

# ellucian

WHITE PAPER SERIES



## Helping students complete degrees on time and on budget

How effective degree planning drives student success  
and institutional funding





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## Higher education reform remains firmly at the top of the policy agenda for both federal and state governments. But recently the dialogue has shifted—from access and enrollment to retention and graduation.

Increasingly, policymakers are using time- and credit-to-degree as indicators of student success—revising institutional funding formulas accordingly. And in its recently developed College Scorecard, the U.S. Department of Education included “graduation rate” as one of only five key data points to help students compare schools.

To succeed in this new environment, institutions must invest not only in getting students in the door, but in keeping them on the right path once inside.

There are multiple strategies for increasing the efficiency with which students attain degrees. Implementing an effective degree-planning program is one of the essentials.

Students with a realistic understanding of what it will take to achieve their goals are more likely to succeed. With this in mind, students, advisors, and institutions must make it a shared priority to create roadmaps for academic success and on-time graduation.

Whether the mandate comes from legislators, trustees, or a progressively competitive marketplace, one thing is clear: institutions must ensure they have the resources to deliver high quality, on-time, on-budget degrees.

This includes the capacity for effective degree planning. Following are key components of a successful program.

### The high cost of excess time and credits

Estimated cost to average U.S. student, in attendance and lost wages, for each additional year spent in school:

**\$51,000** at 2-year public

**\$68,000** at 4-year public

**\$19 billion** estimated total cost of excess credits per year—nearly \$8 billion paid by students, \$11 billion by U.S. taxpayers.



## Automate the process

Effective degree planning is difficult without automated tools for creating and storing information. You might spend more time hunting for data than using it to craft solid plans.

Students and advisors already have trouble navigating complex degree requirements. The challenge only increases when different advisors create their own manual systems for tracking these requirements. All too often, they end up working with outdated or inaccurate information. The result is plans that look good on paper but don't effectively lead to a degree.

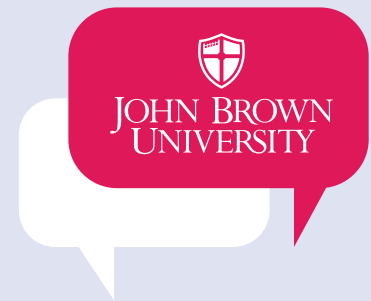
This is where reliable audits come into play. Students and advisors should be able to audit and adjust a plan at any given time, confident in its accuracy. This requires an automated system with information updated in real time.

To further improve reliability, this system should offer an easy way to store and retrieve notes on substitutions or other relevant information that travels as advisors change.

More sophisticated systems even integrate financial aid, athletic eligibility, and other non-academic requirements.

### More effective advising at John Brown University

John Brown University recently implemented an integrated degree planning system. One of its department heads, **Marquita Smith**, describes the impact on her advisory team.



#### Before

“Everyone had their own way of keeping records.

Agreements weren't always documented, and sometimes invalid course substitutions were made. I didn't have access to approve the changes or coach my advisors on the decisions they were making.”

#### After

“I can easily document substitutions in the notes field and send them to the registrar directly from the application. This will streamline the audit process at graduation time. It will be less stressful for everyone, including the students.”

## Map the entire student journey

Planning semester to semester, or even year to year, is no longer enough. To avoid unnecessary time or cost, students need roadmaps that guide them from enrollment to graduation.

### Provide model plans

Model plans help students envision what it takes to get from the first day to graduation day.

Start by developing degree road maps for each major, outlining various course sequences that lead to on-time graduation. Provide an easy snapshot of the requirements for each major, prerequisites needed, and which courses to take when. Students with federal financial assistance should be able to see different paths to meeting degree requirements during a certain period of eligibility.

Some students will use degree maps as-is, others as a starting point for creating a personalized plan.

### Manage student expectations

Students, particularly in their first year, often need a reality check.

In a survey of nearly 200,000 incoming freshmen in 2012, the Higher Education Research Institute found that 83 percent expected to graduate in four years. Yet based on actual four-year graduation rates from colleges in the survey, only 40 percent would be likely to complete their education in that amount of time.<sup>1</sup>

The ideal roadmap is simple and easy to grasp, helping students understand the impact of their choices in the short and long term. The earlier students take ownership of their academic plans and decisions, the more likely they are to achieve their goals.

### Eliminate surprise endings

Approximately 30 percent of excess credits result from “poor student choices”<sup>2</sup>—a preventable phenomenon. If students understand the plan, and have user-friendly tools for monitoring their own progress, they shouldn’t find themselves saddled with extra time or credits to graduate.

When working with outdated, inaccurate information, even advisors can contribute to excessive credits- and time-to-degree. Sometimes they approve plans that fail during graduation audits.

Effective degree planners make it easy to align roadmaps with requirements—and to realign them when necessary, without jeopardizing the timeline.



1. Higher Education Research Institute, “The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012”  
2. Complete College America

## Keep options open

Students should not have their choices restricted because an institution lacks the resources to help them navigate change.

At a minimum, advisors should have automated tools for searching standard options if a student is looking to make a change. Many leading software products offer more powerful “what if?” and “look ahead” functionality, which demonstrates how different combinations of courses, majors, minors, and other eligibility factors will impact a particular student’s graduation timeline.

Ideally, students should be able to explore on their own—plugging in different variables and getting instantly updated roadmaps. For those overwhelmed by the process, or without access to in-person advising, plug and play technology can be a lifesaver.

Most importantly, having options at their fingertips allows students to engage in more meaningful discussions with their families and advisors about academic goals.

### Focusing on opportunities as well as requirements at SUNY-Potsdam

**Ramona Ralston**, registrar at the State University of New York-Potsdam, describes how an effective degree planning system has improved the dialogue with students about goals.

#### Before

“A strong part of our mission since the beginning has been to offer choices within our liberal arts programs. But managing all those choices has been a challenge for us.”

#### After

“Having a system that simplifies the mechanical and tracking aspects of advising frees faculty up to have more meaningful conversations with students about choices, internships, grad school, and academic performance.”



## Make self-help a hallmark

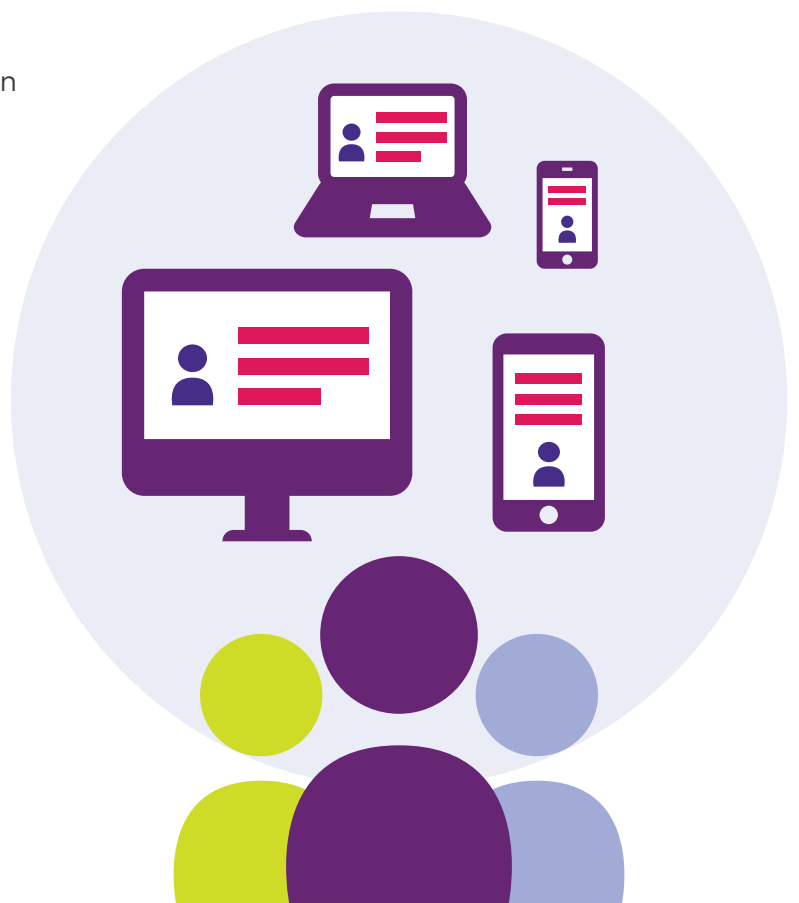
The most successful degree planning systems are Web-based, user-friendly, accessible 24/7, and tailored to what students need and care about most.

Students are accustomed to accomplishing tasks and solving problems online. A degree planning interface should be as intuitive as the retail sites familiar to most students. This will increase adoption and successful use.

Self-help systems can be tailored to complement the level of advisor support students receive at their particular institution.

Some institutions offer face-to-face advising, but mandate that students have plans in place before a meeting. In this scenario, students need a self-help tool with at least enough functionality to navigate standard majors and requirements. Having the basic work completed in advance saves advisors from spending the first half hour getting up to speed. Instead, they can devote their full attention to providing students with meaningful advice.

In contrast, many institutions provide students little to no face-to-face support, especially when advisor-to-student ratios make personal attention nearly impossible. In this scenario, students should have access to a full-service, self-help platform. As they plan, monitor, and adjust their own degree plans, institutions can devote more resources to ensuring requirements are optimal and up to date.





## Remove barriers for low-income, first-generation students

### Empower students who lack resources

Perhaps the largest beneficiaries of user-friendly, full-service degree planning tools are low-income and first-generation college students.

The first person in a family to go to college may lack role models or family support. This can make it particularly hard to envision what a path to success might look like or know who to ask for help. And low-income students are often balancing work and school, making planning particularly difficult.

These and other challenges prevent a significant percent of these populations from graduating on time.

Institutions that don't offer self-help tools that are easy to find and easy to navigate are failing these students. Especially as many attend schools with unfavorable advisor-to-student ratios and few on-campus support resources.

## Integrate degree planning with other systems

Any degree planning tool should integrate with your existing ERP or student information system. At a minimum, this ensures accurate, consistent information, while enhancing each student's profile and history.

Where possible, incorporate degree planning into related workflows, such as scheduling and registration. This improves efficiency and ensures a more seamless experience for students.

If you have the technical resources to extract and analyze data from your degree planning system, you can improve planning and resource allocation.

### Make transferring easy

A large percentage of low-income students start at community colleges hoping to transfer to four-year schools. Those who do, immediately come up against complex requirements and processes—a significant barrier to entry.

Schools must make it easier to discern which credits do and do not transfer. Transcripts should be delivered automatically and in digital format. And transparency must guide the entire process. Applicants should understand exactly what's needed to satisfy requirements, as well as their status at any given time.

Enrollment suffers when prospects are frustrated or they enroll elsewhere while waiting for a response.

An investment in better serving these populations, from application to degree planning to graduation, carries a significant potential return.

For example, a review of course demand can be used to ensure students get into the classes they need for on-time graduation.





## Conclusion

Degree planning is something institutions must do well—to improve student success and to demonstrate performance in an area prioritized by policymakers and funders.

Effective planning comes down to helping students understand what is required to achieve their goals and providing the support they need to succeed. This is not as simple as it sounds.

Large public institutions—particularly those with a high percentage of low-income, first-generation college students—are limited in their ability to provide hands-on advisory support. Investing in modern technology that empowers students to manage their own degrees is a small price to pay compared to the potential loss in funding if student success and graduation rates decline.

Private institutions also risk reputation and revenue if they assume students are solely responsible for their own success once enrolled. Even students that can afford an extra year have become more conscious of the cost associated with delaying entry into the job market. They are also aware of the need to fit in as many courses as possible that directly prepare them for a globally-competitive economy.

While there is a wide range of factors that contribute to student success, effective degree planning is one over which schools have considerable control. That makes it a smart investment—one with a potentially large return for students and their institutions of choice.

### Success stories

The following institutions have reported positive results after implementing formal degree maps into advising.



**Florida State University** has **cut in half** the number of students graduating with excess credits.



**Arizona State University** increased the number of students deemed “on track” from **22 percent to 91 percent** in three years.



**Georgia State University** boosted graduation rates by **more than 20 percent** in the last 10 years.

## About Ellucian

Ellucian helps education institutions thrive in an open and dynamic world. We deliver a broad portfolio of technology solutions, developed in collaboration with a global education community, and provide strategic guidance to help education institutions of all kinds navigate change, achieve greater transparency, and drive efficiencies. More than 2,400 institutions in 40 countries around the world look to Ellucian for the ideas and insights that will move education forward, helping people everywhere discover their potential through learning.

To learn more, please visit [www.ellucian.com](http://www.ellucian.com).





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