability issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took reduced course load</td>
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<tr>
<td>Took non-degree requirement courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worked full or part time (outside of Co-op)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participated in Co-op and/or Study abroad program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worked within a faculty member’s research team</td>
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<td>Changed program/area of specialization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty meeting program requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late in making decision on major or program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pursued double major/other credential at the same time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problems transferring credits from other institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Reasons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in weak job market/high unemployment rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Delayed Graduates [N = 2,380]  Delayed Students [N = 1,080]
6. Why do students take a reduced course load?

- 52% of Delayed Graduates and 63% of Delayed Students said that taking a reduced course load caused them to take longer to graduate.

- The top 3 reasons for reducing course load for both Delayed Graduate and Delayed Students are that:
  - They wanted to divide their time between their studies and work (over 69%)
  - They wanted to obtain good/better grades (over 50%)
  - They wanted a good study-life balance (over 40%)

- 31% of Delayed Graduates and 36% of Delayed Students reduced their course load due to course availability issues.

7. Is there a relationship between the number of hours a student works while attending SFU and time to completion? Why do students work long hours?

- Over 50% of Delayed Graduate respondents and over 60% of Delayed Student respondents indicated that working was a reason for taking longer to complete their degree.

- The strength of the relationship between the number of hours worked and the length of time exceeding the traditional timeframe was significant and the same for both Delayed Graduates and Delayed Students ($r = 0.28$, $p < .01$). It appears that the students who worked more hours per week took a longer time to graduate.

- Almost 80% of both Delayed Graduate and Delayed Student respondents work to support their education.

- Among Delayed Graduates, 61% of respondents worked to support financial obligations outside of their university education; compared to 77% of Delayed Student respondents. This may indicate that Delayed Students are shouldering more financial obligations beyond the costs of their own university education.

- 29% of Delayed Students work over 35 hours per week, compared to 14% of Delayed Graduates.

- 44% of Delayed Graduates and 48% of Delayed Students work to avoid graduating with debt.

8. Among Delayed Graduates and Delayed Students, do those who participate in Co-op graduate sooner or later on average?

- Over 36% of Delayed Graduate respondents and 27% of Delayed Student respondents said that participation in Co-op and/or study abroad programs caused them to take longer to complete their degree.

- Among Delayed Graduate respondents who participated in Co-op and/or study abroad programs, 68% took over 5 years to complete their degree.

- In general, there is a higher percentage of respondents who did not participate in these programs. This may indicate that other factors are causing students to take longer to graduate such as course availability issues, working full-time or part-time, or reducing their course load.
9. Among the students who cite difficulty meeting program requirements as a reason for delayed graduation, what percentage received a Required To Withdraw (RTW) status and what subsequent action did they take?

- About 33% of Delayed Students compared to 17% of Delayed Graduates cited difficulties meeting program requirements as a reason for taking longer to graduate.

- The top 3 difficulties cited by both groups of students include:
  - Failing or repeating one or more courses,
  - Difficulty meeting program’s GPA requirements, and
  - Complex program requirements.

- 19% of Delayed Graduate respondents said that they received RTW status, compared to 23% of Delayed Student respondents.

- After receiving RTW status:
  - 85% of Delayed Graduate respondents enrolled at another post-secondary institution and returned to SFU to complete their degree. 18% of respondents enrolled and successfully completed the Back on Track³ program at SFU.
  - 69% of Delayed Students enrolled at another post-secondary institution and have subsequently returned to SFU, while another 14% will re-apply to SFU. 23% enrolled in the Back on Track/Student Success Program and 9% have successfully returned to good academic standing. Another 9% stopped pursuing post-secondary education for now.

10. Is there any difference in expected degree completion times and reasons for delay in graduation between Delayed Students and the general SFU undergraduate population⁴?

- Expectation times are very similar between Delayed Students and the general SFU undergraduate population. 55% of the general SFU undergraduate population and 53% of Delayed Students expected to take 4 years to complete their credential.

- 87% of the general SFU undergraduate population and 90% of Delayed Students expected to take between 3 to 5 years to complete their credential.

- The five most commonly cited reasons by both Delayed Students and the general SFU undergraduate population are:
  - Course availability issues
  - Took reduced course load
  - Working full-time or part-time (outside of Co-op)
  - Personal reasons
  - Taking courses not counting toward degree requirements

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³ The Back on Track Program was officially offered in Summer 2009 to students who received RTW status in Spring 2009. Prior to this, it was a pilot program called the Student Success Program which was offered to students in Fall 2007.

⁴ The Fall 2010 Undergraduate Student Survey (UGSS) was used to compare results from the 2010 Degree Completion Survey to the general SFU undergraduate student population.
• Compared to the UGSS, the percentage of respondents from the Degree Completion Experience Survey were significantly higher in the following situations:
  o Took reduced course load
  o Worked full-time or part-time outside of Co-op
  o Have personal issues
  o Took time off
  o Changed program or area of specialization
  o Difficulty meeting program requirements

11. Do students have difficulty registering for their last or last few courses required for degree completion? If so, what are these difficulties?

• About 14% (320) of Delayed Graduate respondents said they had difficulties registering for their last course necessary for degree completion. The most common difficulties were:
  o The course was only offered once a year.
  o The course quickly became full whenever it was offered.
  o The course had scheduling conflicts with another course.

• Of these 320 Delayed Graduate respondents, 12% experienced pre-requisite difficulties such as:
  o Did not have the pre-requisite course.
  o Did not have the required grade to register for the last course.

• Among Delayed Student respondents who have 1 – 3 courses remaining in order to graduate, roughly 24% (96) indicated that they were encountering difficulties such as:
  o Courses are only offered once a year.
  o Courses quickly become full whenever they are offered.
  o Courses have scheduling conflicts with another course.

• Of the 96 Delayed Student respondents, 25% said they experienced pre-requisite difficulties similar to the ones experienced by the Delayed Graduate respondents.

12. How do students feel about their general degree completion experience? Would they come to SFU again?

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with five statements about their SFU experience. Figure 2 shows the results of respondents from both groups who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”.

• Over 72% of respondents from both groups said they would still reduce their course load even if they were able to register for all of the courses needed to have a full course load.

• Over 66% of respondents indicated working allowed them to pay for their education.

• Over 42% of respondents from both groups said that working is more important than completing their degree in 4 years.

• A higher percentage of Delayed Students compared to Delayed Graduates agree that required upper division courses are more difficult to register for than lower division courses.
• Almost 10% fewer Delayed Students compared to Delayed Graduates said that SFU’s Co-op/Study Abroad programs is one of the reasons they were attracted to the university.

• Close to 20% of respondents from both groups would not attend SFU if they could start over again. Among these respondents, the top 5 reasons why they would not attend are:
  - Program issues (e.g. no or limited selection of programs or courses available at SFU, better programs offered at other institutions, not enough program specializations at SFU).
  - Lack of campus life or campus community.
  - Lack of skills or resources necessary for employment or network opportunities.
  - SFU’s reputation.
  - Course content, format and workload.

Figure 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Respondents Who Strongly Agree or Agree with the Following Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would still take a reduced course load even if I could register for 5 courses that I wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not be able to pay for my education at SFU if I were unable to work while studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper division courses I need for degree completion are harder to register in than lower division courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working is more important to me than completing my degree in 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of the reasons I was attracted to SFU is the co-op and/or study abroad programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations

1. The priority areas to work on to improve course availability issues for the general undergraduate student population are:

   - Increase seat capacity of required courses to accommodate more students.
   - Increase the frequency of required courses in particular, for upper division courses.
   - Schedule courses likely to be taken together at non-overlapping times.
   - Improve access for full-time working students by scheduling courses in the evenings or offering distance education or on-line courses.

Appendix D provides a list of courses that survey respondents had difficulty registering for. Also included in the appendix are enrollment capacity, actual enrollment and utilization rates for each course in Spring 2011, Summer 2011, and Fall 2011.

Specific suggestions made by students include:

   - Address course frequency by offering courses in more terms especially the Summer term.
   - Increase course capacity by increasing the number of sections offered or by increasing the enrollment limits.
   - Improve course scheduling by offering courses at multiple times during the day or week. As well, some students stated a preference for one 3 hour class in place of three 1 hour classes.
   - Improve course access by offering courses at Surrey and Vancouver campuses and increasing the number of distance education or on-line courses.

2. Encourage departments to assist students who wish to complete their degree in 4-5 years to progress through their degree in some specified order such that participating students are guaranteed seats in the courses they need to graduate.

3. Allow students to pre-register 2-3 terms in advance for courses they need to complete their degree to assist departments in course scheduling and seat capacity planning.

4. Information sessions during orientation days on majors and/or programs and subsequent career paths offered by departments may assist undecided students to declare a major or program earlier.

Other specific suggestions made by students for improving degree completion time include:

   - Provide more general services and advising to students [e.g. help with general study skills and techniques for time management]
   - Improve the quality of instruction [e.g. availability of professors outside of class for one-on-one help]
   - Improve English language skills of professors and TAs
   - Improve student-life environment [e.g. a better campus community atmosphere to make it a more desirable and enjoyable place to be at]
   - Make classes more interactive and engaging
   - Make courses/learning more applicable to the marketplace [e.g. include experiential learning]