



“Super Seniors”: Who, What, Why, and How Many?

Editor’s note: This is Part I of a three-part series on Super Seniors.

Due to the severity of recent budget cuts and the critical reduction of resources, students who are *undeclared majors* and *super seniors* appear to be gathering attention.

The term *undeclared major* is an official designation that describes a student status whereby the student has not formally declared a selected program major. Typically, the greatest incidence of undeclared majors is during the freshman year. Students tend to decide on a major by the end of their sophomore year or by the start of the junior year.

As displayed in Table 1, in fall 2009, 531 out of 7,031 undergraduate students or 7.6 percent are undeclared majors. By most standards, the proportion is small. Considering only undeclared majors, 65 percent are freshmen (345), and 20 percent are sophomores (106); 11.9 percent are juniors (63), and 3.2 percent are seniors (17).

When considering student level, 21.8 percent of all freshman students are undeclared; 11.2 percent of all sophomores are undeclared; 3.2 percent of juniors are undeclared; and only 0.7 percent of all seniors are undeclared. The patterns do not appear particularly alarming or unusual.

The coined term *super senior* is not an official student status and, therefore, is a bit more complex to define. At best the term is used to approximate a description of a condition or pattern of excess unit accumulation among senior status students. While the term has been around for some time, it is vague and ambiguous. First, as used here, it has nothing to do with age, nor with senior citizen status, nor with grand athletic or academic achievements by senior level students. The term has more to do with describing students in four-year colleges or universities who take much longer than four years to graduate with an undergraduate degree. Fifth-year or sixth-year seniors are terms often used synonymously to describe the phenomenon.

Our working definition describes *super seniors* as seniors who have more than 120 earned college or university credits and are actively enrolled in the current academic year.

Table 2 shows all seniors by total units earned. Of interest are seniors with more than 120 units earned. Typically for institutions of higher education, 120 units earned signals the minimum number of credits necessary for graduation. (However, there of course are academic programs that require more than 120 units to degree. Generally, for example, BS degrees tend to require more units than BA degrees.) To continue, by our working definition, about 29.6 percent of all seniors with a

Table 1. Undeclared/Declared Majors by Student Level, Fall 2009.

Student Level	Undeclared	Declared	Total
Freshman	345	1239	1584
Sophomore	106	840	946
Junior	63	1931	1994
Senior	17	2490	2507
Total	531	6500	7031
Row %			
Freshman	21.8	78.2	100.0
Sophomore	11.2	88.8	100.0
Junior	3.2	96.8	100.0
Senior	0.7	99.3	100.0
Total	7.6	92.4	100.0
Column %			
Freshman	65.0	19.1	
Sophomore	20.0	12.9	
Junior	11.9	29.7	
Senior	3.2	38.3	
Total	100.0	100.0	

Source: Office of Institutional Research. ERSS Preliminary, Fall 2009.

declared major are “super seniors”. Only 3 seniors in the super senior category are undeclared majors.

Table 2. Seniors Enrolled in Fall 2009 Classes: Total Units Earned by Undeclared Majors and Declared Majors.

Undeclared/Declared	Total Units Earned			
	91 - 100	101 - 110	111 - 120	over 120
Senior with Undeclared Major	6 (35.3)	5 (29.4)	3 (17.7)	3 (17.7)
Seniors with Declared Major	775 (31.1)	540 (21.7)	438 (17.6)	737 (29.6)
Total Seniors, Fall 2009: 2507	781 (31.2)	545 (21.7)	441 (17.6)	740 (29.5)

Source: Office of Institutional Research. ERSS Preliminary, Fall 2009.

Why the sudden attention? Never before has the CSU system given much attention to super seniors, or undeclared majors for that matter. Until now, college-going and attendance has been supported by the particularly American ethos that believes it is acceptable and not unexpected that students should take their time in earning as much education as possible; that staying in school longer than four years is fine; that pursuing a double major is well and good. In fact, historically when the economy turned downward, conventional wisdom rang out it was prudent to stay in school for additional knowledge and training. If affordable, staying in school to ride out bad economic times was the smart thing to do.

The unprecedented budget cuts over the past year has prompted the CSU Board of Trustees to support the empowerment of university presidents to take necessary actions to confer degrees to students who have excess units. To put it plainly, necessary actions means presidents will be free to develop enrollment strategies to encourage and guide students toward degree completion. The University is concerned with making room for new students or room for students who need seats in classes in order to finish successfully in a shorter timeframe.

The Committee on Educational Policy of the Trustees of the California State University (July 21, 2009) adopted a resolution to facilitate graduation. While not a mandate to Presidents, Title 5, California Code of Regulations was amended to add Section 40411 as follows:

§ 40411. Conferral of Degree upon Completion of Degree Requirements.

The president of each campus may preclude any student from enrolling in any additional state-supported courses when that student has met all necessary requirements for a degree, and may take the actions necessary to confer the degree.

Thus, the CSU Stanislaus President and administration are encouraged to develop and enact policies and practices to confer degrees to undergraduate students with excess units.

Below, we posit a few reasons why a student may accrue excess units.

- *Being undeclared could be a reason. Some students are not able to decide early-on as to what they want to do. So they hang on, exploring other courses in hopes the exploration will lead to self-discovery.*
- *Similarly, changing majors may also generate excess units as well as increase time to degree.*
- *Pursuing multiple degrees would require many more credits beyond 120 units, and perhaps as high as 150 credits or more.*

- *Students may make poor choices or lack in follow-through when it comes to choosing classes to fulfill GE requirements, upper division electives, and proper sequencing of courses in the division major. It is not uncommon for students to take additional courses or redundant coursework that was not necessary.*
- *Infrequently but worth noting, low grades in previous coursework may require retaking the course. A grade of “D” does not reflect well, and in many instances even a “C-” or “C” is not good enough for the major when it comes to applying for graduate school.*
- *Some department programs may require additional courses for the major because of program requirements for graduation as well as to satisfy accreditation needs. Some programs such as music (BM), fine arts (BFA), computer information science (BS), nursing (BSN), accounting (BS), and biological sciences (BS), require additional coursework resulting in units earned above 120.*

As noted previously, the prevailing culture of higher education and college-going in general, encourages students to explore all things academic and remain in school for as long as needed, as long as they are a student in good-standing and paying for it.

Today, the economic recession has driven away millions of jobs, has made for higher unemployment and brought about a huge tax revenue shortfall. The California economy in particular is revealing a very slow market recovery resulting in fewer slots in the marketplace for graduating seniors. Even with the California Governor’s recent repositioning of the state budget proposal to get the CSU System back to where it needs to be, could take years.

For the first time in CSU system history, there is no budget for enrollment growth. If the Governor’s intent comes to fruition, it only gets the CSU system budget back to 2007 levels. The reality today is not only fewer slots in the marketplace, but also fewer seats in the classroom. The number of scheduled course offerings is reduced. And while the number of applications for admissions is growing, there will be reductions in the number of students admitted to the University. Thus, the University must look to managing its resources, including the applications, admissions, and enrollment process in a way entirely different from past experience. The supply/demand paradigm has now set up shop on campus. The classroom space and seats are now “gold” to be mined; only this type of “mining” translates into moving people out of school and into the workforce, quickly. Thus, *super seniors*, and to some extent *undeclared majors*, are now issues.

About the Office of Institutional Research (IR).

IR is responsible for compiling student data, for analyzing and presenting statistical information from many university-wide sources regarding applications received, new enrollments, continuing enrollments, credentials awarded and degrees conferred for each term of the college year. IR also fulfills the reporting requirements of the Office of the Chancellor, the State of California Legislature, as well as Federal reporting requirements, and is also central to fulfilling the University’s need for informed decision-making.