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A Vexing Problem for College Students: Course Availability

A new report looks at course “shutouts,” which can add to the time and cost of getting a degree.

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Imagine that you’ve arrived at college, eager to start your studies, only to find that you can’t enroll in courses required for your major.

Some students don’t have to imagine that scenario. It’s all too real.

So-called college course shutouts are not isolated cases, and they are increasingly recognized as a barrier that can drag out the time it takes to earn a degree. That raises students’ tuition costs and possibly drives them to a different course of study. Courses may be filled to capacity, bumping students to waiting lists, or may not be offered every semester or at a time that works with the student’s schedule.

“It makes it difficult for students to graduate in a timely manner,” said Ivette House, deputy program officer at 10,000 Degrees, a nonprofit in San Rafael, Calif., that helps low-income and first-generation students pursue college educations. “The longer it takes you to get through college, the more money you’re paying.”

Given the skepticism about the cost and value of a college degree, that's a big concern. The average published or "sticker" price for in-state tuition and fees, housing and meals at a four-year public college is now about \$26,000 a year. It's \$15,000 for a two-year public college and \$45,000 at a private nonprofit college. Staying another semester can add thousands of dollars to the cost.

A report published Friday by Instructure, an education technology firm, concluded that limitations in course availability "are not isolated incidents but reflect a broader trend in how students navigate academic pathways."

The report included a survey of more than 1,000 college students and recent graduates, which found that 85 percent of those responding reported at least some difficulty registering for a required course. About three-quarters said limited course availability made it more likely that they would need extra semesters to complete their degree.

"I was surprised just how pervasive it was," said Brian Cully, senior vice president of corporate development at Instructure. The survey was conducted in August and September online using SurveyMonkey Audience and included students from across the country.

While a traditional college bachelor's degree is meant to be completed in four years (two years for an associate degree), many students take longer. About 61 percent of students who pursue a degree or certificate after high school complete their studies within six years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Taking extra years to finish college adds to the cost not only because students pay more out of pocket, but also because of the loss of wages the student could have earned by graduating on time, according to research from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

"It turns out that taking an extra year or two to finish school adds considerably to the cost, in large part because of higher opportunity costs," they wrote.

Tight state budgets may constrain the availability of classes at public institutions, and changes in student demographics may play a role as well, experts say. College schedules were designed mostly for younger, full-time students, but older students may have to juggle work and child care while attending classes.

“A 9-to-5 course schedule may not serve them adequately,” said Bill DeBaun, senior director of data and strategic initiatives at the National College Attainment Network, a nonprofit that promotes college attendance.

Can students take courses at other colleges to fill gaps?

In some cases, yes. But not all colleges accept credits for courses taken at other institutions. More than half of the students in the Instructure survey said they took courses at another school, either in person or online, to stay on track to graduate. But a large majority of those who took outside courses said they had trouble enrolling in the class, and most said they had difficulty transferring the credits to their home college.

Other research has also shown that limited course availability can have broader negative effects. A 2025 paper by researchers at Purdue University and Brigham Young University found that when college students at a large university weren’t able to enroll in courses they requested, it reduced by 30 percent the probability that a student would take any course in that subject. And earlier research on community colleges found that students placed on a waiting list were as much as 28 percent more likely to take no courses at all that term.

Are certain schools or programs more affected?

Course availability varies by state and institution, but public colleges tend to be more affected than well-funded private institutions because of budget constraints, said Silvia Robles, a research scientist at Brown University’s Annenberg Institute who has also studied course shutouts at community colleges.

Students need to be aware of the possibility of course restrictions when planning their college path, Ms. House said. Her nonprofit begins working with students in California and Utah when they are high school seniors to identify potential programs and majors.

Within the California State University System, she said, certain majors or entire campuses may be labeled “impacted,” meaning demand for some popular programs, like nursing, exceeds capacity. Students may have more difficulty gaining admission to such programs, she said, and may find it challenging to take the necessary sequence of courses to complete a degree within four years. Students should ultimately choose the school they think is best for them, she said, but “you want to be realistic.”

Problems scheduling time with academic advisers can compound course selection issues for some students. Jesner Alvarez, 20, an aspiring radiologist in his fourth semester at Contra Costa College, a community college, said he enjoyed his studies and was doing well academically. But when he tried to register for a required English class, the system said he needed another course first. Mr. Alvarez scheduled an appointment with an adviser to appeal, but by the time he was approved, the class was full. He must now wait until next semester and hope the class is offered. “That was very frustrating,” he said.

How can I tell if a college has issues?

Prospective students should also ask enrolled students during campus visits or by reaching out on social media, Dr. Robles said. “Talk to students already there on the ground,” she said. They can also ask the school directly.

In addition, students can check data on graduation rates, an indirect indicator of course availability, by using the College Scorecard tool, as well as the government’s College Navigator, to see the proportion of students who earn a degree within a certain number of years after enrolling. The higher the percentage, the better.

The Cal State system has a database that students can use to check which programs or schools have limited enrollment capacity, Ms. House said.

What else can students do to get courses they need?

Increasingly, colleges align with other affiliated institutions, or even those in other states, to offer online course sharing to fill gaps in their schedules, said Yolanda Watson Spiva, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit in Indianapolis that seeks to increase college completion rates. Before signing up for such a course, however, double check with your own college's registrar to make sure it accepts credits from that provider. "Do your due diligence," she said.

Prospective students can also ask about special programs that help students graduate on time, Mr. DeBaun said. The State University of New York system, for instance, offers the ASAP program to eligible students to help them stay on track, through benefits like personal counseling and priority course registration, he said. Similarly, some schools may have honors programs that offer priority registration as a perk.

Students should also pay careful attention to their college's course registration windows, Dr. Robles said. Schedule an appointment with your academic adviser early so you are ready to enroll in classes immediately after registration opens. That gives you the best chance of getting the courses you want.

And be aware that at some community colleges, students who attend for multiple semesters may earn "priority" enrollment for in-demand courses, said Robert Fairlie, a professor of public policy and economics at the University of California, Los Angeles.