

15 *to* **FINISH**

WEST VIRGINIA

► **POLICY BRIEF**

15 to Finish: Implications and Utility for West Virginia
West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission
September 2014

Introduction:

The math is obvious: there's no chance of graduating on time without earning at least 15 credits each semester, or 30 each academic year.

- Complete College America

Yet federal financial aid policies only require that students be enrolled in 12 credits each semester to be considered eligible for assistance. Most damaging, this standard has become known as “full-time” attendance. As a result, enrolling in fewer than 15 hours is becoming a norm, with 50 percent of students at public universities doing so (CCA, 2013). This practice can have a profound impact on both institutional and student costs. For low-income and underrepresented minority students, it can mean the difference in completing college altogether. The longer students take to complete their degree, the more likely that their lives will fill up with jobs, relationships, marriages, children, mortgages — the list goes on and on.

In West Virginia, many students take too much time to complete a degree or drop-out of college entirely. According to Complete College America (2011), less than half (48.2 percent) of West Virginia bachelor's degree seeking students who began college full-time in 2002 finished a degree in six years. The rate for low-income students (Pell grant recipients) was 38.7 percent. These are discouraging statistics, particularly at a time when West Virginia's economy needs more college degree holders than ever before.

The challenge that lies ahead for West Virginia's public system of four-year colleges and universities is to continue to offer state residents affordable access to four-year institutions, while helping more students complete their degrees in a timely manner. To address these needs, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's new 2013-2018 master plan, *Leading the Way: Access, Success, Impact*, has set a system-wide goal of increasing the number of students completing 30 or more credit hours the first academic year of college to 65 percent. In pursuit of this goal, the plan sets forth strategies including providing clear pathways to degree completion and establishing 15 credit hours per semester as the standard for success.

Nationally, a promising practice has emerged that focuses on changing students' mindsets and behaviors and affirming the “full time is 15” message advocated by Complete College America. Dubbed 15 to Finish, the effort emphasizes campus-wide collaboration through a focused but comprehensive awareness and advising campaign. The campaign seeks to reset students' perceptions of full-time as 15 credit hours and to inform them of the payoffs of enrolling in 15 hours or more — including better academic performance, reduced student loan debt, savings on tuition, housing and fees, and earlier entry into their intended careers.

This paper discusses the 15 to Finish initiative, offering a context and recommendations for implementing the program in West Virginia.

What is 15 to Finish?

The "15" in 15 to Finish refers to credit hours a semester, which at most institutions would represent five courses. At four-year colleges and universities, this is considered a "full load" of academic coursework. By legislative mandate, the majority of academic programs in West Virginia are 120 credit hours, meaning that a student would need to complete eight semesters of 15 hours of coursework to graduate, on time, in four years. Complicating matters and clouding students' perceptions is the way the U.S. Department of Education calculates what is considered to be a full-time student for federal financial aid purposes. To receive federal grant and loan aid, a student only has to enroll in 12 hours per semester, three hours shy of what is typically considered a full academic load. In only taking the minimum 12 hours, a student is on path to complete a degree in a minimum of five years instead of four.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} 12 = 5 & \text{vs.} & 15 = 4 \\ \text{CREDITS} & & \text{CREDITS} \\ \text{YEARS} & & \text{YEARS} \end{array}$$

According to Complete College America, as of December of 2013, 15 states had developed formal programs to promote and study the impact of encouraging students to enroll in 15 hours each semester in order to complete their degrees in a timely manner. The most prominent example of these efforts is The University of Hawaii System's "15 to Finish" program. The System's campaign began in 2011 and featured statewide advertising, on-campus messaging to current undergraduates, high school and community outreach, and training for campus staff and faculty. As a result, the percentage of students taking 15 hours or more per semester across the four-year system increased from 38.3 percent in 2011 to 55.5 percent in 2012, a 17.2 percentage point increase (Johnsrud, 2013).

Figure 1: States that have launched a 15 to Finish effort (as of Dec. 2013)



Is a 15 to Finish Campaign Right for West Virginia?

In order to examine the impact a 15 to Finish effort might have in West Virginia, the Commission analyzed data from a cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen that began studying at a public four-year institution in the fall of 2007 (the most recent cohort for which six-year graduation data is available). A total of 10,620 students enrolled during the 2007 academic year, with 77.8 percent of those students enrolling in 15 hours a semester. However, due to dropouts and reductions in the number of hours attempted, that rate fell dramatically by fall 2008. In their second year, the number of students from the 2007 cohort who enrolled in 15 hours per semester dropped from 8,264 to 5,409 — just over half of the first-time students who began the previous fall. Although the decrease in students taking 15 hours is a major concern, there is positive news. Among every measure the researchers examined, students who enrolled in 15 credit hours per semester their first academic year outperformed those who enrolled in 14 or fewer credit hours.

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This is notable since the researchers controlled for pre-enrollment academic ability (high school GPA and ACT composite score) and income level. For example, students who enrolled with a high school GPA between 2.0 to 2.9 are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Credit enrollment by first-time freshmen with a high school GPA of 2.0 to 2.9

All students, fall 2007				Students who were enrolled the entire 2007-08 academic year																			
Avg. Fall 2007 GPA		Retained Spring 2007		Average cumulative GPA Spring 2007		Retained to Fall 2008		Graduated in 4 years		Graduated in 6 years													
<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>	<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>	<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>	<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>	<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>	<i>Did not take 15 hours</i>	<i>Took 15 hours</i>												
#	mean	#	%	#	mean	#	%	#	%	#	%												
1052	1.70	2328	1.99	796	75.7	1966	84.4	1300	1.93	1462	2.31	872	45.4	1148	78.5	48	2.5	186	12.7	288	15.0	549	37.6

Of this sub-group, there were 3,380 freshmen with 66.2 percent of those students enrolled in 15 hours of coursework. Among students enrolled in 15 credit hours, the average fall semester GPA was almost .30 points higher — and those students were more likely to be retained to the following semester. As one can see across the table, the outcomes of taking fewer than 15 hours per semester during the first year of college have long-term repercussions on retention and completion. Ultimately, 37.6 percent of students who enrolled in 15 hours of course work each semester during their first year in college completed a degree in six years, compared to 15 percent of their peers who enrolled in fewer credit hours.

Another area of interest in West Virginia is learning how low-income students perform in college. Low-income students often arrive to college less prepared for not only the level of academic rigor required of college level work, but also navigating institutional processes such as course registration. Table 2 explains outcomes related to low-income (Pell Grant eligible) students and credit hour enrollment.

Table 2: Credit enrollment by Pell eligibility and college performance indicators

Pell Eligibility	All students, fall 2007								Students who were enrolled the entire 2007-08 academic year															
	Avg. Fall 2007 GPA				Retained Spring 2007				Average cumulative GPA Spring 2007				Retained to Fall 2008				Graduated in 4 years				Graduated in 6 years			
	Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours		Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours		Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours		Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours		Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours		Did not take 15 hours		Took 15 hours	
	#	mean	#	mean	#	%	#	%	#	mean	#	mean	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
✓	870	1.91	2362	2.43	693	79.7	2088	88.4	1147	2.07	1634	2.73	780	48.8	1371	83.9	75	4.7	355	21.7	288	18.0	799	48.9
✗	1486	2.23	5903	2.69	1194	80.3	5376	91.1	2011	2.40	4559	2.91	1583	55.9	4038	88.6	294	10.4	1536	33.7	805	28.4	2850	62.5

This table follows an almost identical pattern to those students who enrolled with a high school GPA of 2.0 to 2.9. Of the 10,620 first-time students who enrolled in 2007, 41.4 percent (4,400) were Pell Grant eligible. The low-income students who enrolled in 15 credit hours of coursework exhibited better academic outcomes throughout their college career when compared to their peers who enrolled in fewer credit hours. Twenty-four percent of low-income students who enrolled in 15 credit hours each semester during their first year in college completed their degrees in four years, compare to only six percent of their peers who enrolled in fewer credit hours.

Conclusion

Is increasing then number of students taking 15 credits per semester likely to have a positive impact in West Virginia? Yes, particularly when examining outcomes based on course-taking behaviors during students' first year in college. It is important to note that this initial project only measured outcomes based on the number of hours students attempted during their first academic year. In examining the tables, it is clear that during the six-year period, students are withdrawing from college for any number of reasons. Encouraging more students to enroll in 15 credit hours per semester might not be the "magic" answer to increasing persistence and completion for all students attending four-year public colleges and universities in West Virginia. However, the cohort data presented above demonstrates that students who enrolled in 15 credit hours during the fall and spring of their freshmen year had far better academic outcomes than their peers who did not.

Key Points

- ✓ Students who enrolled in 15 credit hours the fall and spring of their freshman year had far better academic outcomes than those who did not.
- ✓ It is clear that during a six-year period, students are withdrawing from college for any number of reasons.
- ✓ An awareness initiative such as 15 to Finish is likely to be beneficial to West Virginia students, but should be coupled with strategic advising and personalized support efforts to address the many factors affecting students' ability to stay on track for graduation.

West Virginia's 15 to Finish Campaign

To promote on-time degree completion and academic achievement, the Commission will launch a system-wide 15 to Finish information, awareness and advising campaign in January 2015. West Virginia's effort will be integrated within the Commission's statewide College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) initiative, an outreach program focusing on helping students prepare for and succeed in postsecondary education.

Goals: The West Virginia 15 to Finish campaign will seek to:

- ✓ Increase the percentage of college students taking at least 15 credit hours per semester
- ✓ Change students' perceptions of "full-time enrollment" to 15 hours
- ✓ Prompt college advisors to encourage more students to take 15 credit hours or more
- ✓ Build awareness regarding the academic benefits of taking 15 credit hours per semester
- ✓ Build awareness of the long-term benefits of finishing college on time

Target audiences:

- ✓ Soon-to-be college students (12th grade students, potential adult learners)
- ✓ Current college students
- ✓ Parents of students ages 17-25
- ✓ Admissions and enrollment officers
- ✓ Faculty and academic advisors
- ✓ Policy leaders and administrators

Campaign activities and messaging tools and strategies:

Activities for the effort will center on conducting a highly targeted multi-media communications campaign and providing professional development to ensure successful implementation and stakeholder support at the local level. Communications strategies will include earned media outreach, digital and social media advertising, highly targeted radio advertisements, and the creation of campus toolkits including materials such as brochures, email and newsletter templates, and video PSAs for use at orientations and other campus events. Materials from these toolkits also will be provided to high school counselors to aid them in advising 12th grade students.



15 to Finish is a registered trademark of the University of Hawaii System and is being used by West Virginia with permission through the Complete College America initiative.

West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission
Leading the Way: Access. Success. Impact.

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