

San Antonio Express-News

UTSA has new tactics to boost its grad rates

June 15, 2006

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Faced with graduation rates lagging behind the rest of the country, officials at the University of Texas at San Antonio are looking at new ways to get students out the door with diplomas in hand.

For the first time, this fall's freshmen will be referred to as the Class of 2010 -- a designation common at other universities and one with a built-in deadline.

Students with 90 hours of credit will be required to file an academic plan with an expected graduation date. Freshmen seminars will continue to be available, as will more tutoring. Advisers plan to whip out calculators to show students the financial advantage of getting through college quicker.

The changes follow an alarm sounded by the Texas System Board of Regents earlier this year.

The board declared graduation rates at the System's nine institutions unacceptable and charged presidents with upping them to at least the national average by 2015. Texas Higher Education Commissioner Raymund Paredes uses his pulpit to echo that goal, hammering home the message that the state will suffer economically if colleges and universities don't start cranking out more graduates.

But UTSA, UT-El Paso and UT-Pan American serve many students who enter college burdened with challenges. In addition, UTSA must balance its stated desire to become a top-tier research university with a virtually open admissions policy.

Nationally, about 53 percent of students graduate within six years, a time span that's quickly becoming the new standard for college completion. In the UT System, that rate is 37 percent.

The worst rates belong to UTSA, with a six-year graduation rate of 30 percent, UT-El Paso and UT-Pan American, three largely commuter campuses with virtually open access.

By comparison, the six-year graduation rate at UT-Austin, the system's flagship, is 75 percent, in part a result of efforts in recent years to improve that number.

Four-year rates are much worse -- UTSA only graduates 8 percent of its students after four years compared with 47 percent at UT-Austin.

Kevin Carey, a research manager at Education Sector, a Washington-based independent think tank, said improving graduation rates is critical.

"It is clear that the dividing line between haves and have-nots is a four-year degree," Carey said. "Degree completion should be an engine of social mobility. If one in four students are graduating, you are largely failing to meet that challenge."

Dueling missions

Solving the graduation rate problem is complicated for UTSA, which accepts 99 percent of applicants, many needing remedial classes. At the same time, UTSA wants to become a prestigious research university, a designation usually paired with selective institutions.

Some critics say the university can't be both.

"What I don't understand is how we can aspire to Tier One research university status, yet function to some degree like a community college," said James Syler, an adjunct faculty member at UTSA. "The two don't go together for me."

Gerry Dizinno, the university's director of institutional research, recognizes the paradox.

"I can give you a formula for increasing U.S. News & World Report ranking," he said. "Decrease your acceptance rate. Increase your SAT score profile."

But UTSA isn't willing to do that, said Dizinno and Provost Rosalie Ambrosino.

Ambrosino says UTSA has both rigorous standards and a mission to help underserved students, many of whom are the first in their family to go to college.

Others come from low-performing high schools and are not prepared for tough coursework or are too poor to afford college without getting a job.

"This is a layer who has never participated in college before," Ambrosino said. "That group will be even harder to graduate, not because of their ability, but just because it is all new to them and their families. You are going to have to wrap your arms around them even more."

UTSA provides a safety net for students who are at risk of failing or are "swirling the drain," said Patricia Glenn, director of UTSA's Tomás Rivera Center for Student Success.

The center's peer tutoring program draws 9,000 students a year, she said. The university has also begun funneling about 500 freshmen who didn't quite make UTSA's entrance requirements into an Academic Development Program, where they learn study skills and meet frequently with an academic adviser.

The university now keeps twice as many of those students as it has in the past, Glenn said.

Also for the first time in fall 2005, UTSA deferred admission for about 575 applicants, sending them to community college for a year.

The university is now partnering with Northwest Vista College on a joint admission program so future students can transition smoothly to UTSA after knocking out remedial classes.

Glenn thinks it's a good plan for some students. After watching her own son fizzle out in college, she knows that failure can scar self-esteem.

"If you are truly democratic, you say let everybody get a crack at it and the people who are most motivated and persistent will be able to make it," Glenn said.

Serving diversity

Even for the motivated, however, life sometimes gets in the way.

In his sophomore year at UTSA, Eric Woodard's girlfriend got pregnant and lost the baby. Emotionally wrecked, Woodard stopped going to class. He joined the military, thinking he needed discipline and a break from college. Later, he took another stab at college and dropped out again.

Four years later, the 25-year-old still doesn't have a diploma.

"My ambition was always to get married and have children," he said. "I just wanted to find a woman who loves me and raise a family."

There is nothing UTSA could have done about Woodard's personal problems, and other realities of student life complicate efforts to raise graduation rates.

Nearly half of freshmen and 70 percent of seniors have jobs off campus, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement.

On top of that, 21,000 of UTSA's 27,000 students are commuters. They drive in for class, but don't usually stick around to sip coffee and talk philosophy because they have work and family obligations.

"Our students are working a ton too much," Glenn said.

The classroom experience is pivotal to keeping working, commuting students engaged. But professors' efforts to focus on teaching and get to know students are often stymied by huge classes, said Kirsten Gardner, a UTSA history professor whose introductory classes pack in more than 400 students.

"With that many students, you hardly know who they are," Gardner said. "You feel you are just trying to keep your head above water as opposed to getting creative about ways to keep students in school."

With UTSA's explosive growth and chronic space deficit, there is little hope that class sizes will shrink. Instead, Ambrosino said, everyone must get creative in order to bring graduation rates up a staggering 23 percentage points in the next 10 years.

Tallying dropouts

UTSA administrators believe that the way the federal government tallies graduation rates hurts schools that serve non-traditional students.

Rates submitted to the U.S. Education Department and used by U.S. News & World Report to rank colleges track a group of full-time freshmen who start and finish at the same college.

That formula makes no allowance for the 25 percent to 30 percent of freshmen at UTSA, for example, who come to campus as part of a deferred admission program at UT-Austin. Used in part to ease overcrowding at the flagship, the program guarantees admission to UT-Austin after one year at a subordinate campus. These students stay within the UT System, but are counted as dropouts by the feds once they move from UTSA to UT-Austin.

Students who transfer to out-of-state colleges are also counted as dropouts. In addition, UTSA gets no credit for a large chunk of students -- 27 percent -- who transfer from a community college to finish their degree at UTSA.

Here's a more nuanced look at student progress: After six years, 61 percent of students who started in 1998 had either graduated from, or were still attending, UTSA or another Texas institution, according to data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

That number suggests students are poking along, but not giving up.

"I think many of our students are successful, they are just doing it in eight, 10 years," said Larry Williams, the associate vice president for academic support at UTSA who is heading a newly formed task force on graduation rates.

Ross Wiener, policy director at the Education Trust, said institutions of all kinds must find a way to raise standards. The nonprofit think tank is based in Washington.

"It's not fair to compare every institution to a selective university that gets to pick among the most well-prepared students and most financially able to pay," he said. "But every institution has some peers they can compare themselves to and learn from."

This spring, Gardner and about 150 other faculty members attended a campus summit on improving graduation rates. The strong turnout was a sign that professors care about students and are open to new ideas, she said.

But the history professor has one concern:

"The lingering question," she said, "is will the ideas we generate have resources to back them up."

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