

Driven and No Regrets: A Qualitative Analysis of Students Earning Baccalaureate Degrees in Three Years

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Using rigorous qualitative research methodology, twenty-four college students receiving their undergraduate degrees in three years were interviewed. Following analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts and coding, themes emerged, indicating that these students possessed self-discipline, self-motivation, and drive.

Overall, the results indicate that students are driven by their future plans, external influences, and their own personality. Thoughts to quit the program sometimes occurred, but students in our sample did not dwell on them. Additionally, they expressed few regrets regarding their decisions, despite the costs paid, the sacrifices made, the health endured, and the social experiences missed. Finally, these students discussed how graduating early affected their grades, changes they would make if they could do it all over again, and advice they would give to future students contemplating early college graduation.

Introduction

Reviewing the literature for research on students who choose to graduate from college early showed surprising paucity. Frankly, it was a significant motivating factor in our choice to undertake the present research study. For example, we know that ethnic minority students tend to have lower college rates than non-minority students (Renner, 2003), adult learners often take longer than the typical four years to graduate from college (Mishler, 1983), and that college graduation rates are not necessarily tied only to cognitive variables (Tracey, 1987). We also have documentation regarding gifted students who choose to graduate from high school early (e.g., Toth, 1999). However, a review of Educational Abstracts and ERIC (including assistance from reference librarians) shows almost no research reported on students

choosing to accelerate their college experience and to graduate in less than the traditional four years.

Dainow (2001) discussed how more college students are now using summer school to accumulate their credits so they can graduate early. Students choosing to graduate early reported to her that boredom was part of their motivation for graduating early. Dainow also explained that there has been a nationwide effort to promote summer school, including high school seniors before their freshman year of college. If the seniors continued in the summer school program, they could graduate from college in three years instead of four.

Stanley and Sandhofer (1997) conducted a study with students who graduated before the age of 19, mostly from Johns Hopkins University. They found a few students were pressured into accelerated education by their parents. Other students, however, were relatively mature and highly motivated; early graduation occurred without seeming difficulties. Cusker (1999) studied means by which Advanced Placement (AP) credits affected the performance of students entering Binghamton University. She reported that 8.3% graduated in less than four years. Consequently, she found no significant correlation between accumulating AP credits and graduating early from college.

Rybnikar (2004) recounted the evolution of one institute's three-year program. In 1946 Babson College began a three year program to receive a B.S. in business management. This program showed demonstrated success partly because it was an all-male institute, and many of the students were in their 20s, returning from the war and wanting to move on with their lives. By the 1960s, however, the program no longer worked. Students were younger and wanted more time to enjoy college life. Students today can still graduate in three years if they go year-round, but the regular program presently extends for four years.

Cassel (2002) reported that about one in 100 students world-wide graduate from college. In the United States, the rates are about one in three. With the explosion of college enrollments across the globe, dire attention is needed for those who possess the

capability for completing their studies early. The British model, adopted in other European countries also, bases the university experience on a three year undergraduate assumption. With the escalating high cost of higher education (Strauss, 2005), increasing numbers of students likely will be looking for alternatives to paying for a four year experience. Consequently, the need for research in this domain seems essential.

Consistent with Johnson and Christensen (2004), we employed a qualitative research design since empirical research in this domain would be exploratory. That is, without clear data on which to base hypotheses, quantitative research relating to early graduating students seems premature. We trust that findings from the present project will provide later quantitative researchers with some grounded theories on which reasonable theories can be based and tested. In this vein, we designed the present study inductively, using “disciplined restraint” to provide as objective reporting of the results as is reasonable (Raffanti, 2006). As such, we followed traditional Glaser (1992) qualitative research protocol rather than theoretically interpreted alternatives (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Participants

Twenty-four undergraduate students from a private, selective, Midwest, comprehensive university were selected and agreed to participate in our study. We used criterion sampling as all participants met the rubric we used for selection. No exclusionary criteria were used and names were provided by the university’s academic services office. Twenty-three students were Caucasian, and one was Hispanic. There were seventeen women and seven men, ranging from ages 20 to 22 (eight were 20, fifteen were 21, and one was 22). There were sixteen majors represented among the sample. Six students were psychology majors, and one person double majored in psychology and criminal justice. Three were communications majors, and four were youth ministry majors. The business administration department included one student majoring in finance and one in accounting/finance. Other majors consisted of philosophy, pre-seminary, Bible and pre-seminary double major, music, English, and biology.

Among these students, the average high school GPA was 3.78. Of the sixteen subjects who took the SAT, the average score was 1283, ranging from 1040 to 1490. Of the twenty subjects who took the ACT, the average score was 28, ranging from 18 to 33. Although we used names in this article to enhance the readability of the paper, obviously they are pseudonyms.

Method

We conducted an empirical research study using the qualitative method. Our investigation was phenomenological in design. Since participant observation or ethnographic methods were not feasible for this study, our principal means of obtaining data was in-depth interviews. In particular, we tape-recorded our meetings, transcribing the tapes for analysis later. Data also was collected via a one-page demographic sheet that participants completed before the interviews commenced.

The study's design employed semi-structured interviews. As such we came to the interviews prepared with questions relating to the participant's future plans, external influences leading to their decisions, reasons for academic decisions, affect and cognitions regarding students' academic experience, personality factors, and advice to others in similar situations. However, we also exercised freedom to navigate during the interviews, moving from scripted questions, allowing the participants to lead the interview in directions of participant interests and personal constructs. As such, we believe that a healthy degree of reflexivity occurred during the interview phase of the data collection, and this enhance the quality of obtained information.

We also intentionally conducted the study inductively and cleared deductive approaches from our design. That is, we did not begin with a theoretical construct, using this to guide the research process. Rather, we wished openness to allow the participants to tell their own stories and accounts of their experiences. Our intent was to move from the words collected to general conclusions that appeared to emerge inductively from the interviews. As such, the

study was essentially exploratory in nature.

The data was coded, utilizing Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) protocol. We examined reoccurring statements, phrases, and constructs—assessing potential inter-locking connections. At some points, we collapsed them into combined categories. Regular meetings between the researchers helped, during the analysis phase, to provide cross-checks relative to potential themes in the data. Although, consistent with standard qualitative practice, we did not straight-jacket ourselves into numerical assessment, we did pay attention to the numbers of times particular constructs were mentioned across participant responses.

Some themes we originally thought to be valid later were discarded due to lack of support among most participants. Consequently, much of our findings reflect majority-view, although this is meant in a figurative and not descriptive-statistical sense. In the end, our goal was to produce a theory grounded in the data collected. We believe that, overall, this was accomplished.

Results

It takes discipline and commitment to attend college and receive a baccalaureate degree. Four years of hard work and late nights can be and taxing on any student. But to condense four years' worth of college work into only three years is a particular challenge. Overall, the results of our study indicate that students who do this are driven by their future plans, external influences, and their own personality. Thoughts to quit the program sometimes occurred, but students in our sample did not dwell on them. Additionally, they expressed few regrets regarding their decisions, despite the costs paid, the sacrifices made, the health endured, and the social experiences missed. Finally, these students discussed how graduating early affected their grades, changes they would make if they could do it all over again, and advice they would give to future students contemplating early college graduation. The results were surprising at points, and they describe a unique group of individuals who strive for excellence, as quickly as they can achieve it.

Generally, early graduates are internally driven. When discussing her self-discipline, Abby related: "I guess it's just something that you have to instill in yourself early on..." Felicity continued: "Whatever you got to do to get that, then you do it." Depending on the issue, Ethan believes he can be "a very driven person," especially when it comes to people. He elaborated on his passion and drive as he attempts to balance task-orientation with life relationships:

One of my mottos is, you know, 'A person is always more important than a grade.' So, if someone was struggling with something and I had a test tomorrow...I could see then that...if I stopped to talk to this person I'm going to lose at least a grade or two on the test tomorrow. And it's more important to talk to that person...I'm driven in a lot of things....Very very infrequently do I put a ton of effort into any one thing.

Of the 24 students interviewed, eighteen plan to continue their education in contexts such as graduate school, seminary, culinary school, or the like. Evidence suggests that participants' decisions to pursue further study did factor into their decisions to finish early as an undergraduate. Mary placed this phenomenon in the context of being more focused: "I think that I'll look better, plus it kind of focuses me a little more this year, because I'm sure that if I had not graduated early this year, I would've been so bored. So graduating early really helps me just focus and realize what I have to do." Other students expressed being tired of school; realizing they have additional experiences with upcoming graduate studies, they want to complete their work as quickly as possible. Wendy decided: "I wanted to go to grad school, but I didn't want to be in school forever, so I figured it would help [to graduate early]..."

The decision to graduate early came to each subject differently, but most decided during their first or second year of college. Natalie recalls: "At the end of my freshman year I just decided that I had taken pretty much all of my gen. eds., and that it

was a pretty plausible idea, so I decided to go for it.” Dora put it simply, “I had taken a lot of classes previously, so, I was just ready to be done with school and get through it and, I didn’t really want to be here another year....”

The most salient external factor influencing the decision to graduate early was money. In particular, 17 participants alluded to money being a major benefit regarding their decision. Zoe said frankly, “It was the money.” Other externals included relationships with friends, family, and significant others, saving time, the dislike of dorm or of the region’s weather, and the inability to pursue hobbies at the college’s location. Ethan explained: “I didn’t really care to be in school another year, sometimes I feel like I’m wasting my time here, wasting money here.” Lee explained that for him, it was just the “relief of, being done early, not having to spend four years in school.”

While external factors were a part of the decision making process, all but three of the participants made it clear that the decision to graduate early was personal. Few admitted to being severely pressured or influenced by others. Two had help from parents and friends, and one, who decided to graduate early during high school, was first pressured by her friend to take college credits. When she realized that by continuing, she could graduate early, she personalized the decision to graduate early.

Fourteen of the subjects purported they never thought about the quitting the early graduation track and reverting to a four year college experience. Kim said, “I’m not a give-up kind of person, like, if I ever start something, I never give up on it...” Tasha explained why she never had thoughts of quitting:

I don’t regret my decision at all or anything or think that I should’ve done it in four years instead of three....When I walk across the stage... I’ll feel like a major sense of accomplishment...being able to have done everything people do in four years, and a lot more, in only three years.

At the same time, there were ten others who had questioned their decision. Oliver, for example, admitted: “I’ve thought about it in

the last year, go for four years, just, have an easier load, um, but...decided not to. You know, because otherwise I'd be taking three or four credits, just hanging around for nothing. No scholarships that way." Again, money seemed to be a related factor in pushing these ten to stay in the program. The issue of time, the influences of family, friends, and advisors, and the plague of laziness the participants feared would come with so few credits during their last year also contributed.

Of the 24 students, half of them considered themselves to have a Type A personality. Nine said they were in between Types A and B, and only three considered themselves to be completely Type B in personality. Most of the early graduates said they were driven in their general lifestyle and not just academically. Staci expressed

the feelings reflected by many of the subjects when she said: "I'm passionate about getting my homework done and getting all the things done that I want, but like, overall, if there's something that I really want, in any area of life, you know, I'll, I'll work hard and get it."

Many of the students also linked drive with their self-discipline. Wendy explained:

I'm a very motivated person. If I set my mind to something um, as long as it doesn't change I guess, it'll get done. I'm very, I like to do things like, in advance. I don't procrastinate....I'm pretty disciplined, as in you know, making sure I get stuff done. I have never turned in an assignment late at college, that kind of a thing. I'm very disciplined with it, but I don't let it control my life, or I try not to at least.

The passion these students have to drive them through college in only three years seems to overpower the potentially negative aspects associated with the decision. Despite the costs endured, the sacrifices made, the activities missed, or the poor health endured at times, only two subjects said that they might regret this decision to graduate in three years from college. Quinn

said frankly: "If I did [regret this] I wouldn't be doing it. So, no...I might not like it so much that I had to leave early or whatever, because of the friendships that I couldn't make...but I'm ready to be done, I'm ready to get out there." Wendy admitted:

When I was in high school, I wish I would've graduated in three years...because all my friends were older than me...And I really, like, I'm a good student...I apply myself well, but I really don't like school that much. It's kind of frustrating for me; I feel like I'm doing a lot of busywork...This is just kind of a prerequisite to the next part of my life.

Wendy's words are shared by many early graduates. College is a means to an end; any way to push through those means quicker seems to be a worthwhile endeavor for them.

Most subjects could think of specific costs to graduating early. These included less time and dedication to their social lives, relationships, the dorm experience, extracurricular activities, and experience and knowledge through internships or taking more courses. Even when listing the costs of graduating early, however, the will to accomplish their aim despite them is clear. For every cost, participants identify a "but..." outweighing the loss. For example, Mary said this: "It's definitely costing me, obviously a year of my college experience...but again, I'm just the kind of person that, I get so bored with so many things that for me to stay here another year, I think would be more harmful than it would be fun..." Zoe followed a similar pattern when she said: "It could cost me a lot, um, but it could give me more, I think."

Still others purported that graduating early affected their college experience little. Quinn, for example, asserted: "It's gone really smoothly..." Hannah also explained:

This year like, is my last year here, and I moved away from all my friends to come be an R.A. at a freshman dorm. So, like, I kind of just am one of those people who...just move on...when things are done. I'd rather look forward to life than...looking back...I think maybe it might

cost me as far as like, knowledge or whatnot because if I stayed I could just take random classes that I felt like taking. But again I don't think it's costing me much in that either, because I can go on and do grad school if I want to, so I don't really see it as costing me anything.

These subjects made significant sacrifices in their three years to graduate early. Some sacrifices included their summers, their social lives, time in general, the amount of sleep, pressure to take heavier course loads, and the like. Tasha said: "A lot of time I've sacrificed my summers. Like I've had full-time jobs and um, I've had to be at classes online, so that probably took away most of my social life during the summers and stuff."

Early graduates mentioned extracurricular activities, relationships, the fourth year of college itself, the complete college experience, and the chance to take other courses of choice as elements they will miss as a result of their choleric choices. Felicity said assertively that she would miss out on "another year with [her] friends." She went on to say: "Most of them are older, though, so they're going to graduate anyway. I just wish I had been there the year before, when they were freshmen." Lee reported that he will miss out by not taking additional credits: "I'll just kind of have the bare minimum to get out."

Eight subjects claimed they were not missing out on anything by graduating early. Dora put it simply: "No, not really, because a lot of my friends are seniors this year..." Many of the early graduates like Dora mentioned how their closest friends were seniors by year already, so they were actually graduating with a class they could identify with in a positive manner. This salient point seemed to be quite important relative to social connections associated with participants' decisions. We do not know, however, whether such friendships resulted from our subjects' desires to graduate early or whether the desire resulted from the friendships.

Most students did not feel as though their general health or their sleeping, eating, or exercise habits had been affected by

graduating early. Patricia admitted: "I don't think so. I can't think of why it would. I mean, I sleep probably as much...maybe... more classes give me a little less sleep doing projects but probably not. I would probably stay up and do other stuff anyway."

The nine subjects who indicated that they experienced changes in physical health provided a range typical to extreme responses. Kim illustrated the mundane: "...I've gotten really busy.... It's just less time to take care of myself the way I need to. Sometimes it makes me get sick, because of the all the stress, like colds and stuff..." Yvette, when discussing her physical health, had a traumatic story. Obviously, whether or not it is attributable directly to early graduation or just school in general is unclear:

Since I [enrolled], like I developed a syndrome called a splenic flexure syndrome...I don't have it at all during the summers, but like every single fall I've come [to school] I've had to go to the emergency room for it. So the doctors think it's like...academics and stuff that makes me go to the E.R. Um, so that's probably related....I think.

While lack of sleep is almost always an issue for college students, a few early graduates admitted they would probably acquire more sleep if they had an extra year. Mary said: "As far as sleep, um, that hasn't been as good....I would definitely get more sleep if I was graduating [normally]." Only one student felt her eating habits had been disrupted by graduating early. Natalie said: "I had a Reese Fast Break today, that's about it. Mountain Dew. Um, I don't get to eat lunch a lot, but usually when I get home, I like, pig out, so, it's kind of like uh, one huge meal a day..." Others mentioned dwindling exercise habits. Valerie claimed: "I haven't been able to work out like normal, because of like, all the classes and stuff."

Half of the subjects claimed their grades were not at all affected by graduating early. Among the other twelve, seven said their grades were worse and five said they were better. Christy acknowledged: "I do better under stress....There was one semester that I took twenty-one credits. In that semester I had a better GPA

than last semester which I ended up only taking fifteen.” Valerie added the dimension of distractibility: “I don’t like putting all of myself into my academic work, because I get distracted really easily and stuff and it just gets boring, so...it might have not been that different, but I could see how...maybe my grades could’ve been better if I...only had a few classes...”

Most of the early graduates could name a number of aspects they would have changed about their college experiences if they could go back in time. They listed the following: cultivating more from their freshman year, relationship development, making the decision to graduate early at an earlier point in time, balancing the semesters out better, taking more CLEP tests, staying away from serious relationships, and planning better. Hannah expressed frustration as she looked back on her freshman year and her ignorant lack of planning: “I definitely took some classes that were a total waste of time because...I could’ve easily CLEP’ed out of them...I would’ve definitely...figured out what I could’ve done instead of just assuming that’s what everybody had to do.”

Many of the study’s participants said their advice to others depended on what people want out of life and the college experience. Natalie said: “A lot of people spend the first three years of college trying to figure out what they want to do, so, not if you don’t know what you want to do. If you know what you want, then, it’s a great decision.” Ross figuratively said that one should only consider early graduation “if you can do it without killing yourself.” He continued: “There’s more to college than just grades and work and...because I had so many hours coming in, I was able to graduate early and still hang out with friends and do all these extracurricular things.” Dora stated that it depends on the person: “I guess it’s how much you enjoy college life, because I don’t think school’s really, like I don’t so much enjoy, like, the stressful environment...” Mary also felt that it “takes a specific kind of person and a specific kind of program.”

One simple phrase was repeated among many of the early graduates. In particular, nine students, in one form or another, ended up advising simply: “Go for it.” While the subjects advise

people to be cautious in deciding if early college graduation is truly for them, they still encourage those people to take the challenge.

Limitations and Future Research

The major limitations in this study were its lack of variety in race, gender, and location. All but one of the subjects were Caucasian. There was more than twice the number of women as there were men. This could be an issue of chance, as in the case of our study more women happened to decide to graduate earlier than men, or it could be an independent variable, if more women regularly opt for early graduation than do men. Finally, all subjects were taken from one Midwest university where despite our exhaustive search process, the 24 students studied were the only ones found who were graduating in three years at the time of data collection.

Further research, consequently, should focus on expanding the sample size, the heterogeneity, and use multiple sites for data collection. This hopefully would add minority individuals to the sample, in addition to adding greater external validity to the findings. Survey research in a national sample also would help to broaden our understanding of this student population, although it obviously would not capture some of the depth provided in the present study. In sum, combining additional quantitative and qualitative methods in future research in this area may produce the most productive and promising research results.

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