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Time to Completion of Degree and Retention Rate in Graduate Student Cohorts from 1998-2008

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The Problem

The Anthropology Department at WMU suggests that incoming graduate students should be able to complete the Masters Degree within two years or 4 semesters. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is the rare student who actually completes his or her degree within 2 years. In fact, many students require 4-6 years to complete what is ostensibly a 2 year degree program, while many other students eventually drop out of the program and never complete their degree.

This situation has been discussed among faculty and graduate students within the department for a number of years, but no actual data have been collected on the time to completion or the retention rate of graduate students within our department.

My Academic Leadership Academy research project was designed to address this situation by:

- Collecting quantitative and qualitative data on recent cohorts of students in order to document whether a problem exists,
- Eliciting the opinions of current students and recent graduates as to their progress in our program and their (dis)satisfaction with their own progress through the program,
- Exploring the institutional and personal obstacles that may adversely affect time to completion of degree and retention.

The Survey

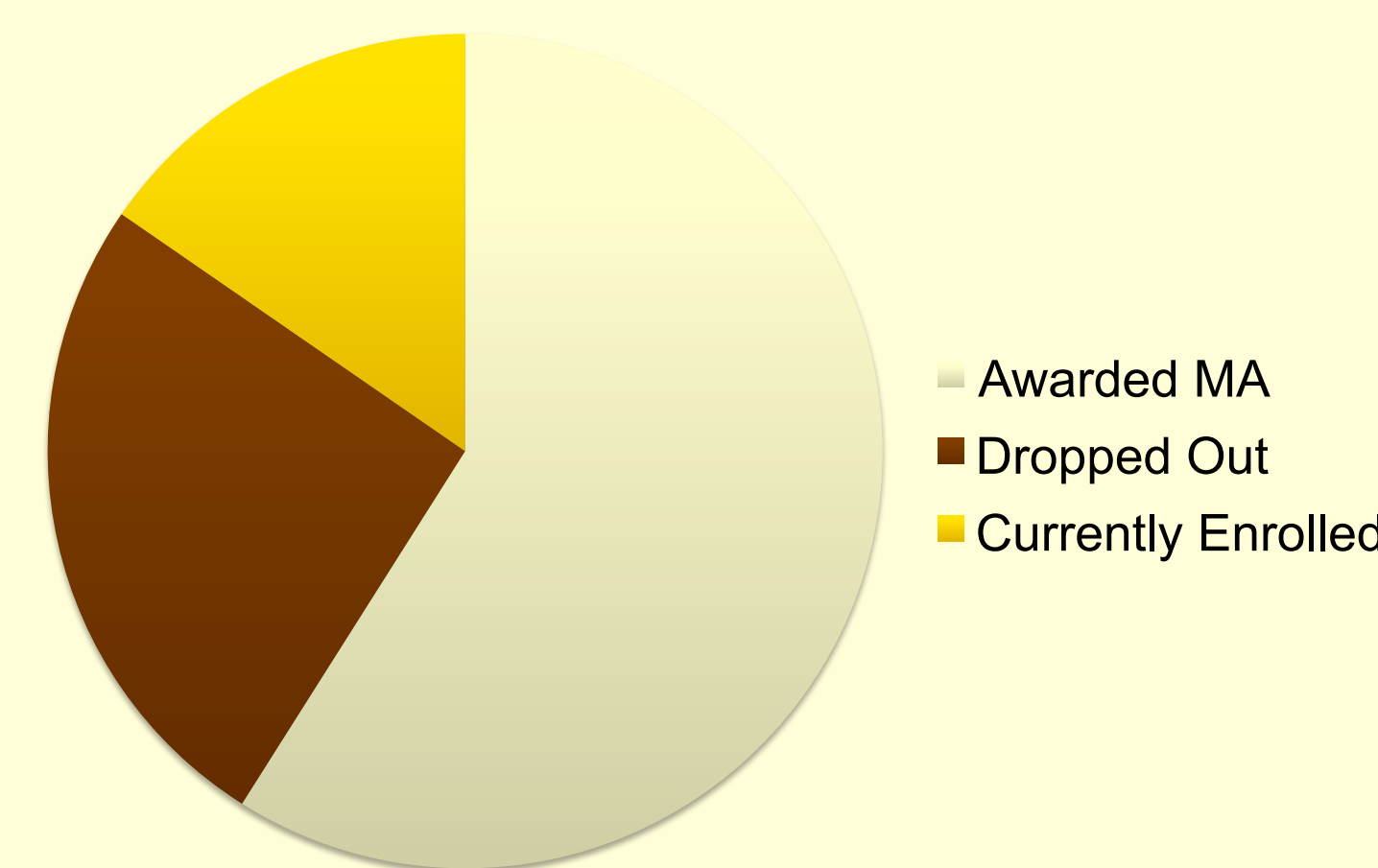
A Survey was written and, with the help of the Anthropology Grad Collective (AGC) and its President, graduate student Jamie Gomez, was distributed via email to all current graduate students and all recent graduates whose email addresses were on file in the Department office. This included many students who had not completed their degree in spite of having been enrolled for more than 2 years. Students were asked to return their completed surveys to Ms. Gomez, who printed them after stripping them of any personal identifiers, and returned the results to me.

The Survey was designed to provide quantitative data that would elucidate the time to completion of degree and the student's own personal perspective on this issue. It included:

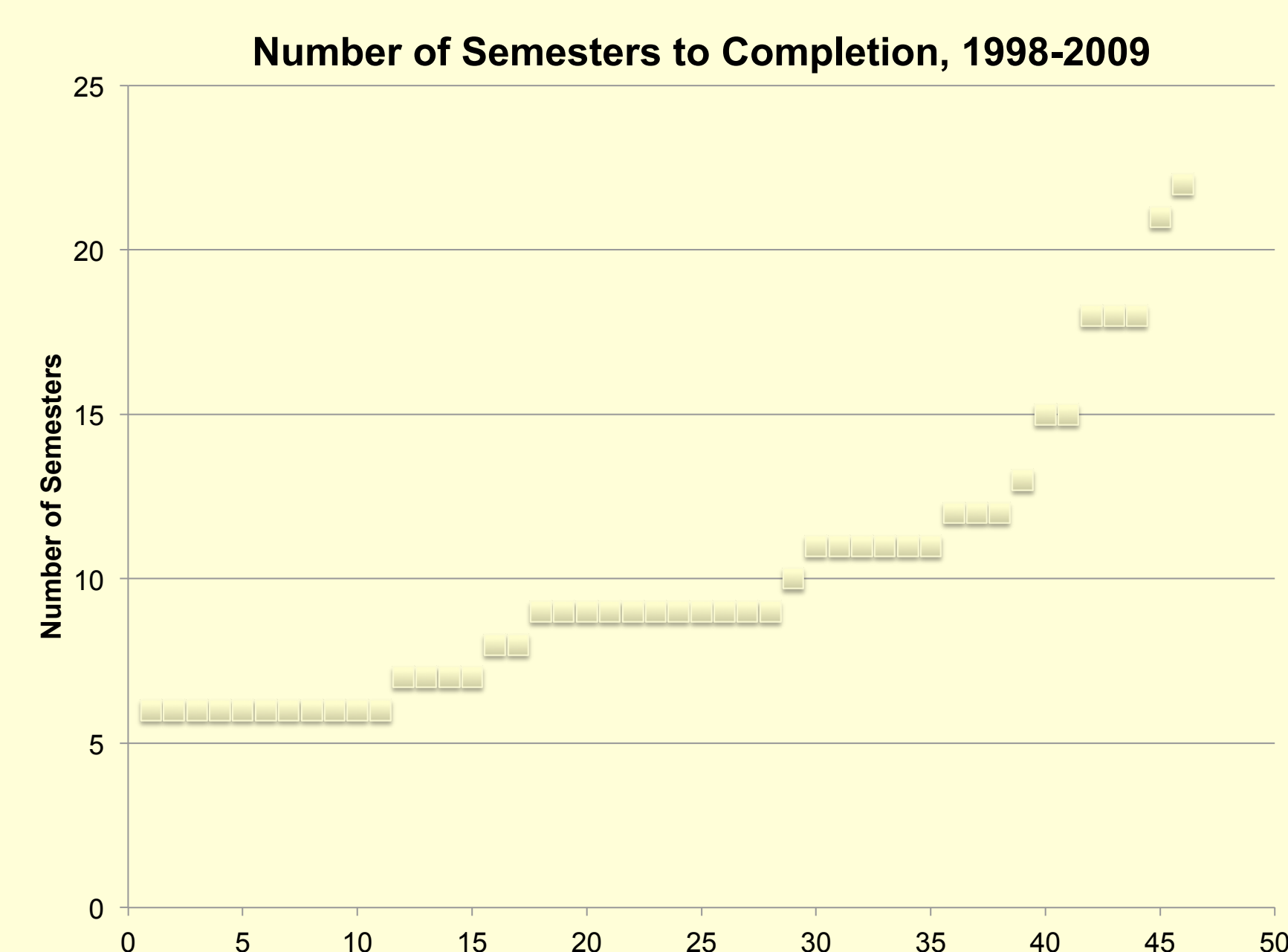
- The number of semesters the student had been enrolled,
- Whether students were on thesis or non-thesis MA tracks,
- Whether students had been a TA or RA,
- Whether students planned to earn a Ph.D.,,
- Which subdiscipline the student identified with,
- Whether students held part-time or full-time jobs outside of the department during their time in grad school,
- Whether they had moved away from Kalamazoo during their time in grad school, and
- An open-ended section where the students could reflect on their (dis)satisfaction with how long it took them to earn their degree (for those previously awarded degrees) or with their progress to date, and finally
- What they thought might be the factors that made it difficult to complete the degree within 2 years

1998-2008 Cohort Analysis

A Database was created which included the semester and year of entry and completion (if applicable), current status (completed, enrolled, dropped out), track (thesis or non-thesis), and subdiscipline (Archaeology, Biological, Cultural) of all graduate students who entered our MA program between Fall 1998 and Fall 2009. The total number of students enrolled during this period was 79, with 46 (59%) having been awarded their MA degree, 20 (26%) dropped out, and 12 (15%) still enrolled.



The average time to completion for the 46 students who had been awarded their degree was 10.02 semesters, with a standard deviation of 4.12 and a range of 16 (maximum was 22 and minimum was 6). Note that we counted 3 semesters as equivalent to a single academic year (i.e., Fall, Spring and Summer semesters), so that our mean time to completion of 10 semesters indicates slightly more than 3 years for the average student to complete his or her degree.

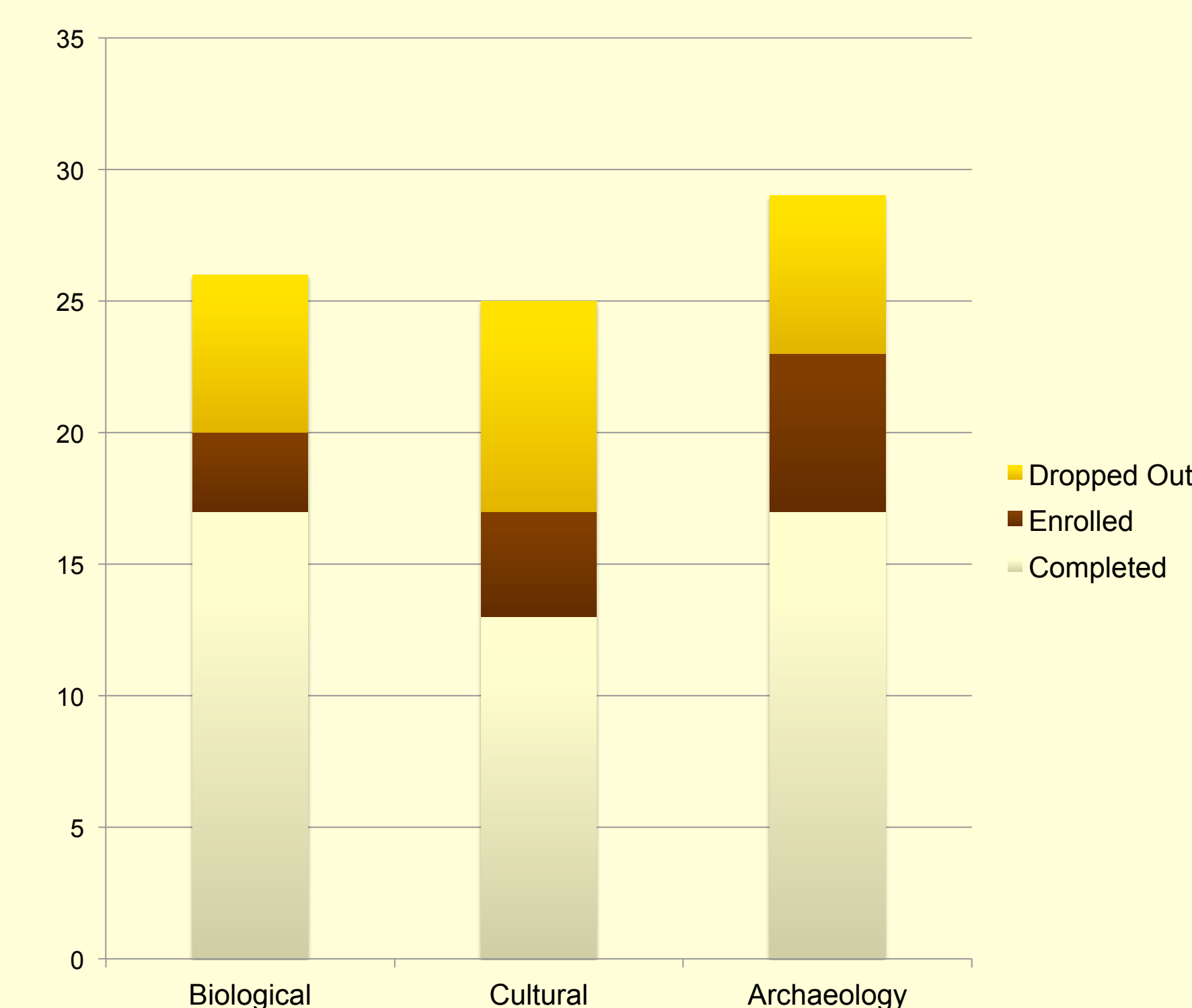


The distribution of the time to completion of degree data are interesting. The distribution is bimodal with modes (n=11) at 6 semesters and (n=11) at 9 semesters, and several outliers are present (1 student who graduated after 21 semesters (7 years), and another who graduated after 22 semesters (> 7 years) which heavily influenced the calculation of the mean.

These outliers suggest an easy way to reduce the average time to completion of our degree.

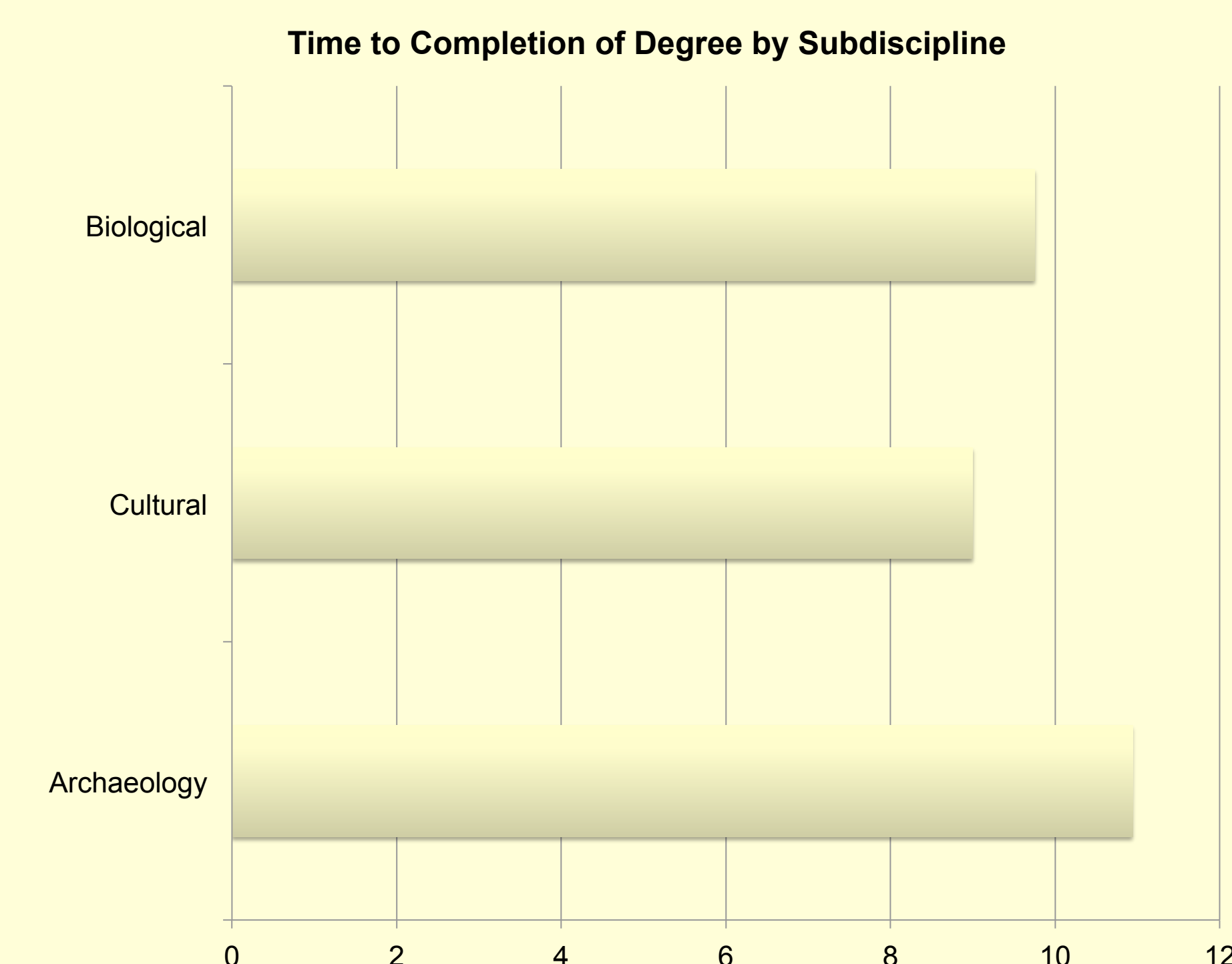
Analysis by Subdiscipline: Retention

Differences in retention between the subdisciplines are minor. In Biological Anthropology 17 of 25 students (68%) were awarded their degree while 6 (24%) had dropped out, and 3 were still enrolled. In Cultural Anthropology, 13 of 25 students (52%) completed their degree, 8 (32%) had dropped out, and 4 were still enrolled. In Archaeology, 17 of 29 students (59%) had completed their degrees, 6 (21%) had dropped out, and 6 were still enrolled.



Analysis by Subdiscipline: Time to Completion

In Archeology, the average time to completion for the 17 students who had been awarded their degree was 10.94 semesters with a standard deviation of 4.72 semesters. In Biological Anthropology, time to completion for the 17 students who had completed their degree was 9.75 semesters, with a standard deviation of 3.92. In Cultural Anthropology, the average time to completion was 9.00 semesters, with a standard deviation of 3.55 semesters.



Results from the Questionnaire

The most valuable part of the responses to the questionnaire were the open-ended responses concerning experiences of individual students, including expectations of how long it would take to complete their degrees, their levels of satisfaction with their progress towards completion of their degree, and problems and difficulties they experienced with finishing their program.

A surprising result was that many students indicated that they were not particularly unsatisfied with completing their degree in 3-4 years. Several suggested that they were financially more comfortable with taking 6 credits per Fall and Spring terms, and thus fully expected to be in residence for 3 or more years.

Many students indicated that personal finances were a major roadblock to completing their degree in 2 years. Even some TAs had to maintain part-time jobs off campus to make ends meet, and many students without support had to work full time jobs.

Several students indicated major frustration attached to the writing and revision of a thesis prospectus: this was an important factor in slowing the progress of a number of students.

A call for more consistency in departmental requirements and expectations, and better advising of graduate students by the faculty was made by several students.

Next Steps

This project represents the first step in what is hoped will be a long term commitment on the part of the Anthropology Department to studying the success or failure of our graduate students to complete the degree in a timely fashion. Retention and time to completion of degree have been identified as important measures of success for our cohorts of graduate students. The database created for this project will be added to and updated on a yearly basis in order to continue to assess our success or failure in training our students in a timely fashion and sending them off to careers or further adventures in graduate school. Discussions have begun and will continue in departmental faculty meetings with the goal of reducing the real or perceived roadblocks to the success of our graduate students, and implementing rational changes and improvements to our program.

Acknowledgements

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