Overview of Graduation Task Force Efforts and Findings

Ensuring that students have the opportunity and support to complete a world-class undergraduate education within four years is an essential part of The University of Texas at Austin’s constitutional mandate to serve as a “university of the first class for the people of Texas.”

Students who graduate in that timeframe begin their careers or pursue graduate education sooner than their peers while taking out less in student loans. Their parents save money on tuition costs. The university, itself, proudly sends these graduates into the broader world as representatives of UT Austin while gaining additional capacity for new students.

The end result for the state of Texas is a well-educated citizenry that can serve our communities and contribute to the economy immediately while facing less debt.

Recognizing these vital benefits, President Bill Powers last year appointed College of Liberal Arts Dean Randy L. Diehl to chair a task force to develop and recommend strategies that will increase the university’s four-year graduation rate to 70 percent within five years.

This is an ambitious goal. The following report details multiple strategies The University of Texas at Austin should pursue to reach it.

Currently, about half of UT Austin undergraduate students receive a degree in four years. This rate is higher than at any other public college or university in Texas. But it is lower than at several peer, public research universities across the nation, which already meet the goal to which we aspire. And while more than 80 percent of UT Austin students currently graduate within six years, it is vital to increase that success rate both by retaining more students and helping those who will ultimately graduate to do so more quickly.

This goal reinforces the priorities that UT System Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa and the Board of Regents laid out last year in the Framework for Advancing Excellence within The University of Texas System. The Framework calls for all UT institutions “to become top performers in 4-year graduation rates” and empowers individual campuses to find the best ways to achieve that locally.
Dean Diehl’s 14-member Task Force on Undergraduate Graduation Rates, which is made up of students and faculty members, believes this can be accomplished at The University of Texas at Austin by:

- enhancing the first-year and freshman orientation experience to better emphasize academics and integrate new students into university culture, and
- improving advising and student tracking so students can better develop a strategy to earn a degree within four years.

To accomplish this, the task force offers more than 60 specific recommendations. Some can be implemented immediately. Others should be pursued over the long term and could require changing university policy or identifying new resources.

The individual recommendations include incentives for students to earn degrees more quickly and disincentives for students to stay at The University of Texas longer than needed. They were drawn from dozens of interviews with students, alumni, faculty members and staffers; a thorough review of data related to student performance and graduation rates; and visits by academic advisers to peer universities across the country.

These recommendations include:

- requiring orientation for all incoming first-year students;
- creating an online tool to better allow students and advisers to monitor progress to a degree;
- developing more intervention programs to identify and assist students in academic jeopardy;
- identifying “bottleneck” courses where lack of available seats can impede students’ ability to pursue their required paths to graduation;
- making it more difficult for students to change majors after four semesters or add a second major unless the requirements can be met within four years;
- creating flat-rate summer tuition to encourage students to take more courses;
- enforcing the state’s “slacker” rule that would increase tuition for students who have not graduated despite earning more than the required number of credits.

In making these recommendations, the task force recognizes the differences among degree programs offered by the many colleges and departments on campus. It encourages those units to explore ways to implement the recommendations most effectively for their students.

While the university has considered some of these ideas before, we have learned that achieving success will require us to commit the right resources and be strategic in our approach.

For that reason, the task force recommends that President Powers appoint a graduation rate champion for three to five years to spearhead and coordinate these efforts. Another member of the university administration should be designated to oversee the availability of courses required for graduation.

By pursuing these strategies and remaining focused on raising the graduation rate to 70 percent over the next five years, the task force believes The University of Texas at Austin will be well positioned to meet the president’s lofty goal and continue to excel as a “university of the first class for the people of Texas.”

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