

**University of Kansas**  
**Graduate in Four Task Force Report**

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## Graduate in Four Task Force Report

### I. Overview and Summary

**Issue: KU graduation rates are lower than at other similar institutions**

#### A. Why is on-time graduation important for students and for KU?

- Timely graduation is a key component of student success. Students develop and perform best under conditions that both challenge and support their endeavors. By not encouraging timely graduation through appropriate advising and institutional policies and practices, KU does a disservice to students.
- When students fail to graduate in a timely manner, it is costly to the students and their parents due to additional educational expenses and lost wages.
- When students fail to graduate in a timely manner, it is costly to both KU and the state as low graduation rates affect KU's academic reputation, the recruitment of faculty, and the recruitment of high ability students – particularly faculty and students from outside the state of Kansas.
- Reinforcing the understanding that KU is a serious academic institution contributes to a student body that is more engaged and actively participates in learning.
- Raising graduation rates creates a competitive advantage and increased efficiencies for KU.

#### B. KU graduation rates are lower than rates at other similar comparison institutions.

- For example, KU's 4-year graduation rate of 29% ranks KU:
  - 31 out of 34 AAU public institutions
  - 35 out of 45 Top 25 comparison group
  - 5 out of 11 public Big 12 institutions
- KU graduation rates are below the median of the College Results Online comparison group (<http://www.collegeresults.org/>). The institutions that make up this group were selected based on similar attributes, including standardized test scores, financial resources, and institutional size.

KU Graduation Rates	KU Position in Comparison Group <sup>1</sup>							
	AAU Publics <sup>2</sup> (N=34)		Top 25 Comparison Group <sup>3</sup> (N=45)		Big 12 Publics <sup>4</sup> (N=11)		College Results Online Comparison Group <sup>5</sup> (N=47)	
	Rank	Pct Rnk	Rank	Pct Rnk	Rank	Pct Rnk	Rank	Pct Rnk
4 Years – 29%	31	9%	35	23%	5	60%	25	48%
5 Years – 52%	31	9%	37	18%	7	40%	28	41%
6 Years – 58%	30	12%	36	20%	8	30%	29	40%

<sup>1</sup>Graduation rates are for 1997 cohort of full-time, first-time freshmen.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix 1 for list of institutions and rankings.

<sup>3</sup>The 45 institutions include the AAU public institutions and The Center (University of Florida) public institutions with at least one metric in the "Top 25" during 2001-2002. See Appendix 2 for list of institutions and rankings.

<sup>4</sup>See Appendix 3 for list of institutions and rankings.

<sup>5</sup>Similar comparison institutions selected by College Results Online according to 11 institutional and student characteristics that are statistically correlated with overall graduation rates. See Appendix 4 for list of institutions and rankings.

### **C. Why are KU graduation rates lower?**

#### *Cultural Context*

- University messages and actions are inconsistent regarding graduation in four years. For example, graduation in four years is emphasized during summer orientation, but some university PR materials show typical course loads of 12 hours. Jokes about graduating in more than four years are occasionally included in speeches to first-year students.
- Historically, students were often advised to take 12 hours, particularly during their first two years. The common perception guiding that advice was to ease students into college life and then increase the momentum in subsequent semesters.
- KU tradition emphasizes giving students time to explore educational possibilities, so flexibility is important. Students in the College are not required to declare a major until they reach 90 credit hours.
- The costs associated with additional semesters are not fully understood by students, parents, faculty, and advisors.

#### *Student Behavior*

- On average, students do not take enough hours each semester to graduate in four years. The average course load for undergraduates has declined over the last 20 years, from 14.7 credits hours in Fall 1982 to 13.4 credit hours in Fall 2004.
- Students typically take the same numbers of hours each semester. For example, if students take 12 hours in the fall, they are likely to take 12 hours in the spring. Students do not “make up” a smaller course load one semester by taking more classes the next semester.

#### *Courses*

- Between 20% and 30% of first-time freshmen do not successfully complete freshman math courses.
- MATH 002 is particularly problematic with a typical successful completion rate of 70% or less. The course has an average enrollment of 1,000 students each fall.

#### *Institutional Practices and Policies*

- Expectations of graduating in four years are not consistently communicated by professional and faculty advisors or through other KU communications such as speeches and brochures.
- Rules and guidelines are not consistently enforced (e.g., continuous enrollment in math/English). Other policies encourage behavior that extends a student’s time to graduation (students are allowed to petition to withdraw up to the last day of class).

**D. Is improvement in graduation rates an attainable goal?**

- Improving graduation rates requires a partnership among students, faculty, and the institution. All parties must take responsibility for their part of the process.
- KU has upward momentum in graduation rates. Four-year graduation rates for the 1999 freshman cohort (30.5%) and the 2000 freshman cohort (31.0%) are significantly higher as compared to the mean 4-year graduation rate (25.8%) over the last 20 years.
- KU has upward momentum in retention rates. The 1-year retention rate of new freshmen increased from 77.9% for the Fall 1998 class to 82.7% for the Fall 2003 class.
- With an entering cohort of 4,000 first-year students, an additional 40 students graduating from a single cohort translates to a 1% increase in graduation rates.
- Even a small increase in hours completed could make a big difference. For example, 22% (887 students) of the 2003 freshman cohort completed 55-59 credit hours as of Spring 2005. If this group enrolled in just two more classes during that two year period, they would be on track to graduate in four years, effectively doubling the number of students with over 60 hours at the end of their second year.

## II. Recommendations

The task force recommendations are grounded in the three guiding principles listed below. Each recommendation is assigned an implementation priority based on its expected affect on graduation rate as well as the institutional ability to implement.

- KU is a serious academic institution that expects and encourages timely graduation (e.g., four years for 4-year programs, five years for 5-year programs, six years for 6-year programs). Institutional policies and practices need to reinforce this principle.
- All KU communications need to convey a consistent message that graduation in four years is expected, desirable, and attainable.
- Institutional policies and practices need to encourage timely graduation and be consistently and fairly enforced. Policies and practices that are not enforced should be eliminated.

<b>Recommendations</b>	
Implementation Priority	
<p><b>Guiding Principle 1</b>  <b>KU is a serious academic institution that expects and encourages timely graduation.</b>  <b>Institutional policies and practices need to reinforce this principle.</b></p>	
High	<p>1. Set a <b>minimum</b> enrollment of 15 hours for full-time students. (The 15-hour enrollment figure is not a goal or target, but a minimum. To graduate on time a student needs to average over 15 hours per semester over the 8-semester period.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Contact students (i.e., letter, Kyou portal message, email) who enroll in fewer than 15 KU hours during the fall semester encouraging them to enroll in the summer.</li> <li>§ Contact students who complete less than 30 hours during the fall and spring encouraging them to enroll in the summer.</li> <li>§ Provide lists of students not meeting the minimum to their advisors.</li> </ul>
High	<p>2. Require all students to declare a major by 60 hours.</p>
High	<p>3. Contact new freshmen with math ACT of 18 or lower and recommend taking MATH 002 equivalent at a community college or through KU Continuing Education before entering KU in the fall.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Data from 1997/1998 cohorts show that students with MATH 002 as transfer credit have higher 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates (6%-16% higher) than students who took MATH 002 at KU.</li> </ul>
High	<p>4. Develop standardized institutional policies across academic units for drops and withdrawals.</p>
High	<p>5. Provide a simple, widely accessible method for students to track progress toward a degree, major choice, milestone, etc.</p>

<b>Recommendations</b>	
<b>Implementation Priority</b>	
High	<p>6. Limit the number of drops/withdrawals over a student’s career.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Limits of 3, 4, or 5 course drops/withdrawals over a student’s career have been suggested.</li> <li>§ Need to differentiate between withdrawal from the university and dropped classes.</li> <li>§ Course/section “swaps” would not be counted as drops.</li> </ul>
High	<p>7. Develop standardized institutional policies for drops and withdrawals</p>
High	<p>8. Offer alternative and/or strategic course scheduling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Add course offerings in the summer that allow students to stay on track.</li> <li>§ Offer short courses during winter break and/or late spring between convocation and the start of the summer semester.</li> <li>§ Stress enrollment in summer school through advising and promotional materials.</li> <li>§ More proactively recruit students to enroll in summer. For example, the Edwards Campus sends postcards promoting summer enrollment to all undergraduate students in the KC metro area. 80% of undergraduate students at the Edwards Campus in summer are Lawrence campus students.</li> <li>§ Send advisors a list of students who could graduate if they took summer courses in their last semester.</li> </ul>
Low	<p>9. Eliminate the application for degree when student progress can be automatically tracked and degrees awarded when requirements completed.</p>
<p><b>Guiding Principle 2</b>  <b>All KU communications need to convey a consistent message that graduation in four years is expected, desirable, and attainable.</b></p>	
High	<p>10. Advising philosophy and practices should align with a goal of graduation in the appropriate time (i.e., graduate in four years for 4-year programs, five years for 5-year programs, etc.).</p>
High	<p>11. Adopt “expectations setting” language of encouraging on-time graduation by all university constituent groups – faculty, staff, and administrators.</p>
High	<p>12. All publications, brochures, program plans, etc. should support on-time graduation (i.e., graduate in four years for 4-year programs, five years for 5-year programs, etc.).</p>

<b>Recommendations</b>	
<b>Implementation Priority</b>	
<p><b>Guiding Principle 3</b>  <b>Institutional policies and practices need to encourage timely graduation and are consistently and fairly enforced.</b>  <b>Policies and practices that are not enforced should be eliminated.</b></p>	
High	13. Enforce the existing policy of continuous enrollment in math/English.
Medium	14. Consistently check and enforce prerequisites.
Medium	15. Limit the number of times that a student can apply to a professional school.

### III. Context and Supporting Data

Context/Supporting Data		
Questions/Topic	Answers	Comments
<b>Graduation, Time to Degree, Retention Rates (KU overall)</b>		
1. What is the 8-semester (4-year) KU graduation rate?	29% for full-time, first-time freshmen (1997 cohort)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The average 4-year graduation rate among AAU public institutions is 42%.</li> </ul>
2. What is the 9-semester (4.5-year) KU graduation rate?	36% for full-time, first-time freshmen (1997 cohort)	
3. What is the 10-semester (5-year) KU graduation rate?	52% for full-time, first-time freshmen (1997 cohort)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The average 5-year graduation rate among AAU public institutions is 66%.</li> </ul>
4. What is the 12-semester (6-year) KU graduation rate?	58% for full-time, first-time freshmen (1997 cohort)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The average 6-year graduation rate among AAU public institutions is 71%.</li> </ul>
5. What is the typical time to degree among KU's 4-year programs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time to degree ranges from 8.69 semesters in Business to 9.25 semesters in the College (excludes schools with programs that typically require more than 124 hours (Architecture, Engineering, Fine Arts, Pharmacy).</li> </ul>	
6. What is the KU freshman (1-year) retention rate?	82% for full-time, first-time freshmen (Fall 2002 cohort)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The average freshman retention rate for AAU public institutions is 89%. KU ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> out of 34 (Fall 2002 cohort).</li> <li>Of the students who <b>did not graduate</b> in the 1997 and 1998 cohorts – 44% did not return for their 3<sup>rd</sup> and subsequent semesters and nearly 65% did not return for their 5<sup>th</sup> and subsequent semesters.</li> </ul>



































