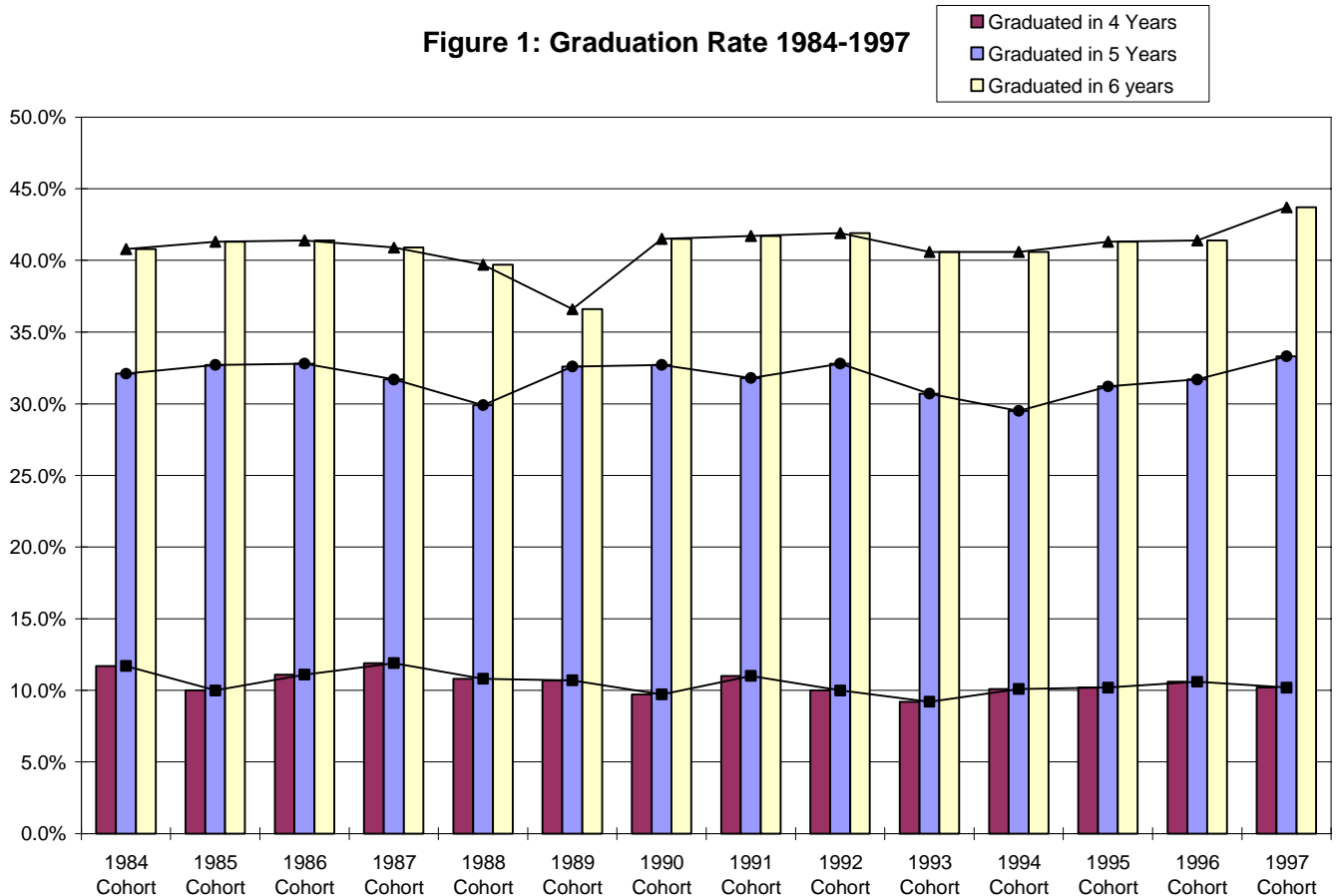


# SPOTLIGHT ON OU

## Graduation Rate Up, Time to Degree Down

The six-year graduation rate was 44% for the full-time FTIACs (first-time freshmen) who entered in 1997. This is the first significant increase recorded since the current tracking system was put in place beginning with the 1984 cohort. The six-year rate has averaged about 40% over this period with a high of 41.9% and low of 36.6%. The four and five year graduation rates were also higher for the 1996, 97, and 98 cohorts, suggesting that this may not be a one-time blip.

Figure 1: Graduation Rate 1984-1997



Concurrent with the improvement in the graduation rates, we are seeing some decrease in time to degree. Average time to degree for FTIACs graduating in 2003 was 5.2 years, down from 5.8 years in 1995. The table below shows average time to degree since 1995.

Graduation Year	Number of Graduates	Avg Time to Degree
1995	265	5.8 years
1997	657	5.7 years
1999	647	5.5 years
2000	431	5.4 years
2002	871	5.2 years

The 2001 OIRA (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment) time to degree study reported that students who take longer to graduate tend to take lighter credit loads, stop out more frequently, and repeat more courses. Between 1995 and 2000, students who graduated in four years or less averaged about four courses per term, while those who took longer than six years averaged about three courses. The average number of credits students enrolled in per term had been declining from the late 1970's until around 1997, when there began to be a turn-around. We believe that this change is primarily due

**Table 1 Average Credit Hours**

	2003	2001	1999	1997	1995	1990	1985	1981
Freshman	12.90	12.62	12.36	12.43	11.84	12.27	12.46	13.35
Sophomore	12.12	12.02	11.72	11.09	11.11	11.36	11.5	12.15
Junior	11.86	11.59	10.92	10.44	10.46	10.88	10.62	11.27
Senior	11.47	11.09	10.80	10.66	10.58	10.92	10.86	11.30

to the efforts made by the New Student Program Office to consistently reinforce the importance of enrolling in a true “full-time” schedule.

Higher workload generally results in shortening the time to degree, which in turn leads to higher graduation rates. This was also reported by Knight in his study, “Toward a Comprehensive Model of Influences Upon Time to Bachelor’s Degree Attainment,” where he found that “. . .

**Table 2**

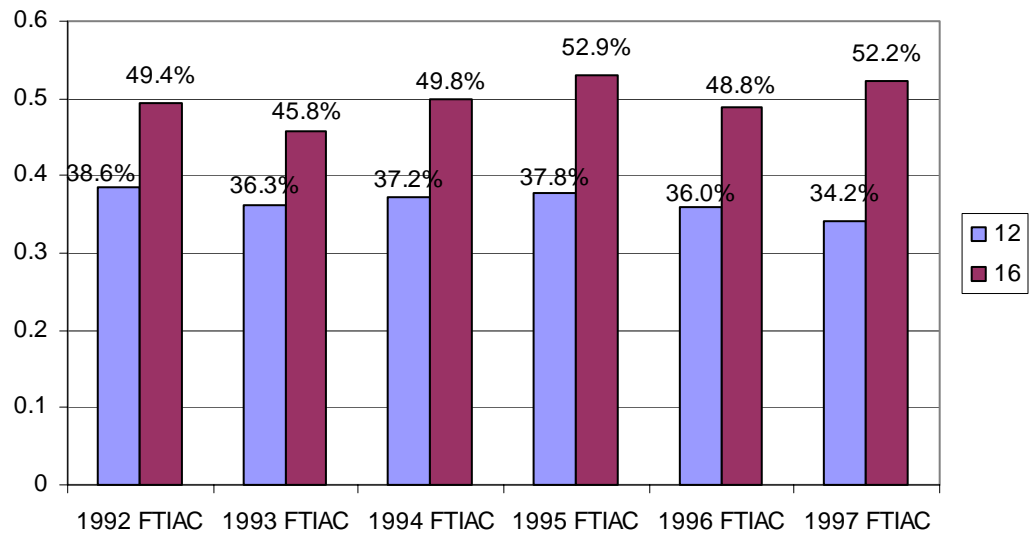
	1994 Cohort	1995 Cohort	1996 Cohort	1997 Cohort
Average Workload	13.10	13.09	13.13	13.44

average credit hour load per term is a strong predictor of more rapid degree

completion . . .” (2002). Table 2 demonstrates graduated students’ workloads, which were calculated by averaging total credit hours enrolled (not earned) for each fall and winter semester. Average credit load has been increasing steadily since 1996.

Studies done by OIRA in 1974 and 1996 demonstrated a link between first-term course load and graduation. Figure 2 illustrates differences in the graduation rate of students who took 12 credit hours and 16 credit hours in their first semester (which held even when

**Figure 2: 6 Years Graduation by First-Term Credits**

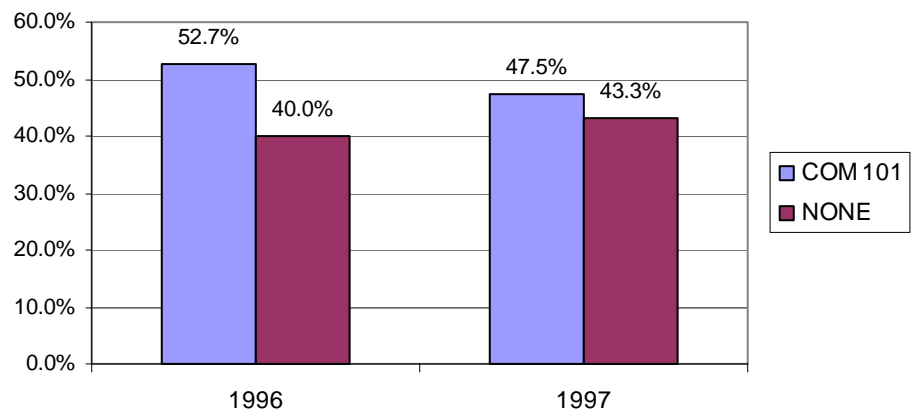


other factors are taken into account). Employing a Pearson correlation also shows a positive relationship between first term course

load and graduation in four, five, or six years, with a significance level of 0.01 in each year.

Another contributing factor to the improved graduation rate appears to be participation in COM 101, the seminar for first year students. As our May 2003 report (Retention and Graduation Rate At Oakland University) noted, first year seminars, like COM 101, have been

**Figure 3: 6 year Graduation Rate by COM 101**



shown to be one of the most successful tools for improving student success. Even though 6-year data is only available for two cohorts, COM 101

students graduated at a higher rate than non-COM 101 students (see Figure 3).

When linear regression is employed with the dependent variable ‘graduated within six years’ on 1996 and 97 cohorts, the result supports the conclusion that there is a relationship between first term course load, COM 101 and graduation. Five variables (first term course load, COM 101, first term GPA, minority, and gender) were entered in the regression equation. The variables that were most strongly correlated to six-year graduation were first term GPA and first term course load, followed by ethnicity and COM101. The multiple R was .324 and R-square was .105. Most of the explanatory power was in first term GPA followed by first term course load, which brought the multiple R to .314. This result is consistent with previous studies conducted by OIRA.

Both graduation rates and time to degree are receiving attention from policy makers and legislators at the state and federal levels. There is a general perception that Higher Education needs to be more accountable for ensuring that students graduate, and that they do so within a reasonable time frame. Students taking longer to graduate are also seen as a cost issue in many states. According to a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “with college enrollments booming and state budgets tight, public institutions are looking for ways to enroll more students without using additional state funds” (February 6, 2004). As enrollment growth continues to put pressure on resources at OU, shortening students’ time to degree could be a way to reduce some of that pressure.

The Chronicle article lists a number of ways universities (and in some cases, states) are proposing to shorten the time students spend in college. Some are punitive, such as charging students more for excess credits, but others are intended to provide students with incentives, such as forgiveness of loans when students graduate “on-time”, or with a minimal number of credits beyond the degree requirement. Another way to reduce the number of extra credits that some students take is to help them plan their course schedules more effectively.

The University of Florida successfully improved its four-year graduation rate from 38% to 51% between 1990 and 2002 by improving students’ planning and course selection. The university initiated a program to guarantee students a slot in any course required for a student’s major, and also implemented a system that allows students to track their academic records on line. According to the UFL catalog, students are required

to enroll in “critical tracking” courses in order to stay on track to graduate in their major and they must use the system to monitor their progress. With the coming implementation of the Curriculum, Instruction and Program Planning (CAPP) system, OU students and advisers will have a similar (although less structured) tool to improve course scheduling. This may reduce the number of students who take significantly more courses than are required to graduate, further lessening the time it takes OU students to complete their degrees and improving the graduation rate even more.

For the first time in many years, Oakland University is seeing its graduation rate rise and its time-to-degree decrease. Things to do to keep this trend going include:

- Continue to encourage all students, especially new students, to enroll in a true full-time schedule. Students must be enrolled for an average of sixteen credits per semester to graduate in four years.
- Monitor communications, web sites, etc., for consistency on the credit load message. Materials sent to students and parents from the New Student Programs Office emphasize the importance of making a commitment to academics in the first year, with examples of true full-time schedules. If other sources show examples of reduced full-time schedules, or full-time tuition and fees computed on 12 credits, students and parents receive conflicting messages.
- Focus on the first-year student experience. Encourage increased participation in COM101. Better yet, consider making it mandatory for all FTIACs. Look at ways to improve advising to first-year students.
- Integrate the CAPP with advising to improve students’ ability to plan and schedule courses effectively.

One note of caution in this optimistic picture: If further budget cuts reduce some departments’ ability to offer courses that their majors need to graduate, it may become more difficult for students to complete their degrees in a reasonable time.

Prepared by:  
Laura Schartman  
Taeko Yokoyama

## Reference

Schartman, L and Yokoyama, T. (2001, November). From Four Years to Five to Six? Trends in Undergraduate Time-to-degree at Oakland University. *OIRA Memo*.

Beardslee, D. (1974). First term workload and persistence. *OIR Memo No.12, Supplement 2*

Schartman, Laura A. (1996, August). First-Term Workload and Persistence. *OIRA Memo*.

Knight, W. Toward a Comprehensive Model of Influences Upon Time to Bachelor's Degree Attainment. *AIR Professional File*, 85.

Yokoyama, T. (2003, May). Retention and Graduation Rate At Oakland University. *OIRA Spotlight*.

Arnone, M. (February 6, 2004) Please Leave, Already. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.