If you think four years of college is expensive, try five...or six. You may hear jokes about "super seniors," but the extra time and money you'll spend on an additional year in college is not so "super". Not only will you pay another year's worth of tuition, textbook costs, campus fees, and other education expenses, but you won't be earning money at your first job or getting started in graduate school.

It seems that graduating college in four years has become less of a priority for many college students. In fact, at most New Jersey colleges and universities, freshmen have a less than 50-percent chance of earning a bachelor's degree within four years, according to a Star-Ledger analysis of graduation data from more than two dozen campuses across the state. If you're just starting your college career, be sure to keep your eyes on the prize and remember the real reason you're in college: to get your degree. The benefits of graduating in four years can outweigh the sacrifice.

Perhaps the most practical reason for graduating college "on time" is the money you and your family will save by not paying for an extra year of school. The in-state tuition cost for the 2011-12 academic year at Montclair State University is approximately $10,700, plus room and board (if you live on campus), textbooks, and other costs of living. If you're using student loans to finance your education, you'll only go deeper into debt. It is simply more cost effective to graduate in four years. By the time you're starting your career and making a steady salary, many of your peers will still be in school. This quick start will enable you to get a better footing in the work force, thus allowing you to advance quicker.

In order to graduate on time, you must have a plan. Here are some tips to help you stay on the right track to a 4 year graduation:

- Complete a course load of 15 to 18 credits each semester.
- Enroll in summer and/or winter sessions to catch up or get ahead.
- Coordinate your general education requirements with your major requirements.
- Make full use of the academic advising available to you. Meet with your advisor at least once a semester.
- Decide on a major early and stick with it. If you don't know what you want to major in, complete your general education requirements first.
- Put your effort and hours into school. Schedule your time to fit your academic plan and plan your job and co-curricular activities around that schedule. Your education is job #1.

Seek help if you are having problems. Keeping your mental, physical and emotional health in check will help you to perform at an optimal level.

Your academic career is your responsibility; be actively involved in it!
How Being Smart about Course Selection Can Save You Money: A Case Study

Alisha, Brad, Lee, and José go to Montclair State University. Each student has the same major, same financial aid package, same job and salary after college.

ONE STUDENT ENDS UP ALMOST $75,000 AHEAD OF ANOTHER...HOW?

Here’s the Story: Alisha takes the ‘standard’ 15 credits a semester and graduates in 4 years. Brad takes a 12 credit full-time course load and takes 5 years to graduate. Lee takes a year off in the middle of school to be the assistant manager at the deli she works at & changes her major. She takes 5 years to graduate over a 6 year time frame. José takes a 16 credit course load but also adds 2 summer courses and 1 winter course per academic year, so he graduates in 3 years.

Each student has $7,000 out of pocket expense per year enrolled (plus an annual tuition increase of 5%), after financial aid. The cost for a 3 credit summer and winter course is $1,000. The entry level salary for their profession is $30,000 (with an annual increase of 2%) but it takes them 6 months after graduation to find a “real job.” In the meantime, they all work at the local deli during those 6 months at $10 an hour.

Let’s take a look...

José, after six years, is almost $75,000 “ahead” of Lee, in terms of finances, plus has a 2 ½ year head start in his chosen profession!