

The Behrend Beacon

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# UK considering graduation contract to keep students on 4-year plan

by Steve Lannen

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Like fishermen returning from a day on the boat, almost all University of Kentucky students have a story about a class that got away.

It was only offered at the same time as another required class. It was only offered every other semester. The professor who teaches the class got sick or was on sabbatical. And the student ended up staying another semester to get that class and graduate.

If that happens, UK should pay the extra tuition, says Tony Stoeppel, a student government senator.

Stoeppel, an engineering major, would like to see UK offer a graduation contract. Students would agree to stay on track to graduate by passing classes and taking a full load, or close to it, every semester. They'd work with advisors to make sure they're meeting requirements.

In return, UK would agree to pay the extra tuition if students had to stay longer than four years because required courses weren't available when they needed them.

Only about one-fourth of new UK freshmen graduate in four years. The reasons are complex, and even the contract's supporters acknowledge it wouldn't work for every student.

But still, UK's faculty and academic leaders are interested in the idea, which is done at schools such as the University of Iowa and Indiana University with varying degrees of success.

UK Provost Mike Nietzel said he is intrigued by the contract idea, which he thinks could help students and UK's graduation rate without costing too much.

"It will focus both the student and the institution earlier on what it takes to be successful," he said.

Jobs, course requirements, scheduling and plain old avoidance of the 8 a.m. class all play a role in why students are staying longer than four years, students and professors say.

At UK and other schools, students increasingly work to pay for school, rent or just spending money. Work schedules often determine how many classes a student can take each semester, rather than the other way around.

In the College of Agriculture, agronomy professor Bill Thom estimates that about 40 percent of his students work 30 or more hours per week.

It would be almost impossible for those students to participate in the contract, he said, because they often cannot take a full load.

Stoeppel said a UK graduation contract could be based on credit hours instead of years, or even offer five- or six-year contracts for some students.

A task force is expected to draft a proposal, which could go before trustees for approval as early as the end of the semester.

A possible downside to the contract is that students might not be able to take all the elective courses they would like and might find it more difficult to study abroad or take time off to work.

Stoeppel readily says the contract isn't for everyone, but thinks it should be an option for those who want to do it.

"For those students that come to this institution with the mentality to do that, the university should clear the way for that to happen," he said.

Clearing the way is where it could get tough, said George Mehaffy, vice president for academic leadership and change with the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Departments will have to review their courses degree by degree, and work with the registrar's office to figure out course scheduling and whether it's possible to offer more course sections.

In majors such as engineering and architecture, it's become accepted that students will not graduate in four years.

"At the operational level, this stuff will get pretty sticky," Mehaffy said.

History professor Kathi Kern hopes the committee looks at UK's degree requirements. "It seems to me we have a lot of requirements here. Are (students) really meeting the kinds of requirements we want them to meet?" she asked.

Katie Whitney would say no. The sophomore just transferred from Syracuse University, but is stuck taking introductory mathematics, basic logic and English courses. She tested out of them at Syracuse, but UK wouldn't accept the credits because she didn't take actual college courses, she said.

"I'm bored out of my mind, but

I have to take them because it's university requirements," the journalism major said. She's taking six classes this semester and still plans to graduate in four years.

When it comes to scheduling, philosophy and English major Marcus Baks has seen first-hand the conflicts. His required "Islamic and Jewish Philosophy" class met at the same time as a "Symbolic Logic" class, also required for graduation.

There were no other course sections offered at different times, he said. In another case, his "Philosophy of Science" class was canceled this semester because the professor injured his back.

"I'll have to take summer classes now," Baks said.

Nietzel said the university will probably have to allow more substitutions of courses to keep students on track, something UK is starting to do more of already.

Advising plays a role in getting students on track, but class availability is a bigger problem, says senior Keith Birchfield.

"I don't think it's realistic unless they hire more professors to teach more classes," he said.

Birchfield used to work part-time in the statistics department and saw business and economic majors shut out of a required course because it was filled. "There was nothing we could do. We couldn't open another section because there was not enough money to hire another teacher," he said.

Birchfield says the contract will work for students who are focused

and know what they want to do when they enter UK. That's not the majority, he believes.

Most of his friends who have graduated took five years because they changed majors. He started at UK as a freshman in 1997 and won't graduate until next year.

For a year and a half, he only went to school part-time, questioning whether he really wanted to be a philosophy major. He's now a sociology major.

"For me, college has been about finding a direction, not just a degree," he said. "If I hadn't had that time off and maybe stuck to a contract, I might be stuck with a degree I didn't want."

And then there's the issue of class times. Many students just don't like to take classes before 10 a.m. or after 2 p.m.

Just the other week, 10 seniors pleaded with Kern, the history professor, to be let into her entry-level, American history class. They told her hardship stories about how they needed the class to graduate this spring, or they tried to flatter her.

Her class was already filled with 240 students, but she felt bad about their situations. So she e-mailed the seniors and said they could take her class, but would have to take the section at 8 a.m.

Not one took her up on the offer.

"Some students just don't want to take early classes. A lot of this is part of student culture," she said.

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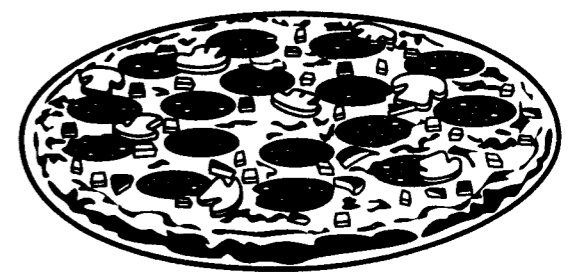
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