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"BRINGING BUSINESS TO THE BLUE RIDGE REGION OF VIRGINIA"

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BecomeAlum

By [Z. Kelly Queijo](#)

Recent tuition hikes at some Virginia colleges and at schools nationwide have many parents hoping their college-bound kids will keep on schedule and graduate within the four years typically required to earn a bachelor's degree. However, it's not always quite as easy as one might think. Four-year graduation rates at Virginia's 15 public universities vary greatly by school and range anywhere from 12 to 83 percent according to a report published in 2007 by the State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV). Clearly, there are challenges when it comes to graduating in just four years.

So, what does it take to become an alum in four years? "A really good academic planning tool can help," says Christina McIntyre, seasoned academic advisor at Virginia Tech, now associate director of the University Honors program, and founder of BecomeAlum, a Web-based application designed to help students work their way through their school's course and degree requirements by major.

"As an advisor, I found myself walking the student through the complete exercise of making a plan of study. While this was helpful I discovered that this was 'my' plan for them. Each semester when the plan needed to be adjusted the student asked me for the plan and direction as to how to fix it. Shifting to a model where the student created the plan and then I provided them feedback led the student to take ownership and control of their educational progress."

Armed with this new insight she teamed up with her husband, software developer and entrepreneur James McIntyre, and together they created BecomeAlum. The McIntyres found that while a college or university may do a great job of making the necessary resources available required to plan a college career, such as the course catalog, online registration systems, and degree audits, a tool that combines all of this (and more) into a single application available to the student, the advisor, and even parents did not exist.

With BecomeAlum, students can view all of the course requirements and prerequisites by year and monitor where they are in the process. "You don't want a student to plan out one semester at a time," emphasizes Christina McIntyre "You want them to plan from their first year through to graduation. BecomeAlum is a living document. It's a plan that will continue to evolve... if a student lives from one semester to the next, that's when you see someone get into a situation in their senior year that they've missed that Fall course offered only in odd-numbered years."

Depending on when and how often a course is offered, dropping a course one semester could end up adding an entire year to the student's graduation timeline as well as adding to the total cost. Now more than ever, budget cuts are impacting when courses are offered, and the challenge to keep up with course changes is critical.

BecomeAlum allows the student to track prerequisite sequences and semester course offerings. Alerts are set to notify students when courses are planned out of sequence or if a student is missing pre- or co-requisites. Students can also set mid- and long-term goals, upload head-shots, and use the My Blog feature to keep notes about why specific choices were made along the way. They also enjoy the luxury of being able to explore the "what-ifs" should they decide to change majors, add another major or a minor, or enroll in a co-op or internship program.

Advisors have read-access to the student's goals, photo and plan, as well as the ability to post comments to the student's record. Since BecomeAlum is Web-based, it's easy for a student and advisor to discuss the plan via phone while each views the student record from their respective computers.

Laurie Bianchi, M.S., undergraduate coordinator in Virginia Tech's Human Nutrition, Foods and Exercise department, considers BecomeAlum "an essential tool" when working with college students. "It is extremely helpful for curriculums that enforce prerequisites and/or have specific semester offerings of classes because the student can see immediately that a planned class can or cannot be taken in a given semester. It also allows the academic advisor to access the student's plan of study at any time and provide electronic feedback." Advisors can review the plan and make comments but only the student can alter the plan.

With permission granted by the student, parents can also have to access their son's or daughter's plan via the Web. Due to FERPA regulations, the student has the freedom to allow or prevent access by parents.

The McIntyres began designing BecomeAlum in 2006, followed by two years of beta testing by students and academic advisors. BecomeAlum became available for purchase within the past year. Individual departments or entire colleges or universities are the target audience. Pricing is structured so that purchase is done in blocks based on the number of "seats" or students who will use the system. Roughly 700 students are currently using BecomeAlum.

The application functions across any operating system platform (PC, Mac, Linux). Students and advisors have access 24/7. The system is easy to use and does not require software or technical support personnel.

As the number of students using BecomeAlum increases, college administrators will be able to collect enough data to forecast specific course demands. Understanding the trends is vital when it comes to planning course selections.

For more information visit [BecomeAlum.com](#).

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