

**#10: How are you measuring (and how will you address) time to degree for master's degrees? Please break down median and normative measures by disciplines.**

Lead: Sharon Barrios, Graduate Studies Interim Dean

**Section I. MEASURING TIME TO DEGREE**

Our Institutional Research (IR) office calculates the time to degree median and mean for all graduate programs by starting with the students' graduation date and calculating backward to their time of entry. Across all programs, the median is **2.0 years** and **the mean is 2.5 years**.

These numbers indicate that overall our students are progressing through their programs in a timely manner. The IR Fact Books on [Graduate Time to Degree Breakdown](#) reveal individual program time to degree rates and breaks down data by key demographics, revealing these important tendencies:

- The yearly median and mean are consistent across a seven-year period (spring 2012 - fall 2018). The median holds constant at 2.0 years and the mean is around 2.5. (The range is 2.47-2.54 years.)
- We see that our two largest ethnic minority groups (**Latinx and Asian**) and our **international students** consistently graduated at the median and below the mean.
- Though small in numbers, our other ethnic minority groups do well, too. **Native American/Alaskan Natives** consistently graduate at or below the median and mean. While **African American** students' time to graduation rates vary year by year, they are often under or at the mean or median.
- Our **first generation** graduate students also graduated at the median and below the mean.
- And, in 5 out of 7 years, our **historically underrepresented minority students** (URM) graduate faster on average than non-URM students.

This aggregated information offers us a general sense of the good health of our programs related to time to degree. However, the individual program level normally conducts a more telling assessment. Our starting point is to look at the curriculum plan for each program and whether they have designed a two or three year program. We have included **two attached tables** indicating where each program falls.

It is important to note that the curriculum plan timeline is based on the 'ideal' student, that is, a full-time student strictly following the curriculum plan. For some of our programs, the 'ideal' and the 'typical' student do closely correspond. For example, the vast majority of the students in the Communication Science and Disorders program are full-time and meet the 2.0-year benchmark. (Note that these students take 15-17 units per semester, which exceeds the eight-unit definition of "full-time" at the graduate level.)

For many other programs, however, there is a notable difference between their 'ideal' and their 'typical' student. These programs may hold two sets of expectations for time to degree. For example, the Master in Public Administration program reports to their accrediting body the expectation that a full-time student should be able to complete their degree in two years. However, they also report that the majority of their students are in-service professionals who attend part-time, and they hold a three-year time to degree expectation for those students. The Social Science MA program also offers a two year

curriculum plan, but given that 75% of their students are university employees seeking career advancement and are attending part-time on employee waivers (covering only six units per semester), they, too, expect that their average student will finish in three years.

Whether a program's students are full- or part-time is only one of the considerations programs use to establish their time to degree expectations. **Section II** illustrates other factors, and **Section III** offers two quick examples to capture how these factors play out in the calculations for our programs.

## **Section II. DEVELOPING NORMATIVE MEASURES**

Our normative assessments are based on a study of the best measure for each program taking into consideration the structure of the program and its requirements; the typical characteristics of the students it attracts; and discipline-based expectations.

### **A. Program Requirements and Structure**

- What are the number of units required? A higher unit count may indicate a longer time to degree. Most of our programs and options (65%) require 30 units; 20% require 33-37 units; and 5% require 56-71 units.
- Is the program plan highly prescriptive, with few or no electives, and courses structured and scheduled sequentially? Or is the program plan looser with more electives and choices? More structured programs may allow students to advance to the degree at a faster rate.
- Is it a structured cohort-based program with all students entering at the same time, following the same program plan and time to graduation goals? These usually achieve a faster time to degree rate.
- What percentage of a program requires stand-alone 600-level graduate courses? All of our programs exceed the Title 5 requirement of 50%, requiring 60-100% graduate only courses. Programs requiring a high percentage of these more demanding and time consuming course may have a longer time to degree rate.
- What type of culminating activity is required: thesis, project, or comprehensive exam? Programs requiring theses and projects, especially in fields requiring original or extensive field research, may take more time to complete than those requiring a comprehensive exam.
- Are there extensive extra-curricular requirements such as internships and field experience, clinical hours, and teaching assistantships? These experiences may add time to degree.
- What are the program's admissions requirements? More rigorous admission requirements and lower acceptance rates allow programs to select more academically prepared students who may face fewer barriers to graduation.
- Is the program offering a degree that translates into a degree-related job immediately upon graduation, or, even sooner, while in the midst of pursuing the degree? If the former, students are often motivated to move through quickly; if the latter, the job may actually delay or derail degree progress.

### **B. In addition, Student-Related Factors Can Affect Time to Degree:**

- How prepared are the students to meet the demands of the program? For example, is their bachelors in the same field or do they need to take prerequisites or other preparation courses?
- Are the program's students primarily full or part-time?

- If they are part-time, are they mid-career reentry students or fresh out of their undergraduate program?
- Are they primarily pre-professional or in-service students pursuing job advancement or preparing for professional licensure or certification? These students are usually motivated to complete the degree quickly.
- Are they preparing for doctoral studies? These students often take longer than average because they are writing theses, teaching, publishing, and presenting their work.
- Are students receiving employee fee waivers? These waivers cover only two courses per semester; thus, most of these students are part-time.
- Are the students being offered attractive extra-curricular professional or personal development opportunities (teaching or research assistantships, mentorships, internships, community service projects, or student government or other leadership opportunities)? While supporting student development, these opportunities may delay time to degree.
- Are students in the program primarily California residents, non-resident domestic students, or international students? High tuition costs or visa requirements often motivate non-resident domestic and international students to complete their degrees quickly.

### C. Discipline-based expectations

Undergraduate time to degree rates can be compared across universities and disciplines due to reporting at the national level (for example the National Center for Education Statistics) and the state level (California State University Fact Books). We find no similar sources of national or statewide data for master degree programs. Our accredited programs do look to their accrediting organizations for guidance. In most cases, a specific time to degree is not prescribed; instead, the program determines their benchmark rate and reports this to the accrediting body, which in turn, expects the program to meet that mark. Time to degree measures may also be determined by discipline expectations shared through professional associations, campuses' collaborations, and industry expectations.

## Section III. PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### **Time to Degree Rates below the Mean: *Communication Science and Disorders (CMSD)***

For this program, 2.0 years is the median *and* the average time to degree rate (.5 years below the overall programs' average). The time to graduation rates might appear unexpectedly quick given that the program requires 56-59 units including a requirement of 400 hours of clinical practicum. In addition, their accrediting body allows the program to set its own time to degree benchmark. A closer look illustrates the factors that contribute to their excellent time to degree rates:

- **Accreditation Expectations.** While the accrediting body allows the program to set its own time to degree expectations, it holds it accountable for achieving their reported mark.
- **Acceptance Rate of 14%.** The student selection process is highly competitive; the program attracts hundreds of applicants and thus can field a well-qualified, highly motivated cohort.
- **Cohort Based.** It is a cohort program with all students starting at the same time and following the same plan to graduation.

- **Full-time Students.** Expectations that students will take 15-17 units per semester (eight units is considered full-time in graduate education) and graduate in no more than two years are clearly conveyed.
- **Highly Prescribed Curriculum Plan.** All courses in the curriculum are required; there are no electives (to insure students get all the courses based on accreditation standards).
- **Comprehensive Exam.** The culminating activity for all students is the comprehensive exam allowing a more predictable time to completion than a thesis or project.
- **Mandatory Advising.** Students' progress is monitored closely by the graduate coordinator and other dedicated faculty advisors.
- **Vigorous Job Market.** Students know that the program has a 100% placement rate in degree-related jobs at or shortly after graduation; for this reason they are motivated to finish their degrees quickly.

#### **Time to Degree Rates above the Median and the Mean: *Anthropology***

Compared to the CMSD program and most of our other programs, the Anthropology MA program is an outlier regarding time to degree rates. Their students **average four years** to complete the degree (with a median also around 4 years).

At first glance, the time to graduate rates might appear unexpectedly high given that the program requires the minimum 30 units, especially when compared to the CMSD program's 56-59 units. Also, like the CMSD program, the Anthropology program has an excellent reputation, attracts highly qualified students from across the country, has a low acceptance rate, and thus admits top students (for example, a recent applicant from a top Boston-area university, graduating at the top of her class, with a perfect GRE score). The program also requires mandatory advising each semester. Given these advantages, what accounts for the longer time to degree rate?

- **Three-year Plan.** The program has been intentional in developing a three-year program because they find it greatly increases the employment opportunities, career advancement, and doctoral program acceptance rates.
- For example, in the last five years, the program has had an 85-100% success rate of their physical anthropology students moving directly into Ph.D. programs. Other two-year programs see an acceptance rate in the 45-70% range for their students in this field.
- **Flexible Curriculum Plan.** Students have options and electives; they can select from among four subfields and an option in Museum Studies (requiring two 180-hour off-campus internships).
- **Rigorous Requirements.** The program has intentionally developed a rigorous program that requires more of their students than many typical graduate programs. For example, students are required to complete a Candidacy exam (three papers) and a two-hour Comprehensive Oral Exam to advance to Candidacy (in addition to the thesis and thesis defense). Students failing the

exams may petition to re-take, but are required to prepare for a semester before retaking the exam.

- **Thesis Requirements.** Anthropology theses require extensive field research, take at least four semesters to complete, and exceed 150 pages. Students produce top quality theses regularly nominated by the college and awarded the University Outstanding Thesis award.
- **Early Career Starts.** Students often get full-time jobs in their fields prior to graduation, requiring part-time or distance study. (This differs from CMSD; their students must finish their degree before career.)
- **Professional Development Opportunities.** Students self-report that they *elect to extend* their time to degree in order to pursue a wealth of important professional development opportunities. These include developing Emmy winning documentaries in the Advanced Laboratory for Visual Anthropology; identifying recent Camp Fire remains and immigrant remains found near the US/Mexico border in the Human Identification Lab; or teaching, researching, and working in the Archaeological Research Program, the History Resources Conservation Lab, Ethnographic lab, or Museum of Anthropology.

Table 1.

**Master's Programs Time to Degree (in Years): Programs with 2-Year Curriculum Design**

overall program median = 2.0 years; overall program mean = 2.5 years

**Graduation Year**

Program	Units	2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018		
		count	mean	median																		
Art	30	1	2.50	2.50	1	3.00	3.00	2	2.50	2.50	1	2.50	2.50									
Biology	30	8	3.31	3.25	3	3.33	3.00	6	4.25	4.25	6	3.58	3.50	2	3.50	3.50	7	3.14	3.00	2	2.25	2.25
Business Administration	30-33	53	1.92	2.00	24	2.25	2.00	18	2.22	2.00	26	2.04	2.00	32	2.06	2.00	29	2.28	2.50	19	1.97	2.00
Communication Sciences & Disorders	56-59	20	2.20	2.00	22	2.14	2.00	22	2.05	2.00	23	2.04	2.00	24	2.00	2.00	24	2.02	2.00	24	2.00	2.00
Communication Studies	30	3	2.00	2.00	4	2.00	2.00	6	2.00	2.00	3	2.00	2.00	8	2.06	2.00	6	2.08	2.00	6	2.00	2.00
Computer Science**	30	5	2.90	2.50	5	2.20	2.00	11	2.27	2.00	13	1.96	2.00	43	2.40	2.50	10	2.75	2.50	1	3.00	3.00
Education	30	35	2.40	2.00	38	2.05	2.00	25	2.00	1.50	27	2.39	2.00	16	2.81	2.50	20	1.85	1.50	21	2.07	1.50
Electrical & Computer Engineering	30	15	2.87	3.00	5	2.30	2.50	14	2.29	2.00	6	1.83	1.75	16	1.97	2.00	18	2.28	2.25	2	2.00	2.00
English*	30	5	2.60	2.00	6	3.83	3.00	7	3.79	3.00	16	3.00	3.00	7	2.50	2.50	7	3.21	3.00	3	2.17	2.00
Environmental Science	30-36	4	3.63	3.25	5	3.10	2.50	3	4.00	4.00	5	3.20	3.50	4	2.88	3.00	3	2.00	2.00	2	1.75	1.75
Geosciences	30	1	2.00	2.00				7	3.93	4.00				2	2.50	2.50	4	3.63	3.50			
History	30	3	2.67	2.50	7	3.29	3.00	4	3.00	2.75	4	3.00	3.00	2	2.75	2.75	2	4.50	4.50			
Interdisciplinary Studies (MA/MS)**	30	2	4.00	4.00	9	1.83	2.00	6	1.92	2.00	9	1.89	2.00	3	2.67	3.00						
Kinesiology	30	25	2.52	2.00	14	2.75	2.00	20	2.25	2.00	16	1.88	2.00	19	2.03	2.00	14	2.54	2.00	6	2.33	2.00
Political Science	30	10	3.20	2.75	4	2.50	2.00	5	3.50	4.00	12	2.71	2.50	10	2.25	2.00	3	2.67	3.00	4	3.38	2.25
Public Administration	36-37	12	2.96	2.75	13	2.73	2.50	16	2.88	2.75	15	2.87	3.00	15	3.37	3.00	8	3.31	3.00	9	3.50	3.00
Recreation Administration	30	1	3.50	3.50	1	3.00	3.00	1	2.00	2.00	2	4.75	4.75	1	4.00	4.00				1	6.00	6.00
Social Science*	30	3	2.17	2.00	2	4.75	4.75	2	4.25	4.25	5	3.40	2.50	6	3.25	3.25	5	2.90	2.50	7	1.93	2.00
Social Work	36-61	61	2.41	2.00	46	1.90	2.00	42	1.75	2.00	74	2.34	2.00	43	1.76	2.00	40	1.86	2.00	82	2.39	2.50
Teaching International Languages*	36	10	2.50	2.00	7	2.86	2.00	12	2.96	3.00	14	3.11	3.25	10	3.00	2.25	6	2.25	2.25	2	2.00	2.00

\*Rates improved recently

\*\*Rates increased recently

Table 2.

**Master's Programs Time to Degree (in Years): Programs with 3-Year Curriculum Design**

overall program median = 2.0 years; overall program mean = 2.5 years

Graduation Year

Program	Units	2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018		
		count	mean	median																		
Anthropology	30	6	4.17	3.50	7	4.14	3.50	8	4.25	4.50	7	4.29	4.50	7	4.00	4.00	12	4.08	4.00	3	3.67	3.00
Fine Arts	60	3	3.83	3.50	3	3.50	3.00	2	3.00	3.00	4	3.25	3.00	2	3.00	3.00	4	3.00	3.00			
Nursing	30	1	4.00	4.00	2	4.00	4.00	3	4.17	4.00	7	3.36	3.50	12	3.63	3.00	2	3.75	3.75	1	6.00	6.00
Nutrition & Food Science	30	5	2.60	2.00	6	2.75	2.50	7	2.43	2.50	10	2.70	2.50	12	2.92	2.50	8	2.88	2.75	4	2.88	3.00
Psychology	30-71	24	2.63	2.50	24	3.04	3.00	19	2.89	3.00	24	2.90	3.00	32	2.88	3.00	27	2.89	3.00	31	3.32	3.00