

Report of the  
Freshman Academic Experience Task Force

2010-2011

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE TASK FORCE CHARGE	iii.
MEMBERS OF THE FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE TASK FORCE	iv.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	v.

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I. INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW	1.
II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS, OPERATIONAL DEFINITION, & CONCEPTUAL MODEL	4.
III. TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS	6.
IV. SUMMARY & CONCLUSION	14.
REFERENCES	15.
APPENDICES	
APPENDIX A. FRESHMAN COHORT RETENTION RATES	17.
APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA DESCRIBING UTSA FRESHMAN COHORT	19.
APPENDIX C. DESCRIPTION OF EXISTING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES & WELCOMING/ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	23.
APPENDIX D. CONSIDERATIONS & CAVEATS	28.

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FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE TASK FORCE CHARGE

TO CONSIDER DEEPLY WHAT STEPS WE MIGHT TAKE TO SIMPLIFY THE FRESHMAN YEAR ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE, TO EASE STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO COLLEGE WHILE INTRODUCING THEM TO THE RIGORS OF COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSEWORK

TO CONSIDER STEPS THAT WOULD SIMPLIFY AND STANDARDIZE OUR APPROACH TO ADVISING STUDENTS, SO THAT THEIR OVERALL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE AT UTSA RESTS ON A SOLID FOUNDATION OF COURSEWORK IN THE FRESHMAN YEAR

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MEMBERS OF THE FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE TASK FORCE

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Nancy K. Martin, *Chair*  
Associate Vice Provost  
Core Curriculum & QEP

Diane Abdo, Senior Lecturer  
Writing Core Program

Leticia Duncan, Executive Director  
Tomas Rivera Center

Ann Eisenberg, Associate Dean  
*Chair, Sub-Committee #2*  
Honors College

Kirsten Gardner, Associate Professor  
College of Liberal & Fine Arts

Lona George, Director of Advising  
College of Engineering

Mike Gilbert, Assistant Department Chair  
College of Public Policy

Kolleen Guy, Associate Professor  
Honor's College

Cory Hallam, Director  
Center for Innovation & Technology Entrepreneurship  
Colleges of Business/Engineering

Jill Hernandez, Assistant Professor  
College of Liberal & Fine Arts

Yufang Jin, Associate Professor  
College of Engineering

Craig Jordan, Associate Dean  
College of Sciences

Nandini Kannan, Professor  
College of Business

Alycia Maurer, Senior Lecturer  
College of Education & Human Development

Kristi Meyer, Director  
Graduation Initiative

Lisa Montoya, Associate Dean  
College of Business

Gail Pizzola, Director  
Writing Core Program

Francine Romero, Associate Dean  
College of Public Policy

Steve Temple, Associate Professor  
College of Architecture

Jon Thompson, Associate Professor  
College of Architecture

Betty Travis, Professor  
*Chair, Sub-Committee #1*  
College of Sciences

Joan Tsacalis, Director  
Colleges' Freshman Advising

Tammy Wyatt, Associate Dean  
*Chair, Sub-Committee #3*  
College of Education & Human Development

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Provost John Frederick appointed the UTSA Freshman Experience Task Force in the Fall of 2010. Composed of faculty and professional staff from across Academic Affairs, the group was charged with developing recommendations that will foster freshman retention and success.

**SUMMARY OF SECTION I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW.** This Report begins with brief overviews of the task force's charge from the Provost, retention rates, a demographic description of UTSA's Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) freshman cohort, and our process for addressing the charge.

**SUMMARY OF SECTION II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS, OPERATIONAL DEFINITION, AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL.** The Task Force began its work by determining a theoretical framework and operationally defining the elements "fundamental to success in a student's curriculum" (to address Question 1). This operational definition and two theoretical perspectives (Involvement Theory, Astin, 1984, and Validation Theory, Rendon, 1994) combine to create a conceptual model that frames our recommendations.

**SUMMARY OF SECTION III. TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS.** The Task Force addressed seven questions posed by the Provost and offers several recommendations. The most prominent recommendation is that incoming freshmen should enroll in a first-year course block as follows:

Fall	Spring
Academic Inquiry I (1-3 SCH)*	Academic Inquiry II (1-3 SCH)*
WRC 1013 (3 SCH)	Math or Q course (3 SCH)
Math or Q course (3 SCH)	Core/Major course (3 SCH)
Core/Major course (3 SCH)	

\* *The number of courses and the SCHs should be determined in the implementation phase.*

Class size should be capped at 25 for WRC and for the Academic Inquiry course(s). Faculty teaching in the blocks will be provided supplemental support and have additional expectations than other faculty. These expectations should be reflected in the faculty reward structure. Core Mathematics and WRC 1013 requirements should be completed within the first year. Students who begin with developmental course work in either writing or math should be required to continue taking writing and/or math until they complete core-level requirements.

Although there will be considerable scheduling challenges in implementing these recommendations, the Task Force believes that these are not insurmountable and are outweighed by the benefits. To oversee and implement the recommendations in this report, the Task Force recommends developing a "University College" in which incoming freshmen would be initially housed.

Understanding that many freshmen change their majors, we believe the recommended blocks will strike the right balance between direction and flexibility for all students – including "undeclared" majors. A thorough listing of existing support services for freshmen is provided in Appendix C. Unfortunately, many students are not aware of these services; therefore, besides possible additional services, the committee includes a variety of suggested methods to enhance awareness of existing services. Finally, the report concludes with a brief statement regarding implications for transfer students.

## I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Increasing student success requires sustained effort from across the University. In fact, the Graduation Rates Outcomes Study concludes that, “student success is more a product of an overarching shared culture than it is the result of a more narrowly-conceived deliberate ‘retention’ or ‘graduation’ effort” (Hanson, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that the University makes intentional efforts to establish, develop and nurture a “culture of student connection” with the institution. When students feel connected to their surroundings through relationships with classmates, faculty and staff, they are more likely to choose to persist (Astin, 1984; Rendon, 1994). Long-term gains will likely be realized since successful students eventually make satisfied alumni who speak highly of their alma mater and want to give back to their college. To address freshman student success, the Freshman Experience Task Force responded to the following charge.

**OVERVIEW OF THE CHARGE.** In October of 2010, the Provost appointed the Task Force on the UTSA Freshman Academic Experience to develop recommendations that will likely foster freshman retention at UTSA. The Task Force was composed of faculty and professional staff from across the Academic Affairs component of the University. While recognizing the relevance of personal and social aspects of the first year, the focus of the Task Force centered on the freshman academic experience. Provost Frederick charged the Task Force to consider:

- a. what steps we might take to simplify the freshman year academic experience, to ease students’ transition to college while introducing them to the rigors of college-level coursework
- b. steps that would simplify and standardize our approach to advising students, so that their overall academic experience at UTSA rests on a solid foundation of coursework in the freshman year

Specifically, the Provost asked the Task Force to respond to the following seven questions:

1. What entry-level courses are absolutely fundamental to success in a student’s curriculum, regardless of their chosen major?
2. How much of the freshman curriculum should be specified by the university versus being left at the discretion of the student?
3. Should we develop expectations for how early in the curriculum students should satisfy Core Curriculum requirements? Mathematics and writing requirements?
4. Can we consider packaging a set or sets of courses for cohort-enrollment of freshman students? If so, what are the scheduling challenges that might be encountered?
5. Understanding that many students enter the university with undeclared majors, and others switch majors early in their careers, can we construct a freshman year curriculum that applies broadly to all/most majors?

6. Are there additional academic support services that the university can provide to assist freshmen with their early academic challenges? How would these services be impacted by cohort-enrollment strategies?
7. If we should implement changes to our strategy for freshman curricula, how would this impact the success of students who transfer to UTSA from other institutions?

To adequately address these questions, it is important to first understand how university retention rates are determined and obtain an understanding of our freshman cohort.

**OVERVIEW OF RETENTION RATES.** The student retention rate is defined as “a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are enrolled again in the current fall” (National Center for Education Statistics 2008).

At colleges and universities, the official cohort is made up of students who begin at an institution as first-time, full-time freshmen and intend to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Transfer students, students provisionally admitted, non-degree seekers, and part-time students are not included in retention and graduation rates reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the Department of Education, and most states.

For the past 5 years, overall first-year retention at UTSA has remained fairly stable (65.3% to 66.7%) while trending slightly up. Second- and third-year retention has experienced a bit more variance, while also trending up. Additionally, the gap between second- and third-year retention rates is decreasing. Due to cohort sizes, the overall UTSA rates have been more stable than rates by college. A breakdown of THECB freshman cohort and retention rates is provided in Appendix A.

**OVERVIEW OF FRESHMAN COHORT.** Descriptive demographic data for 2005-2010 (presented in Appendix B) reveal the following composite trends. The two largest ethnic groups are, by far, Hispanic and White Non-Hispanic, respectively. Collectively, these two ethnic groups compose approximately 76% of the cohort. The “typical” first-time, full-time freshman is of traditional age (18-19) and enrolled full-time. In fact, this enrollment trend holds across the entire student body, including both graduate and undergraduate students.

As depicted in Appendix B, the vast majority of students (approximately 60-75%) did not report whether they live on or off campus. Furthermore, we found that data regarding who lives on campus are not adequately tracked. However, loose estimates received from OIR provide some general information. In 2005, approximately 12.6% of all undergraduates lived in on-campus housing. In 2010, the estimates increased slightly to 13.8%. It is important to reiterate that these percentages are only loose estimates. Still, we can conclude that the majority of our undergraduate students are living off campus. This is relevant since place of residence has important implications for student success

(Astin, 1993). Living in on-campus residence halls has a direct positive effect on degree realization, contentment with faculty, and desire to re-enroll in the same college.

However, the data yield some surprises. For example, unlike the national trend, gender is about evenly divided with slightly more males than females in 2009 and 2010. First-generation college students – defined as those who self-report on their UTSA admission application that neither parent graduated from college – comprise approximately half of the freshman cohort. Only seven to 10% of incoming freshmen did not report this information.

When UTSA students are further examined vis-à-vis state and national trends, important patterns emerge. Latinas/os students have among the lowest college completion rates compared to all other ethnic groups (Astin & Oseguera, 2003; Fry, 2002). First-generation college students and low SES students are also especially at-risk for attrition (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

These trends are borne out at UTSA. As depicted in Appendix B, 53% of the 2010 UTSA freshman cohort is considered first-generation college and 44%, Latina/o. Furthermore, compared to other emerging research institutions, we have more students eligible for Pell Grants than UT-Dallas, University of Houston, University of North Texas, Texas Tech University and UT-Arlington (The College Board, 2010). In 2009, the average SAT combined score for our incoming freshmen (1017.8) was approximately equal to the Texas state average of 1016 (The College Board, 2010). Our acceptance rate (78.8%) is only slightly higher than the state average for 4-year public institutions (72.1%). Clearly, our students are capable of succeeding in college. Yet, compared to the nation, our retention rate is slightly below average (within one standard deviation) and our graduation rate is substantially below average (ACT, 2010).

**OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS.** The Freshman Experience Task Force first met on Monday, November 15, 2010 to review the charge and brainstorm the best way to approach the assigned tasks. Following this initial meeting, data related to our freshman cohort were obtained from OIR and posted to Rowdy Space for review. Beginning in early January of 2011 and continuing throughout the Spring term, the Task Force met bi-weekly.

To optimally address the charge, the Task Force engaged in thoughtful preliminary groundwork that yielded three important outcomes. First, we consulted institutional data in order to discern a clear description of our freshman class (see Appendix B). Next, we developed an operational definition of “success in a student’s curriculum” (Question 1). Third, we determined a clear theoretical perspective to frame our work. The operational definition and theoretical framework came together to create our conceptual model presented in Section II.

## II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS, OPERATIONAL DEFINITION, AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

**THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS.** Two theoretical perspectives frame our suggestions for a freshman experience: Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984) and Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994). Involvement Theory posits that learning increases the more students are involved in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience. Students who are involved devote significant focus to academics, spend time on campus, actively participate in student organizations and activities, and interact often with instructors and peers. On the other hand, uninvolved students disregard their studies, spend little time on campus, refrain from extracurricular activities, and rarely initiate contact with faculty or other students. Key for our purposes is Astin's finding that the most persuasive types of involvement for students are academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with academically related student peer groups.

Astin's theory works in tandem with Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994). This theory takes an assets-based perspective to understanding student success by emphasizing students' strengths within the educational environment. Specifically, validation includes six elements (p. 44-45):

1. Validation is an enabling; confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and/or mistrusted.
3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be 1) significant others, . . . 2) family members, . . . 3) friends, . . . attending and not attending college; and, 4) college staff, including faculty who meet with students out-of-class, counselors / advisors, coaches, tutors, teaching assistants, and resident advisors.
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.
6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class.

Because validation is the key to transforming college students, universities are charged with taking an active role in its orchestration. Thus, institutions must consider students' past experience, language, and culture not as deficits to overcome but rather as strengths to be woven into the fabric of knowledge production (Rendon, 1994; 2004).

Both Involvement Theory and Validation Theory are consistent with student-centered teaching approaches in which students have frequent and direct contact with the instructor (through reduced class size, frequent feedback, and mentoring) and play an

integral role in their own education through active involvement in various educational activities.

**OPERATIONAL DEFINITION.** The first question the task force addressed was

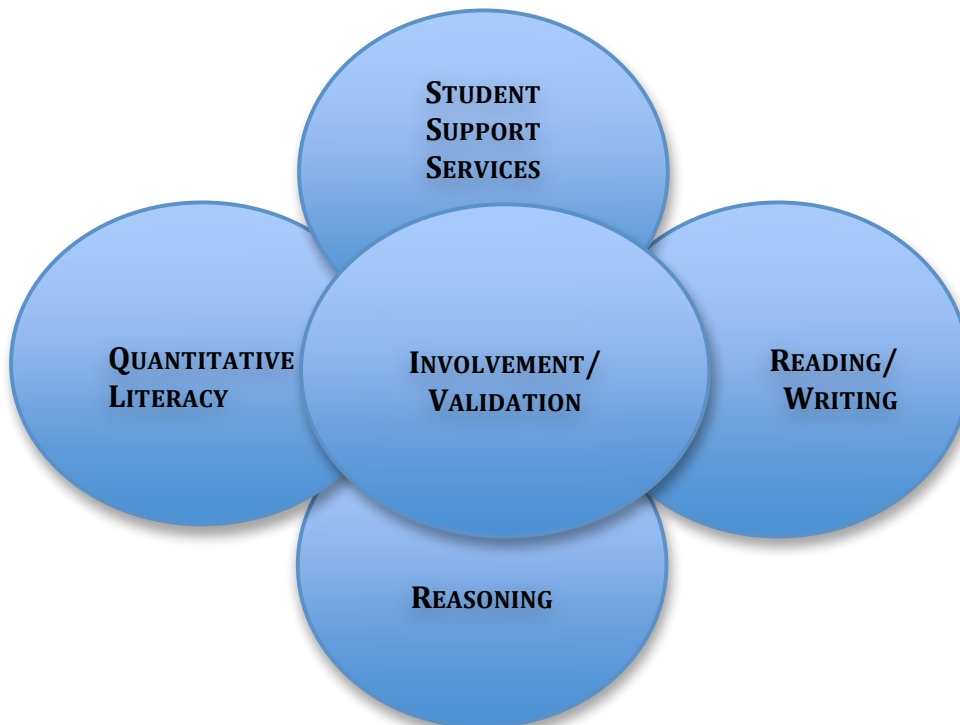
1. *What entry-level courses are absolutely fundamental to success in a student's curriculum, regardless of their chosen major?*

To properly address this question, the Task Force first drew from the professional literature to operationally define the elements "fundamental to success in a student's curriculum." Building on Tracey and Robins' (2006) work, the Task Force defined the phrase as follows:

Second year retention with a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0 at the end of the first year and successful completion of 30 SCHs that provide (1) progress toward a degree & (2) requisite foundational skills in *reading, writing, quantitative literacy, and reasoning*

This operational definition, combined with Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory and Rendon's (1994) Validation Theory, gives rise to the conceptual model that provides the framework for our recommendations.

**FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



### III. TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force was divided into three sub-committees as follows: Sub-committee #1 addressed questions 1 and 2; Sub-committee #2 addressed questions 3, 4, and 5; and Sub-committee #3 addressed questions 6 and 7. Each sub-committee thoroughly investigated the assigned questions and presented recommendations to the full group for discussion. In some cases, there is overlap between questions. Responses to the questions and recommendations based on the conceptual model are presented in this section.

1. *What entry-level courses are absolutely fundamental to success in a student's curriculum, regardless of their chosen major?*

- WRC 1013 (3 SCH)
- MATH (3 SCH) (APPROPRIATE LEVEL)
- Q COURSE (3 SCH)
- ACADEMIC INQUIRY I
- ACADEMIC INQUIRY II

- WRC 1013 (3 SCH)

According to a longitudinal study focusing on students' attitudes and writing abilities, researchers Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz (2004) found that writing "engages students with their learning. It helps to [welcome freshmen] in the academic culture, giving them a sense of ... belonging" (p. 131). It teaches students to think, and to use writing "to unravel puzzles and see the 'big picture' for themselves" (p. 132). Thus, "students [write] *into* expertise" (p. 134) as they try out, imitate, analyze, question, and eventually challenge what the experts do. Writing shows them that "they have much to give and much to gain" in their new community (p. 147). As they continue to write, they continue to grow, shifting from their high school attitude that sees writing a paper simply as completing an assignment to realizing that writing is "a means for discovering what matters" (p. 146). This discovery expands their perception of writing, eventually taking it beyond a relatively private academic exchange to a venue through which they can publically share their ideas.

However, UTSA freshmen responding to the National Survey of Student Engagement (N = ~ 394) reported they were required to write very few papers or reports. Responses from UTSA seniors (N = ~1,110) revealed a similar trend. (This information should be interpreted with caution since the percentage of students responding is very low.)

- MATH (3 SCH) (APPROPRIATE LEVEL)
- Q COURSE (3 SCH)

In the last decade, quantitative literacy has been recognized as critical to the survival of democracy (Orrill, 2003; Steen, 2001). However, results obtained from incoming UTSA freshmen via the Quantitative Literacy Assessment Test (QLAT) reveal that a majority struggle with quantitative literacy (UTSA QEP, p. 9).

Supporting these test results we find that over the past five years, the percentage

of students enrolled in remedial mathematics courses at UTSA has ranged from 36% to 41%. In addition, the performance of students in freshman level Mathematics and Statistics courses at UTSA indicates a deficiency in basic mathematical skills with approximately one-third receiving grades of D, F, or W in core Algebra or Statistics courses (UTSA QEP, p. 8).

- ACADEMIC INQUIRY I
- ACADEMIC INQUIRY II

Reason, Terenzini and Domingo's (2006) study of 30 campuses across the nation concludes that quality first-year programs should focus on support for all students as well as cognitive and academic challenge and engagement. Further, the vast majority of the explained variance in academic capability was attributable to students' experiences during their initial year in college rather than their personal characteristics when they arrived. Specifically, first-year students' perception of the support they received from the institution was the single greatest influence on their development of academic competence. Students who reported feeling that the faculty and staff provided the academic and non-academic support they needed, and who felt they had good relationships with faculty members and administrative staff, were more likely to report greater gains in academic competence than similar students at other institutions. Similarly, students who reported being cognitively engaged, and that their institutions emphasized higher order, critical thinking skills, were significantly more likely to report greater levels of scholarly competence than their counterparts at institutions that were less academically engaging.

Thus, the Task Force recommends the creation of at least one *required* freshman seminar course, such as Academic Inquiry I or II, designed to provide students with (1) a combination of institutional support and academic challenge and (2) an environment where quality faculty-student relationships can develop. We envision a course that will focus on a common summer reading and be taught from an interdisciplinary perspective. The instructor of record will coordinate with faculty from across campus who will serve as outside speakers. Each speaker will address an aspect of the reading from their discipline's perspective, e.g.: quantitative/qualitative research, social science, natural sciences, etc.

COURSE CREDIT. The Task Force engaged in considerable discussion as to whether this requirement should consist of two 1-SCH courses or one 3-SCH course. Ultimately, because the Texas Legislature and the THECB are currently entertaining bills/proposals that could impact the total SCHs and content of the core curriculum, we are unable to make a clear recommendation regarding the semester credit hours at this time. Instead, we recommend that this important issue be determined at a later date when revisions to the state core curriculum requirements have been approved. *If HB 3025 passes in its current form and if THECB approves the current version of the UEAC Core Curriculum proposal*, the University could accommodate the addition of this new course by designating it as one, two, or three (of the six) SCHs allowed for the institutional option.

The Task Force agrees that consideration of course SCHs should be a careful, deliberate process that thoroughly considers all related advantages and caveats. Decisions should

be based on a careful balance between the best experience for students and our current practical realities, e.g., cost and space.

First and foremost, the intent and substance of the course should be considered in light of current research on the topic. For example, Swing's (2002) study concludes that the optimum number of SCHs depends on the nature of the course. The course proposed here would be considered a "special academic theme" course that focuses "... on interdisciplinary themes other than college transition. While college adjustment and study skills may be included in the course, the majority of assignments and course time is spent exploring a selected topic" (Porter & Swing, 2006, p. 94). Research has shown a course of this type is best addressed in three credit hours (Swing, 2002). On the other hand, one and two contact hour courses have been shown to effectively address transition to college issues or faculty / students and student / student connections, time management, study skills and out-of-class engagement, respectively.

However, as the SCHs increase, so do practical challenges such as state mandated limits on degree requirements, classroom availability, scheduling difficulties, staffing and other related costs. Furthermore, while the course is intended to support student success, its addition may inadvertently create an obstacle to degree progress.

Sample course descriptions for 1 SCH Academic Inquiry courses are presented below. If one 3-SCH course is developed, these two descriptions would be condensed into one.

ACI 1011      ACADEMIC INQUIRY I  
1 Hour Credit.

This seminar course offers a fundamental introduction into the collegiate experience. It will explore strategies and conduct that will maximize academic success. Students will engage in small group, interdisciplinary discussions focusing on a shared reading as an introduction to critical thinking and collaborative learning common to collegiate course work. This course offers an introductory investigation to research in the disciplines (major). Students will explore topics that include: research design, methodologies, findings, and professional practices.

ACI 1021      ACADEMIC INQUIRY II  
1 Hour Credit. Prerequisite: Academic Inquiry I

This course continues and expands on critical thinking, academic research and writing, effective use of technology, and scholarly presentation introduced in Academic Inquiry I. In addition, in accordance with the mission of the university, students will explore their roles as both local and global citizens, through community engagement and public service.

- 2. How much of the freshman curriculum should be specified by the university versus being left at the discretion of the student?*

To foster involvement and validation (per the conceptual model on page 5), the recommended freshman experience program will be required for all first-time full-time freshmen and involve a maximum of 25 students enrolled together in a "block" of courses. This class size is small enough to allow for faculty-student and student-student interaction and is near the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recommendation of 20. The proposed freshman experience is based on what has already

been proven to be successful for UTSA students, including what we know about Learning Communities and Supplemental Instruction. We would integrate the components that make learning communities successful, including programs that academically and socially integrate students into our campus and opportunities for students to interact with faculty within their major area.

This program will likely foster a smooth transition from high school to college and allow students to invest in the University through connections with faculty, other students with similar interests, and the general UTSA community. Without a prescribed assignment of classes during their first semester, first-time entering freshmen are likely to take any combination of available courses that interest them and that fit conveniently into their schedule during their first semester, particularly if they do not understand the importance of prerequisites or if seats are not available in their preferred classes. The proposed freshman experience program can keep students from falling behind by ensuring that they take prerequisite courses early in their college experience. Our recommended program would help to ensure that students are on track with their program of study and would allow them to participate in small classes with a common thread of interest.

BLOCKS: Freshman blocks will contain the following:

<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>
Academic Inquiry I (1-3 SCH TBD)* WRC 1013 (3 SCH) Math or Q course (3 SCH) Core/Major course (3 SCH)	Academic Inquiry II (1-3 SCH TBD)* Math or Q course (3 SCH) Core/Major course (3 SCH)

*\* The number of courses and the SCHs should be determined in the implementation phase.*

In the Fall term, the blocks would consist of three to four courses as the “Core/Major” course may overlap with one of the other courses. Spring semester blocks would be composed of fewer courses, thus affording students more flexibility and autonomy. In both terms, freshmen will determine additional courses, in consultation with an advisor, in order to attain full-time status. Regardless of block association, all freshmen would be enrolled in: WRC 1013, Academic Inquiry, a Q-course or a Math course, as well as one course within their major or other core curriculum course designated by the college or department. A few sections of the Fall term blocks will need to be offered in the Spring in order to accommodate those students who enter in the Spring semester.

To enhance the experience, the Writing Program should consider offering a discipline-specific WRC 1013 based on the student’s particular block. The recommended interaction among the block faculty would enhance this discipline specific class as faculty discuss what they are doing in their classes and perhaps align discipline and writing assignments. This type of collaboration would further the idea that writing is not simply a requirement they must endure or an activity that has nothing to do with their major, but an integral part of any academic endeavor.

Note that the committee recommendation does not include WRC 1023 as part of the first year block. This should not be interpreted to mean that students do not need to take

what is currently called Freshman Composition II. Rather this critical course should be moved to a sophomore level course (30+ hours) when students are better equipped for the course. Cognitively, traditional aged freshmen are what William G. Perry, Jr. (1970) refers to as dualistic thinkers and what Marcia B. Baxter Magolda (1992) refers to as absolute knowers. By the sophomore year, students have progressed so that they are better prepared for the expectations of a course in persuasive writing.

CORE/MAJOR COURSE. The college and/or department will determine the Core/Major course. By including this course in the block, colleges are provided the opportunity to tailor the blocks for their students. Colleges may decide to require a course for all students majoring in the college or the course may vary with each department or degree program. Therefore, "College A" may have all students enrolled in the same introductory course while "College B" may design multiple blocks from which freshmen can choose, depending on their major. Those students who are "undecided" might enroll in a course that will introduce them to an area of interest or in a core course that will apply toward any degree program.

#### SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO STUDENT BLOCKS:

In addition to the proposal for freshman blocks, the Task Force makes the following two additional recommendations:

1. Class Size. We recommend that WRC and the Academic Inquiry course(s) be capped at a maximum 25 students. Concomitantly, we recommend that no more than one course within a student's block be large (100 students or more). All large classes should be required to have enough TA support so that the ratio of TAs to freshmen is no greater than 1:25. While we realize there are fiscal consequences related to this recommendation, we believe the benefits to our freshman class outweigh the cost.

2. Faculty Support & Expectations. Research supports the premise that the quality of the college experience is strongly affected by faculty and student-faculty interactions (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rendon, 2004). Faculty and TAs in the program must be carefully chosen and trained for optimal results. Nurturing, approachable faculty members who want to be part of the freshman's first college experience are integral to helping students feel as if they "belong" within the UTSA environment. We, therefore, recommend that faculty who teach within a block meet regularly to collaborate on curricula and assignments. Teaching Assistants who participate in the freshman classes and faculty teaching within the program should be provided professional development training and support on how to teach freshmen. The Teaching & Learning Center could be helpful in providing support for faculty and TAs. In addition, the Learning Communities Instructor Institute provides a model for faculty support and could be leveraged as a resource.

3. *A. Should we develop expectations for how early in the curriculum students should satisfy Core Curriculum requirements? B. Mathematics and writing requirements?*

*A. All Core Curriculum Requirements*. There is considerable variance among degree requirements regarding the core curriculum. For example, students tracking toward teacher certification are expected to complete all core requirements by the 60 SCH mark.

However, Music majors are expected to enroll in MUS courses such that core requirements are spread across the degree and completed by graduation. Because of this wide variance in degree expectations, the Task Force recommends that this question be answered at the department level.

*3. B. Mathematics and Writing Requirements.* Because Math/Q-course and WRC 1013 are included in the block, freshmen should complete these requirements in their first year. We are not willing to recommend a hold, however, if students drop one of these later in the term. *Students who begin with developmental coursework in either writing or mathematics should be required to continue enrollment until they complete core-level Math and WRC 1013.*

*4. A. Can we consider packaging a set or sets of courses for cohort-enrollment of freshman students? B. If so, what are the scheduling challenges that might be encountered?*

*A. Packaging a set or sets of courses for cohort-enrollment?*

Addressed in Question #2 above.

*4. B. If so, what are the scheduling challenges that might be encountered?*

1. Certain areas of the University would have considerable challenges in developing blocks because of the varying levels of freshman mathematics and/or science skill, e.g. COA, COE, COS, and some areas within COLFA. For example, fields that are chemistry-dependent – chemistry, biology, or engineering – add the complication of needing to have blocks with multiple levels of chemistry. The Department of Biology would need to determine how to offer freshman blocks so that students planning to apply to medical school or Dental Early Admission Program (DEAP) are prepared to take the MCAT or complete all DEAP science courses by their sixth semester.

2. Students who enter the University with credit (through high school dual credit, AP or CLEP exams) would have trouble finding a block that would work for them. We considered options of exempting them entirely from the block system or allowing them to register in partial blocks, but either option poses additional problems. Since “exempt” freshmen would be registering after upperclassmen, we were concerned that they would have few options for Fall registration if most remaining seats were in blocks. We were also concerned that if some freshmen were only taking part of a block, course enrollments would be uneven. Another problem is that students with prior college credit often attend Freshman Orientation in June but do not have their AP scores until early to mid-July.

3. Many of our students have work, personal, and family commitments that create narrow time windows for them and make it difficult for them to select a block. For example, students with long commutes often try to keep to a 3- or 2-day schedule, but we anticipate the blocks distributing courses over five days. We also discussed the possibility of exempting non-traditional students from the blocks, as we anticipate traditional-age freshmen as having the greatest need for the blocks. We also discussed the possibility of allowing exemptions on a case-by-case basis.

4. An administrator would need to take responsibility for scheduling and coordinating the blocked courses across multiple departments and determining how to match up multiple sections of individual blocked courses with larger courses within the block.

5. Students who are currently enrolled in “blocked” Learning Community courses have to be manually registered. Given the numbers of total freshmen, a system would need to be developed where freshmen could enroll themselves in blocks.

*5. Understanding that many students enter the university with undeclared majors, and others switch majors early in their careers, can we construct a freshman year curriculum that applies broadly to all/most majors?*

We do not anticipate that undeclared majors would be an issue for the creation of blocks, as most blocks – even ones targeting students interested in specific majors – would be composed exclusively or almost exclusively of courses in the core. A few blocks would contain a combination of major and core courses, e.g., Music, Architecture, or Business.

Students who change their major may have course work that would not apply to the core – as is often the case when one changes majors. However, allowing colleges and/or departments to construct specific blocks would provide students an opportunity to take courses within their field while they also complete core requirements.

*6. A. Are there additional academic support services that the university can provide to assist freshmen with their early academic challenges? B. How would these services be impacted by cohort-enrollment strategies?*

Prior to addressing Question 6, the Task Force gathered a thorough listing of existing support services. This extensive list is presented in Appendix C. The following recommendations relate to additional support services as well as strategies for enhancing currently implemented support services.

*A. Recommendations for Additional Support Services*

1. Develop a freshman newsletter to communicate academic, financial aid, and support service information via Facebook and Twitter (available for viewing by freshmen and their parents, i.e., fans of the group).
2. Develop a freshman signature experience (by departments) to include options such as service-learning, career investigation, graduate school opportunities, etc. This would serve as the foundation for the senior capstone or signature experience that many departments already implement. This experience would not require additional faculty or resources and could easily be implemented into currently existing introductory/freshman courses. This activity would be tied to SACS expectations.
3. Develop a University College to provide a cohort learning experience as well as social, financial, and academic support for first-year, undeclared students, and pre-majors.
4. Develop a mentorship program available to all first-year students (freshmen or transfer). Staff or upper division students at UTSA would mentor these students

regarding academic, social, and financial aspects of college-life across their first year at UTSA. Mentors should receive training in order to foster the development of a quality mentorship program.

5. Establish a college family day where siblings, cousins, etc. can learn about the UTSA college experience.

6. Establish a National Society of Collegiate Scholars chapter on campus (<http://www.nscs.org/>)

- *Strategies for Enhancing Existing Student Support Services*

1. Allow first-year students registering for classes to register for one or two academic support service options from the Tomás Rivera Center. Banner pop-ups could be made available during registration to inform students of academic support options available with individual courses.
2. Develop a “Freshman” link on the UTSA homepage to provide a consolidated listing of academic support services with links to the appropriate offices. We also recommend linking this information page to Blackboard (or other learning management system UTSA uses for freshman courses). UTSA provides numerous services; however, not everyone is aware of them.
3. Review and expand existing academic components of new student orientation to include an overview of the academic expectations of our University, including the skills needed for college-level work (such as reading college textbooks and note-taking strategies).

6. B. *How would these services be impacted by cohort-enrollment strategies?*

Many of the existing services already utilize cohort enrollment strategies, e.g.: Learning Communities and WRC discipline-specific sections. If additional cohort-enrollment strategies, as suggested previously in this report, were implemented, Learning Communities in its current form would not exist. The fundamentals of Learning Communities would be implemented within several discipline-specific blocks.

It should be noted that the creation of discipline-specific blocks might facilitate TRC staff efforts to schedule Supplemental Instruction or walk-in tutoring services. Other existing support services should experience limited effects.

7. *If we should implement changes to our strategy for freshman curricula, how would this impact the success of students who transfer to UTSA from other institutions?*

Depending upon the courses completed elsewhere, <30 hr and 31+ non-core complete transfers would experience challenges regarding blocks that work for them. Circumstances for transfer students are particularly complex since each student will have completed a different combination of coursework. Hence, there may be a need for partial blocking and/or exemption for some transfer students. This, in turn, may present additional problems such as few unblocked course options and uneven course enrollments.

Additionally, 31+ SCH non-core complete transfers would be required to take an “Academic Inquiry for Transfer Students” course. While limiting enrollment to 25 students per section would likely place significant strain on faculty and space resources, such a course would facilitate transfer students’ transition to the new UTSA

environment. We feel it should be noted that more students might decide to complete their core requirements at a community college or another university and transfer in as core-complete to avoid prescriptive blocks during their freshman year.

#### **IV. SUMMARY & CONCLUSION**

The recommendations presented in this report were drawn from theory and research and carefully considered in light of their implications for our first-year cohort. We feel strongly that the freshman year is pivotal to student persistence and that a well-focused, well-conceptualized first-year experience is warranted. To that end, we recommend that first-time, full-time freshmen be required to enroll in blocks of courses that include a new core course focusing on interdisciplinary academic inquiry. To foster connection with UTSA and facilitate smooth transition to college life, some of the block courses should be capped at 25 students. Blocked courses with small enrollments will foster connection with the institution, with faculty, and with peers. Thus, students will be less likely to feel lost and more likely to persist to degree completion.

We are aware that myriad issues must be considered prior to implementing these recommendations. Challenges related to students, faculty and staff, cost, space, technology, scheduling, policies and procedures should be addressed in a second (implementation) phase of this process. To facilitate the study of implementation issues, a list of considerations is included in Appendix D. This list is not exhaustive, as additional considerations surely exist.

In general terms, traditional-aged entering freshmen are novices in unfamiliar territory who are regularly confronted with the new and unfamiliar culture of higher education. First-generation college students, low SES students and Latina/o students are particularly at risk of dropping out. However, appropriate university support can foster smooth acclimation to the academic milieu and augment the likelihood of a successful start. Such support is especially challenging at large institutions like UTSA where communication and coordinated efforts are complex and students are more likely to be lost in the shuffle. It will not happen by accident. It is, therefore, imperative that we be intentional and strategic as we go forward with designing appropriate direction and support for incoming students.

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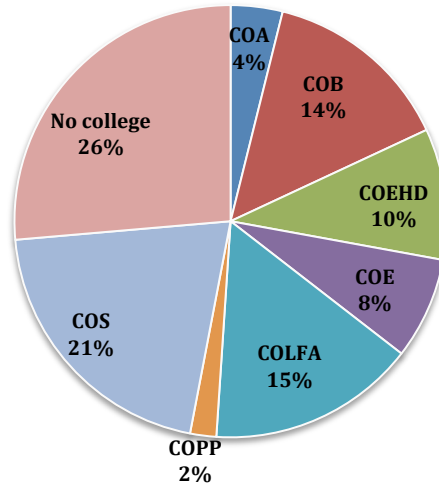
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**APPENDIX A  
FRESHMAN COHORT RETENTION RATES**

*The source for all data below is the Office of Institutional Research with analysis by the Graduation Initiative.*

**Fall 2009 first-time, full-time freshmen, by college**

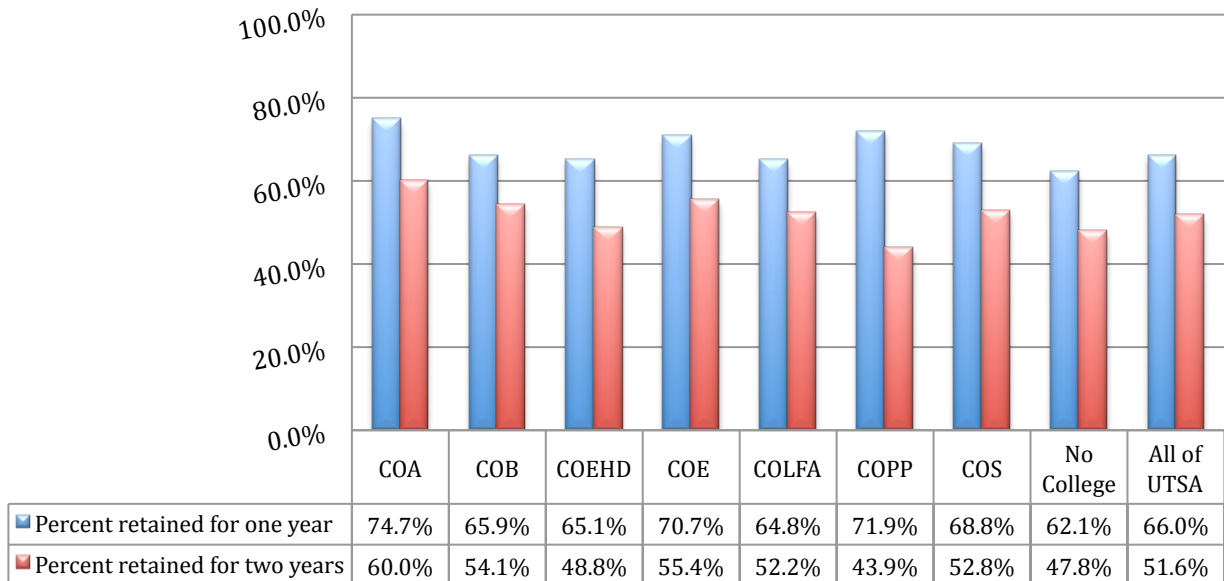


\*CAP students not included

**Fall 2008 Cohort**

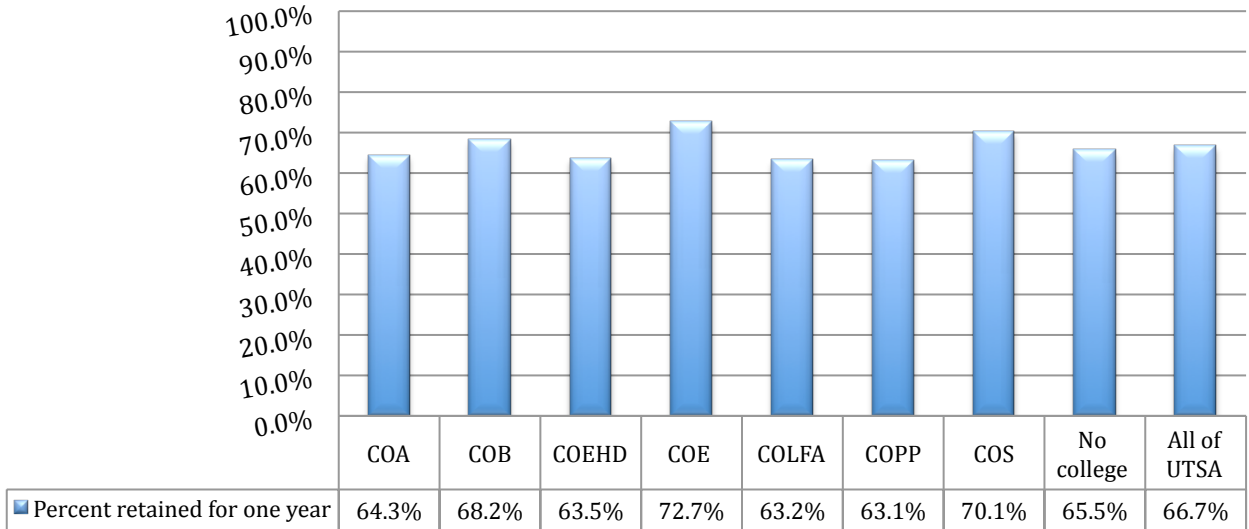
\*CAP students not included

**1- and 2-year retention of students who began at UTSA as first-time, full-time freshmen and were retained anywhere at UTSA**



## Fall 2009 Cohort

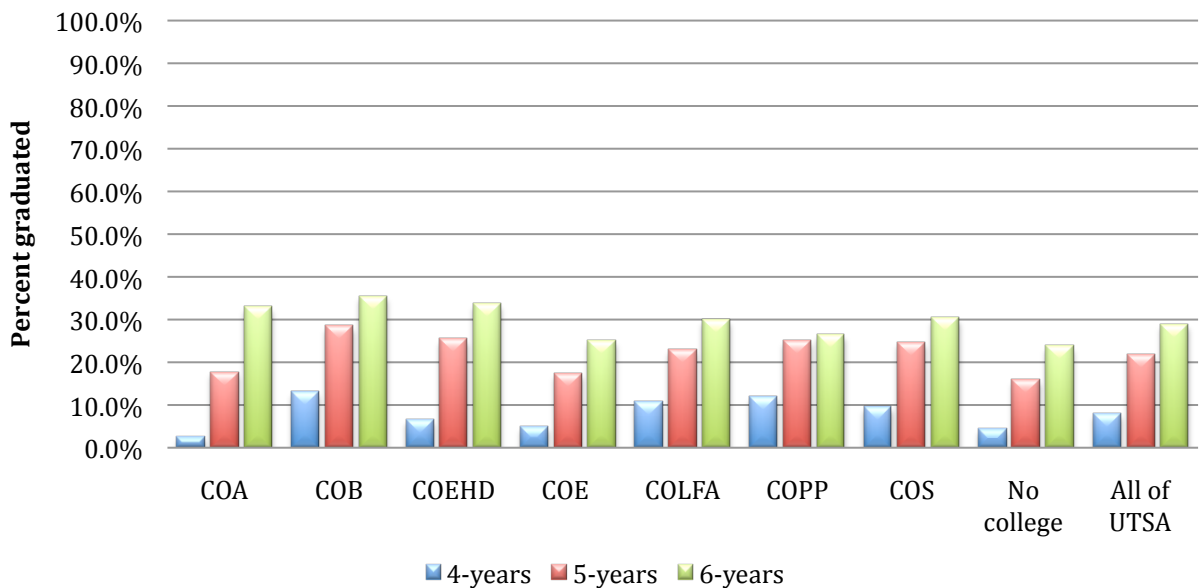
### 1-year retention of students who began at UTSA as first-time, full-time freshmen in fall 2009 and were retained anywhere at UTSA



\*CAP students not included

## Fall 2004 Cohort

### Fall 2004 first-time, full time freshmen, by college, who graduated anywhere at UTSA



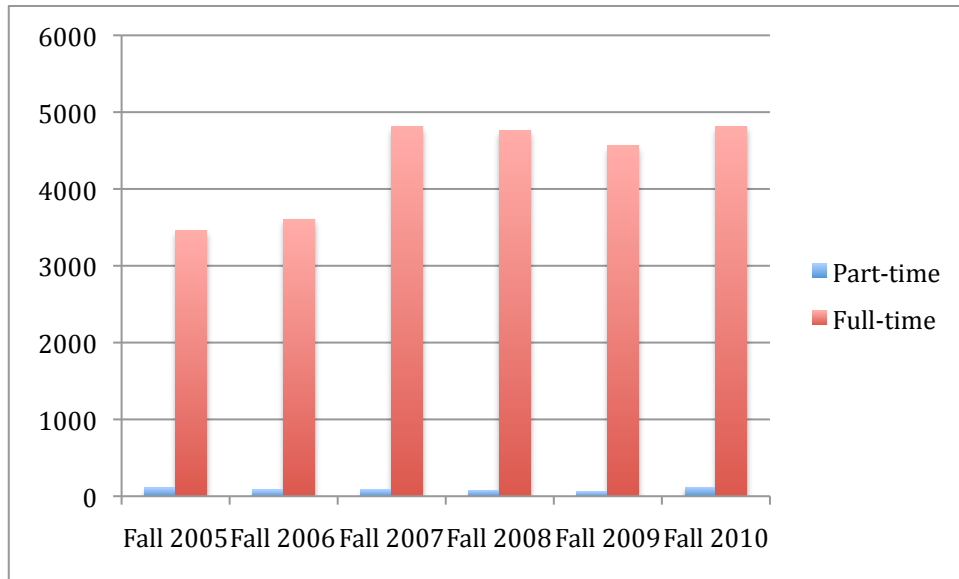
\*CAP students not included

**Note:** 4-, 5-, and 6-year rates are cumulative.

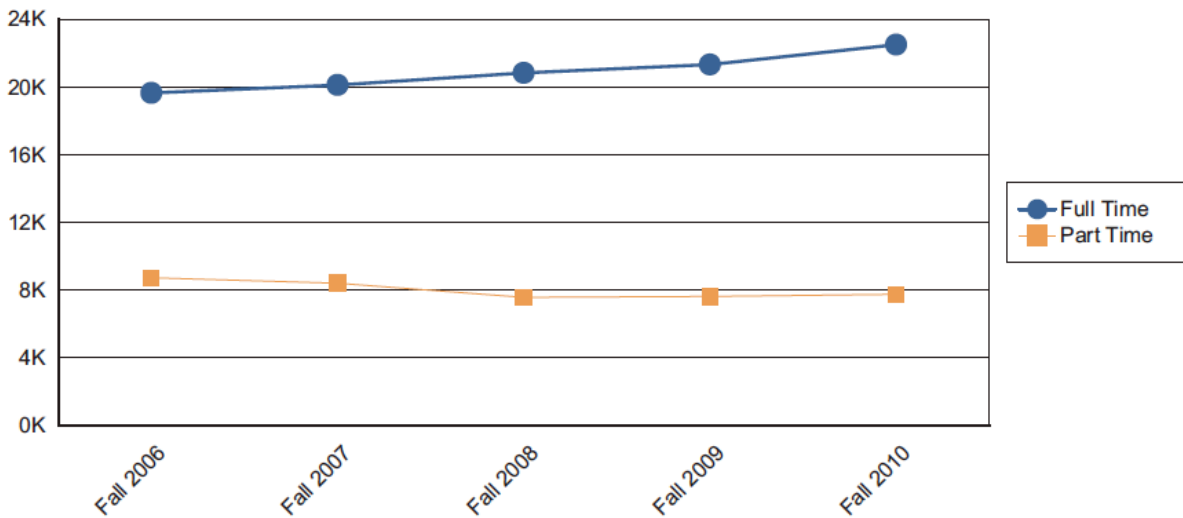
**APPENDIX B  
OVERVIEW OF FRESHMAN COHORT**

*The source for all data below is the Office of Institutional Research.*

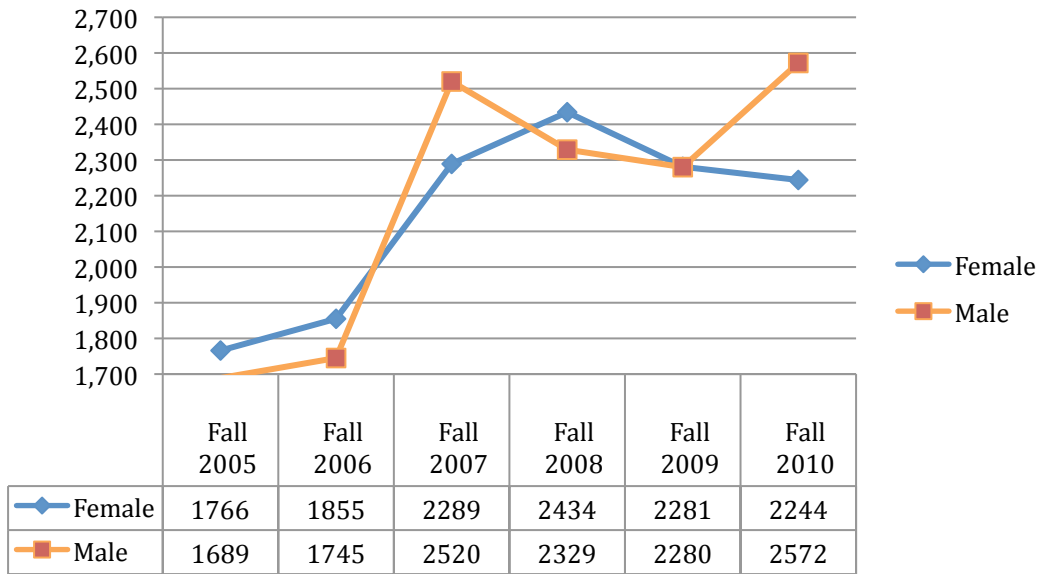
**Full-Time Vs. Part-Time Freshman Enrollment**



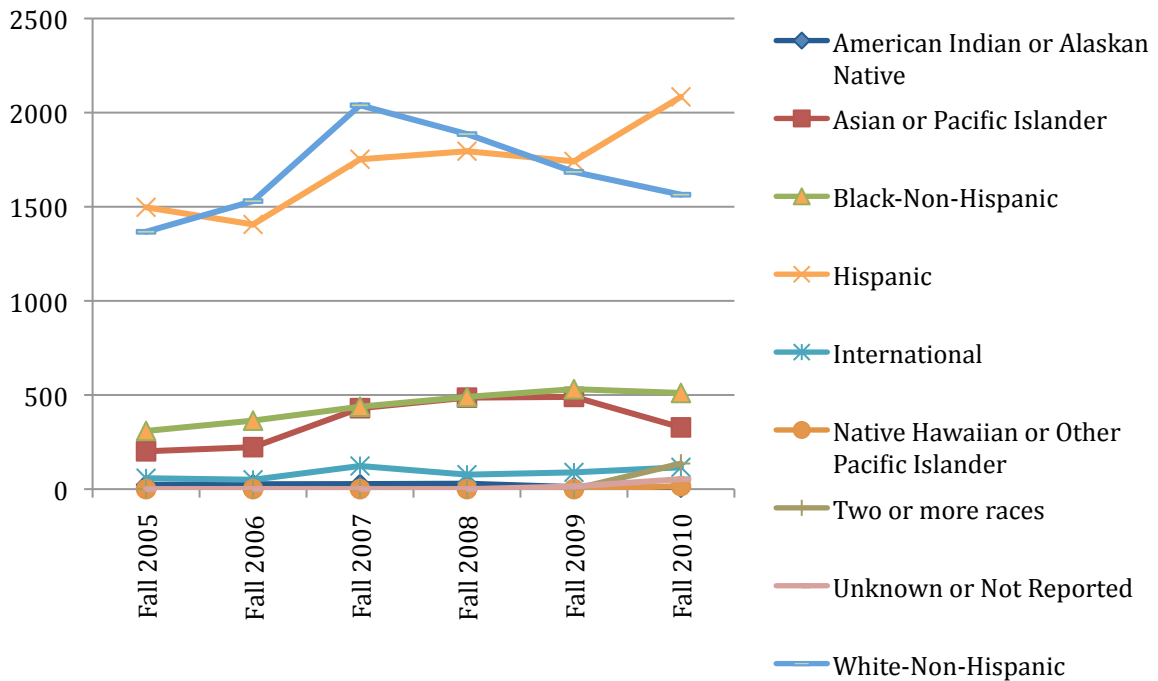
**Enrollment by Course Load**



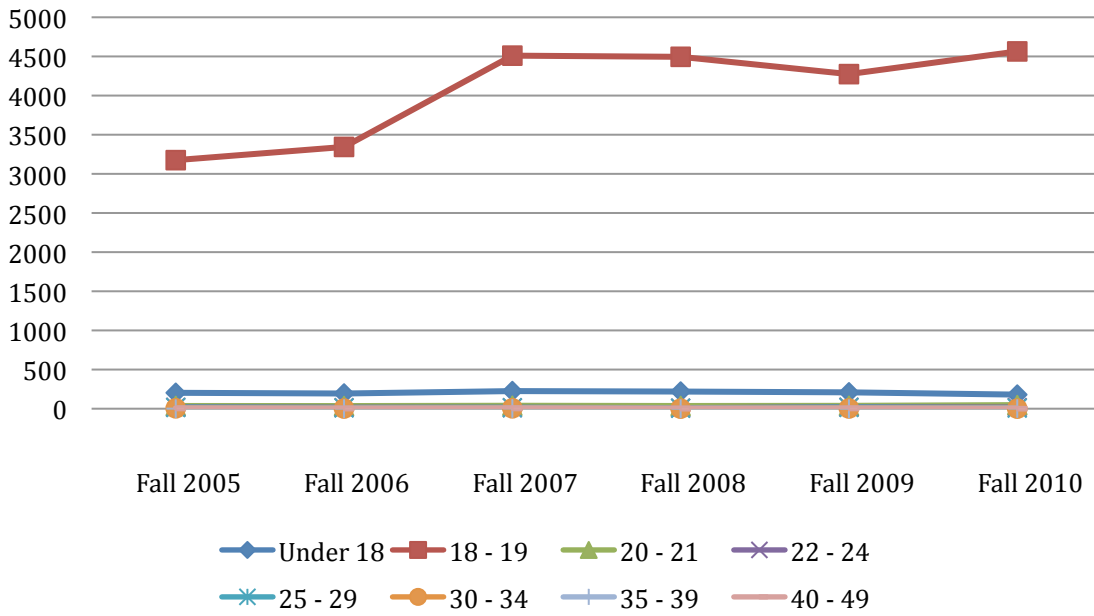
## First-time Full-time Freshman Enrollment by Gender



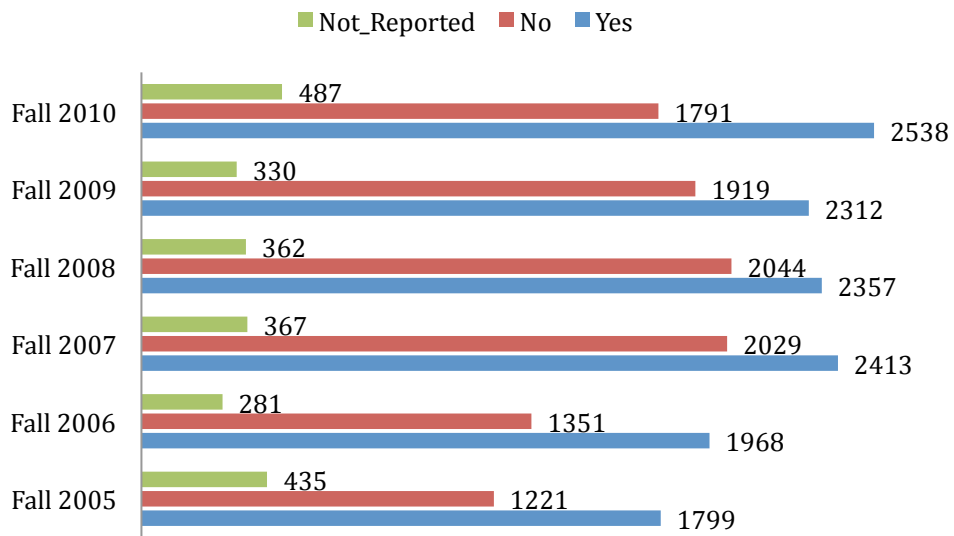
## First-time Full-time Freshman Enrollment by Ethnicity



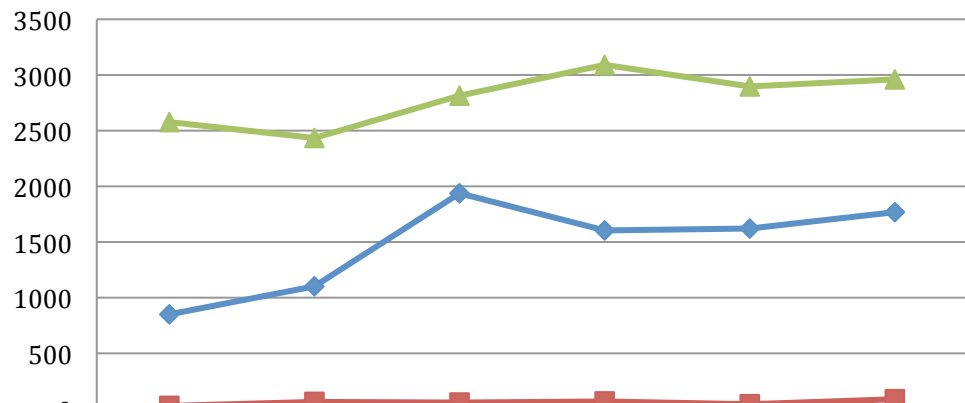
## First-time Full-time Freshman Enrollment by Age Range



## First-time Full-time Freshman Enrollment by First Generation in College



## First-time Full-time Freshman Living On or Off Campus



	Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	Fall 2010
On_Campus	850	1102	1937	1604	1621	1768
Off_Campus	28	64	58	68	43	88
Unknown	2577	2434	2814	3091	2897	2960

**APPENDIX C**  
**DESCRIPTION OF EXISTING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES & WELCOMING/ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES**

The Tomas Rivera Center (TRC) provides academic services to all students, including freshmen, enrolled at UTSA. During the 2009-2010 academic year, there were 5,911 freshmen enrolled at UTSA. This number includes new, transfer, and continuing students with a freshman classification. During 2009-2010, 44% (n=2583) of freshmen participated in Supplemental Instruction, 3% (n=159) participated in Learning Assistance, and 11% (n=631) utilized tutoring services.

*Available to First-Year Students Only*

I. The TRC provides programs specific to first-year students. These include:

A. Learning Communities

During 2009-10, 18% of the freshmen participated in Learning Communities. There were approximately 75 LC sections serving approximately 2000 students. Data suggests that 1<sup>st</sup> year retention rates, GPAs, and 6-year graduation rates are higher among LC participants than non-LC participants.

1) Freshman Seminar (Peer Leaders) –

Learning Communities provides a cohort of 25 first-year students enrolled in two or three core curriculum classes. The Learning Communities consist of various themes and majors. Most Freshman Seminar courses have peer leaders who meet with students outside of class. The peer leaders plan activities and assist instructors.

2) Summer Common Reading

All freshmen are required to read the same book during the summer prior to enrollment in fall courses. The common reading book is used in the Freshman Seminar course.

3) Early Alert Program –

The Early Alert Program provides outreach to students within the Learning Community that are struggling academically.

B. Advising Programs

During the 2009-10 academic year, 21% of freshmen participated in PACE, 19% (467 first year students) participated in the Academic Development Program, 19% participated in the Scholar Support Program, and 2% participated in the ACE program.

1) PACE – Personal, Academic and Career Exploration Undecided Student Program –

The PACE program targets incoming freshmen, undecided students (up to 45 hours), and students (up to 45 hours) in academic good standing. This program focuses on personal development, academic transition, and career exploration. The PACE advisors work with UTSA Career Services to develop freshman-oriented career planning workshops.

2) Scholar Support Program

The Scholar Support Program participants are recipients of selected scholarships who meet regularly with their advisor. Participants are advised on requirements to proceed in major and maintain scholarship requirements.

3) Risk Point Program

The Risk Point Program provides academic support interventions to first-year undecided students. Checkpoints include midterm grade progress reports, first academic warning/probation, and re-entry (following academic dismissal).

4) Academic Development Program

The Academic Development Program provides assistance to provisionally admitted students regarding adjusting to college life and improving academic skills. An informal mentoring program and outreach to first generation students is provided. Programming continues into the subsequent Spring semester.

5) Access College and Excel Scholar Program (ACE at Downtown Campus)

Participants within the ACE program receive academic scholarships (\$2400 across 2 years) and take classes together. Participants have a designated academic advisor and peer mentor.

II. Support Services Offered Outside the TRC

A. Jump Start Program – Tomas Rivera Center and Various Departments

A summer program targeting incoming freshmen that provides an intensive 1½ day algebra refresher course. Students are then eligible to take the new calculus placement exam.

B. Math Boot Camp – Tomas Rivera Center and Various Departments

A summer program targeting incoming freshmen that provides four days of mathematics instruction. Students are placed in developmental math after first placement exam.

C. Freshman Advising Center

Midterm Maintenance

Mid-term grades are checked and students with a low GPA must meet with their advisor to discuss their academic standing. Students will have a hold on their records until they meet with an advisor.

D. The Writing Center

Freshmen can take advantage of the academic support services of The Writing Center.

E. Freshmen Orientation Sessions

Fall, Spring, and Summer orientations are provided for freshmen and transfer freshmen with fewer than 30 hours.

F. Roadrunner Days is a series of events scheduled prior to the beginning of classes, designed to introduce the campus community to new students and allow them to make connections with one another. New students are expected to attend Roadrunner Days. Each college designs and delivers programming for their incoming freshmen for this event.

G. *College of Business: Freshman Support Programs*

**Business Scholars Program**

The Business Scholars Program is a mentoring program for first generation college students pursuing careers in business. Established by the College of Business in 2002, the program is designed to help students make a smooth transition from high school to college and on to graduation. It is open to College of Business freshmen, sophomores and transfer students at the Downtown Campus. Students receive personalized academic support and advising, participate in seminars on business and life skills development and

develop their leadership potential through mentoring and community service activities. Scholars also receive assistance with securing scholarships, internships and career placement opportunities. Students may remain in the program throughout their undergraduate career.

H. *College of Education & Human Development: Freshman Support Programs*

**Dean's Reception Luncheon**

Full-time freshmen earning President's List, Dean's List, and Honor's List are invited to attend an annual luncheon with the Dean and Department Chairs to celebrate their achievements.

I. *College of Engineering: Freshman Support Programs*

**The Center for Excellence in Engineering Education (CE3)**

The CE3 seeks to support UTSA's engineering students by sponsoring special classes, initiatives and events that strengthen academic performance and foster a learning community that contributes to increased retention and graduation rates.

**Just-in-Time-Math**

This is a specialized course that provides an overview of the significant math topics most heavily used in core engineering courses such as statics, dynamics and electrical circuits. Freshmen enrolled in this course may be able to register for introductory engineering courses up to one year earlier than usual and have the opportunity to earn up to \$6,200 in stipends.

**Designated sections of math for Engineering majors**

Sections of Algebra for Scientists and Engineers (MAT 1073), Pre-Calculus (MAT 1093), Calculus I (MAT 1214), and Calculus II (MAT 1224) have graduate students assigned to provide tutoring for students, with particular emphasis on computational skills needed to successfully progress to the next level of math in the degree plan.

**Peer mentoring for freshmen Engineering students**

This project focuses on a cohort of incoming Engineering freshmen students each year. The program provides opportunities for female minority Engineering majors to interact with peers and professors. The students are assigned projects along with mentors and participate in workshops to improve their student skills, research skills, etc. Finally, the program provides support such as stipend, travel and supplies for both undergraduates and graduate students.

**Research Stipend**

This program provides \$2,250 stipend per semester to undergraduate Engineering students to participate in research laboratories. Professors recommend students to work in their labs. Students provide an application along with letter of recommendation and transcripts to CEEE.

J. *College of Liberal & Fine Arts: Freshman Support Programs*

Welcome to COLFA letters to newly admitted students

K. *College of Sciences: Freshman Support Programs*

**Freshman Blackboard**

Blackboard includes a checklist of tasks (such as developing a four-year plan) that freshmen transitioning to sophomores should accomplish. The Blackboard also includes degree plans, information about internships, COS events and links to campus resources.

*Available to both first-year and transfer students*

A. Tomas Rivera Center

Supplemental Instruction (SI)

Supplemental instruction is a series of weekly study sessions offered to students enrolled in historically difficult courses. SI sessions integrate study skill development with course material. Sessions are guided by students who successfully completed the course and who are trained to facilitate collaborative learning.

Tutoring

Tutoring is available for 74 courses covering 16 subject areas. Drop-in tutoring is available.

Non-Course-Based Developmental Instruction (NCBDI)

NCBDI provides small group and online developmental instruction in math, reading, and writing for all students.

Math Assistance Program (MAP)

The MAP targets college algebra and pre-calculus courses offering a variety of supplemental instruction and tutoring components.

Academic Coaching

Academic Coaching provides individualized help with study skills. Students assess their strengths and weaknesses with the assistance of an academic coach.

Class Presentations

At the request of faculty members, the TRC will make a class presentation on TRC services, study skills or related topics.

Expert Learner Workshops

Expert Learner Workshops offer information on study skills and learning techniques. The workshops are offered weekly.

B. The Writing Center (class presentations, workshops, online program, etc.)

Tutoring

The Writing Center offers tutor-facilitated workshops on a variety of writing topics. Tutors also present to classes and present in orientation programs. The Writing Center provides software for students with disabilities and maintains a computer lab for individual and class writing instruction. Online tutoring is also available.

C. COEHD

Pathway to Academic Success Program (PASE) – [sophomore students and above only]

The PASE program is an online program that focuses on the development of academic skills. All COEHD students placed on academic probation or who have been reinstated following academic dismissal must complete the program.

D. COS

Student Mentor Program

The Associate Dean meets with some of the at-risk students for discussions about how to improve their success at UTSA.

Plans for the future include implementing a program wherein juniors and

seniors that are doing well and are members of RSO's that have COS students as members (Pre-Med Society, for example) will be paired with incoming freshmen to help them through their first year.

*Available to Transfer Students Only*

A. COLFA

Welcome to COLFA letters to newly admitted transfers students – COLFA

B. COEHD & COS

Online Orientation Information via Blackboard

Transfer students are provided the opportunity to complete an orientation via Blackboard.

C. Transfer Orientation Sessions

Transfers students with more than 30 hours are provided the opportunity to attend a campus-based orientation or complete an online orientation.

D. COEHD

T-Shirt Swap Day

In an attempt to establish a welcoming environment, all transfer students majoring in the COEHD are asked to meet the advising staff and “swap” their former university t-shirt for a UTSA t-shirt.

Advising

Advisors meet with newly admitted students at NW Vista and SAC

Beginning Spring 2011, COEHD advisors will meet with newly admitted students from North West Vista and San Antonio College to discuss degree and program requirements.

## APPENDIX D CONSIDERATIONS & CAVEATS

### **Students Issues.**

*Entering UTSA ahead/behind their peers.* Freshmen enter the university at varying levels; some enter with credit for WRC 1013 or core Mathematics. Others are not ready for college level coursework and are in need of developmental support. These groups of students – and the myriad variations within the groups – result in countless unique situations and add to the complexity of block scheduling. Timing of placements exams and receipt of their results will be critical.

*Student Sub-Populations.* Particular student sub-populations, e.g., athletes and Honors students, major in disciplines across campus. It is important that all student sub-groups and their unique needs be considered as course blocks are being developed.

*Work Schedules.* Student work schedules will vary widely, thus creating issues for pre-determined class schedules.

### **Technology/Banner/Space Considerations.**

Various challenges exist related to automating the scheduling process. Therefore, it is important that the appropriate personnel in the Registrar's Office be involved in working through these issues.

### **Administrative Oversight.**

There will be considerable administrative tasks associated with a comprehensive freshman experience program, e.g., coordinating with colleges / departments across campus, determining policies and procedures related to the program, and assessing the program. To provide administrative oversight, a "University College" should be created.

### **Faculty/Staff Considerations.**

Faculty who teach in the blocks should expect additional requirements. Block instructors should work as a team, e.g.: communicate and collaborate regarding class assignments, expectations, policies and procedures. In addition, they should receive support specifically in the instruction of traditional age freshmen. Each Academic Inquiry instructor will need to coordinate with other faculty from across campus who will serve as outside speakers. Therefore, these added demands should be reflected in the University's reward structure. If the Academic Inquiry course is less than 3 SCHs, faculty workload may present additional issues.

### **Semester Schedule.**

In the Fall term, the Academic Inquiry course should consider meeting a few days the week *before* classes start (focusing on how to approach the university experience) and end a few days prior to the end of the term. In addition, provisions will need to be made to accommodate those freshmen who enter the University in the Spring term.

### **Pilot and Phase-In.**

Given the considerable challenges related to block scheduling and the introduction of a new course, the Task Force recommends that the program be piloted and followed by a gradual phase-in process.