



*Raising Graduation Rates:
Policies and opinions
August 2008*

The charge of improving retention and graduation rates is primarily from the state legislature, state level agencies such as THECB, and the UT System. The pressure from these entities will likely increase, not decrease in the coming years.

One example of this current and continuing interest is the charge to the Standing Senate Subcommittee on Higher Education, during the interim session, to review and address several issues related to retention and graduation rates at higher education institutions in the state. These interim charges demonstrate that such issues are not going away. When the legislature reconvenes in January 2009, one of the top agenda items will be the accountability success measures. Another example of the continuing scrutiny is Governor Perry's Executive order RP 67, signed in January 2008, creating a Task Force on Higher Education Incentive Funding.

The following list includes citations for important documents, parts of legislation, and accountability reports currently steering the drive to improve retention and graduation rates nationally, in Texas, and at UTSA. This list is not meant to be all inclusive, but does strive to be representative and current, as of 2008.

The items are presented in reverse chronological order with the most recent appearing first.

Completed August 2008

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National

Title: **Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008** (Higher Education Reauthorization Act, HB 4137 and SB 1642, in particular, section 109)

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-4137>

Date: Passed July 31, 2008, now awaiting the signature of the President

Transparency and accountability are key components to this bill. The new law requires that retention and graduation rates “shall be included as performance measures” for universities, colleges, medical schools, and others. Additionally, the law requires that these rates, along with other accountability measures, be made publicly and readily available “in simple and understandable terms.”

Kristi's take: While the requirement at this time is a reporting criterion, it is reasonable to expect the requirement, similar to previous state laws, may move from simple transparency to accountability with punishments and rewards in the future. The HEA is so closely tied to federal student financial aid that one might reasonably expect for “performance measures” to be linked to student aid availability.

Texas - Legislature

Title: **Senate Research Center Memo, Criteria for a “Tier One” University Ranking**

http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/senate/commit/c535/20080723/SRC_Tier_one_definitions.pdf

Publication Date: July 11, 2008

This memo discusses the criteria for a school to be considered Tier One. It identifies the freshman retention rate and average 6-year graduation rate as part of the criteria for Tier One status. For *US News and World Report* rankings specifically, graduation rates are listed in two separate places as performance measures. Rankings such as *US News and World Report* are mentioned as one way to determine whether or not a school would be considered Tier One.

Kristi's take: Retention and graduation rates play a role in the overall mission of UTSA to become a Tier One school. The need for high(er) retention and graduation rates is imperative if UTSA is to become a Tier One school. Furthermore, this is evidence that entities external to the state (like *US News and World Report*) are paying attention to university retention and graduation rates.

Texas – Coordinating Board

Title: **Frequently Asked Questions: Accountability Success Measures.** Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/senate/commit/c535/20080528/052808_THECB_Accountability_Success_Measures_FAQ.pdf

Publication Date: May 2008 via the State Senate Subcommittee website

The THECB provided this FAQ document to the Texas State Senate to identify and explain accountability success measures used for the THECB Accountability System. The Accountability System measures (1) number of degrees awarded, (2) graduation rate, (3) graduation and persistence rate, and (4) transfer graduation rate. In May 2008, the Standing Senate Subcommittee on Higher Education met to, among other things, “examine different methodologies for assessing the quality of degree and certificate programs at higher education institutions and for measuring student learning outcomes. Review current institutional performance standards and make recommendations that promote academic and financial accountability. Review the method for measuring graduation rates to determine whether alternative measures are more appropriately suited for institutions with a large percentage of non-traditional students” (see: <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/80R/minutes/html/C5352008052813001.HTM>). The legislature will refer to these THECB standards when making decisions about institutions of higher education.

Kristi's take: The theme here is very clear. THECB will evaluate and measure institutions based on ability to graduate students. So far, the call for the inclusion of transfer students in graduation rates has not borne fruit.

UTSA

Title: **UTSA 2016: Strategic Plan 2007-2016**

<http://www.utsa.edu/ir/StrategicPlanning/UTSA%20Strategic%20Plan%202007%20-%202016%20FINAL.pdf>

Publication Year: 2007

Increasing graduation and retention rates play a prominent part in this plan, which will guide UTSA over the next decade. By 2016, UTSA intends to be an internationally recognized, premiere university. This is not possible without increased student persistence and graduation. UTSA also plans to lead the state in achieving the goals outlined in *Closing the Gaps*. Graduation rates are a key indicator of UTSA's progress for *Closing the Gaps*. Furthermore, the charge of this plan is that the goals outlined in UTSA 2016 be integrated into all aspects of university planning and operations.

Kristi's take: UTSA's administration is making a commitment to increasing student persistence and graduation. The institution formally recognizes that for UTSA to be successful, it must retain and graduate more undergraduates. With so much emphasis placed on the importance of this plan, it is reasonable to expect the university to actively pursue meeting the goals and expectations which are listed in this plan. Furthermore, the public attention which this plan has received means there will likely be public attention on whether or not the goals and objectives are met.

UTSA

Title: UT San Antonio 2007 Compact for FY 08-09

Citation: UT System Office of Strategic Management. (2007). UT San Antonio 2007 Compact for FY 08-FY 09. Austin, Texas: UT System Office of Strategic Management.

<http://www.utsystem.edu/osm/compacts/2007/UTSA08-09Compact.pdf>

Publication: 2007

As part of this annual report to the UT System, UTSA's first three performance indicators include first-year persistence rates, 4-year graduation rates, and 6-year graduation rates. Additionally, retention and graduation rates appear as goals under ongoing initiatives and new strategic initiatives. Every Compact since their inception in 2004 has included graduation and retention rates as objectives, priorities and performance indicators.

This is the most recently available Compact as of July 2008.

Kristi's take: UTSA has for many years formally recognized the need for increased retention and graduation rates. The goals outlined in the current, as well as previous, compacts with UT System are ambitious but not impossible. However, meeting these goals will take much effort by the entire campus community.

UT System

Title: The University of Texas System Graduation Rates Initiative Progress Report

Citation: UT System Office of Academic Affairs. (2007). The University of Texas System graduation rates initiative progress reports. Retrieved December 6, 2007, from

<http://www.utsystem.edu/aca/initiatives/gradrates/2007GradRatesProgressReport.pdf>.

Publication Year: 2007

In February 2006, the Board of Regents of the UT System unanimously passed a resolution that made improving graduation rates one of its highest educational priorities. The UT System Graduation Rates Initiative began in 2006, following recommendations made in Nov. 2005 by Vice Chancellor Teresa Sullivan. The UT System initiative defines a range of new "structural, policy, and academic programs to promote timely graduation".

The charge from the Board of Regents is that "all academic institution presidents align institutional policies to maximize their positive impact on graduation rates - policies such as financial aid, academic advising, performance reviews, tuition, course scheduling, campus housing, curriculum, admission, and any other institutional policy that improves graduation rates."

This resolution further requires that each institution report quarterly on steps taken to improve graduation rates.

UT San Antonio has a target 6-year graduation rate of 53% by 2015. The midpoint target rate of 37% by 2010 is listed here. In other locations this midpoint target rate is listed as 40%.

As of August 7, 2008 this is the most recent progress report posted to the UT System website.

Kristi's take: UT System is serious about graduation rates, and will continue to require all system institutions to have plans to improve graduation rates, and to report progress on the efforts. Target rates were determined politically rather than empirically since 53% was the average rate nationally. The rate determined by our OIR after consulting peer and aspirational peer rates was 44% for 2016.

UT System

Title: University of Texas System Board of Regents Accountability and Performance Report: 2007-2008

<http://www.utsystem.edu/osm/accountability/2007/AccountabilityReport07-08.pdf>

Publication: 2007

This 2007 Accountability Report for the entire UT System places renewed emphasis on, and gives high visibility to the high priority of graduation rates. The UT System, and by extension UTSA, has made a commitment to “develop and maintain a focus on student outcomes (p. 65).” “UT San Antonio is working aggressively to improve time to degree and graduation rates through enhanced advising, student success programs, and financial aid (p.147).” The UT System student outcomes model features high persistence and graduation rates as a requirement for a quality institution.

This report covers system trends, strategic priorities, and institution-specific accountability profiles. Performance measures are introduced and explained in this document. Retention and graduation rates are included as a major component of each of these areas.

Also included in this report are goals for retention and graduation rates. Accountability and outcomes are reported (and compared) by gender, ethnicity, student level, and area of study.

“The UT System is now beginning to consider the relationships between, and impact on, student success of investments and initiatives to guarantee financial aid, to improve advising, *to increase graduation rates*, and student outcomes (p. 65).”

Kristi's take: This comprehensive report includes a great deal of information about graduation and retention rates at UTSA, and across the UT System. Comparisons across universities in the UT System are easily accomplished using this report. Unfortunately, UTSA is not keeping up with other institutions within the system, in terms of improved retention and graduation rates. Major state agencies, the legislature, and other organizations use this report to rate and rank institutions.

UT System

Title: **University of Texas System Board of Regents Accountability and Performance Report: 2006-2007**

<http://www.utsystem.edu/osm/accountability/2006/completereport.pdf>

Publication: 2006

This 2006 Accountability Report for the entire UT System places a high priority on graduation rates. This report serves as a response to Executive Order RP 31

(<http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/press/exorders/rp31>) requiring that all public institutions of higher education have a comprehensive reporting system, to include reporting of persistence and graduation rates.

Since 2002, this annual report has included and highlighted graduation rates. For example, performance measures are introduced and explained in this document in terms of retention and graduation rates: “Performance Measures: provide data on activities for which institutions will be held accountable. These measures emphasize outcomes, e.g., graduation rates, but also include some measures of progress, e.g., retention rates, that will help address any trends before they become major problems.”

The UT System also lists retention and graduation as high priorities for the system. “Priorities: Attract, enroll, retain, educate, and graduate students who reflect the socio-cultural and ethnic composition of Texas (p 1)”. Additionally, “The U. T. System must continue its commitment to improve the rates of undergraduate student persistence and graduation (p 97)”.

Compared to other UT System schools, only UT Dallas has made slower progress than UTSA in raising graduation rates since 1994 (p. 33).

Kristi's take: This report is another example of the emphasis on strict accountability required by the state government, THECB, and the UT System. In particular, graduation and persistence rates are being watched by every major bureaucratic organization related to higher education in Texas.

Texas - Legislature

Title: **UT Academic Institutions Reports on Timely Graduation Required by House Bill 1172**

Citation: Cole, J. (2006). UT academic institutions reports on timely graduation required by house bill 1172

Publication Year: 2006

This document briefly reports and summarizes the efforts taken by schools across the UT System to enhance timely graduation across the UT System

Kristi's take: This document reemphasizes how important graduation rates are to the UT System and Texas Legislature.

UT System

Title: **UT System Graduation Rates Initiative**

Author: Sullivan, Teresa

<http://www.utsystem.edu/aca/initiatives/gradrates/SullivanWhitePaper-Nov2005.pdf>

Publication Year: 2005

The UT System emphatically states that raising graduation rates “is not an option, but an imperative if the “Closing the Gaps” program is to be successful.” Access to higher education is not sufficient in itself; students must also be able to graduate. The need for more college graduates in Texas is an economic essential because of Texas’ demographic characteristics. The need for more timely graduation in Texas is a financial fact because “the costs of low graduation rates are borne by everyone”; including students and taxpayers across the state.

Texas is behind the national average in four, five, and six-year graduation rates. UTSA is behind the state average, as well as the average for the UT System institutions. Only UT El Paso has rates lower than UTSA within the UT System.

Sullivan notes that the issues of advising, curriculum, and institutional culture are amenable to interventions which can impact student retention and graduation rates.

Sullivan also provides a “Framework for Intervention” which lists 14 recommended practices for improvement.

Kristi’s take: UT System’s interest in timely graduation is based largely on the economic needs of the state. After 3 years this is still a high priority for the UT System. The legislature will continue to push the UT System, who will in turn push individual schools within the system to focus on increasing graduation rates. UTSA has not yet fully embraced the recommendations made by Vice Chancellor Sullivan. For example, all of the academic advising centers do not currently use the automated degree check program; some directors refuse. Ad Astra, a course scheduling program has been under review by the UTSA Registrar for several years now. However, despite record growth in enrollment (and course demand), the university has still not moved forward, and not made any real improvement to the way courses are scheduled. Many of the 14 recommendations made for improving graduation rates are the same recommendations made by the Graduation Initiative in the UTSA Graduation Improvement Plan.

Texas - Legislature

Title: **HB 1172, 79(R)**

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/BillSummary.aspx?LegSess=79R&Bill=HB1172>

Publication: Effective June 15, 2005

“Relating to policies and measures to promote timely graduation of students from public institutions of higher education.”

This bill requires institutions to report to their governing boards on efforts which:

- ensure that undergraduate students graduate in a timely manner,
- ensure that undergraduate students do not attempt an excessive number of semester credit hours beyond the minimum number required to complete the students' degree programs,
- provide academic counseling concerning timely graduation,
- develop an online student degree progress report which compares the courses taken and credit received by a student to the courses completed and needed for degree and graduation requirements for each academic term, and
- implement tuition policies that encourage timely graduation.

Kristi's take: While this bill simply requires accountability in reporting data in this area, it is prudent to expect a move in the future from accountability to more of a rewards/punishment system related to the implementation of the requirements listed above. In other words, if schools are not doing everything possible to help students graduate sooner, the legislature will take action. At this time, punitive measures have been levied against individual students who engage in activities thought to be counterproductive to timely graduation, such as the limit to 6 withdrawals and the additional charges for repeating courses more than 3 times. However, similar punitive measures have not been levied against institutions as a whole. This is likely in a depressed economy where state governments and bureaucratic agencies feel pressure from the public for more accountability and efficiency.

National

Title: **What it's Worth: Field of Training and Economic Status in 2001**

Citation: Ryan, C. L. (2005). What it's worth: field of training and economic status in 2001. Current Population Reports, 70-98.

Publication Year: 2005

This report from the Census Bureau details the link between education and income. In 2001, the average monthly income of an individual with a bachelor's degree was approximately \$4280, compared to an average of \$2000 for the individual who did not complete high school. For an individual with a professional degree, the average monthly income was \$8000. This is based on the 2000 Census.

Kristi's take: Confirmation from the Census Bureau that a college degree makes a huge difference in one's potential earning power.

Texas - Demography

Title: **Economic Impact Study: A Study of the Economic Impact of The University of Texas System**

Citation: Institute for Economic Development, "Economic Impact Study: A Study of the Economic Impact of The University of Texas System," The University of Texas at San Antonio, March 2005.

www.utsystem.edu/News/2005/EcoImpact-FullReport030905.pdf

Title: A Summary of The Texas Challenge in the Twenty-First Century: Implications of Population Change for Texas

See Chapter 7 & 10

<http://txsdc.utsa.edu/download/pdf/TxChall2002Summary.pdf>

Authors: Murdock, S., White, S., Hoque, M., Pecotte, B., You, X., and Balkan, J.

Publication: 2002

In these reports, Dr. Murdock demonstrates that unless Texas produces more college graduates, the state cannot sustain itself economically. The poverty rate in Texas will increase by 3% and the average household income will decline by at least \$3000 in constant dollars by 2030, if graduation rates across the state remain low (Murdock, 2005). Compared to the national average and other populous states, Texas lags behind in the production of college graduates. Texas is growing rapidly, and is becoming increasingly diversified; institutions of higher education must keep up with this growth.

Texas' investment in higher education is investment in human capital (2005). "There is a consistent positive correlation between the percentage of college graduates within a state and the per capita income for that state (2005, 1)".

"According to the Texas State Data Center 2003 population estimates, of the 1.8 million people living in the San Antonio Region, 52 percent are Hispanic. The UT System institutions support the economic strengths of San Antonio by contributing to the advancement of key industries within the region, including biomedical, military, tourism, and the financial service industries. Many of these industries will require a highly skilled and educated workforce. According to the 2000 US Census, 22 percent of people 25 years and older living in the San Antonio Region have attained at least a bachelor's degree (2005, 25)". To sustain the region economically, the percentage of individuals with bachelor's degrees must increase.

Kristi's take: Education is the key to keeping Texas a viable, sustainable, and competitive state in the U.S. Texas must act quickly and dramatically, so that the need for public services and correctional facilities do not cripple our state.

Texas - Governor

Executive Order RP 31 – January 22, 2004

<http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/press/exorders/rp31>

Publication: 2004

This Executive Order requires a comprehensive accountability reporting system. The order links this accountability, which includes graduation and persistence rates, to state funding. "Systems and institutions of higher education must be able to clearly define the need for additional state-funding in a manner which will justify the public's continued investment of resources."

Kristi's take: The state will consider these accountability measures, including persistence and graduation rates, in funding. In 2007 the Governor attempted to tie incentive funding to those institutions who had improved their graduation rate. This bill was voted down by the legislature.

However, this issue is not disappearing, in January 2008, the Governor established a Task Force on Higher Education Incentive Funding.

Texas - Legislature

Title: **HB 3015 78(R)**

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/text.aspx?LegSess=78R&Bill=HB3015#>

Publication Year: Effective September 1, 2003

When the Regents gained the authority to set designated tuition beginning in 2005, improving graduation rates was the justification for the increased tuition.

“The bill allows the board to set different tuition rates by program and course level to increase graduation rates, encourage efficient use of facilities, or enhance employee performance.” This bill also requires schools to set aside a percentage of designated tuition funds to provide financial assistance to undergraduate students.

The primary argument for this bill was to allow institutions of higher education more flexibility in tuition in order for them to meet the goals of the Closing the Gaps initiative.

Kristi's take: The argument made by the UT System to the legislature was that designated tuition was needed to improve graduation rates. In return, the legislature expects an improvement in graduation rates. Rates have increased at UTSA and across the UT System since 2003.

Texas – Coordinating Board

Title: **Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan**

Citation: The Texas Higher Education Coordination Board. (2000). Closing the gaps. Austin, TX.

<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/ClosingtheGaps/>

Publication Year: 2000

Closing the Gaps originated in April 1999 when “a Coordinating Board Planning Committee was appointed to develop a new higher education plan.” In October 2000 the THECB approved *Closing the Gaps Higher Education Plan*, a plan aimed at closing education gaps in Texas, as well as between Texas and other states. Since that time, “Closing the Gaps” has been a driving force behind the mission, goals, and actions of institutions of higher education in Texas. As part of the Closing the Gaps Higher Education Plan, a performance system was developed in January 2001 which requires that all institutions of higher education set targets for 2005, 2010, and 2015. Additionally, all institutions submit annual progress reports detailing how they are working to accomplish their targets.

According to THECB website (retrieved 3/18/2008 from <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/>), “Meeting those goals (of Closing the Gaps) means a bright future of economic vitality, social independence, and civic engagement for the citizens of Texas. Not meeting those goals means a future of lower household incomes, more stress on social services, and fewer people capable of participating as contributing citizens to our great state.”

THECB also notes that “enrolling more people is not enough – they must graduate, too. Texas will not achieve the results it needs if students do not succeed in their higher education endeavors.”

Texas needs to produce “50% more degree, certificates, and other identifiable student success measures from high quality programs” by 2015 (Goal 2, p. 4). “Only by sharply reversing Texas’ declining enrollment and graduation rates, and building excellence in education and research, can the state compete successfully with other states and nations” (p. 5).

Three of the five Success Strategies for the state include increasing graduation and retention at institutions of higher education in Texas (pp. 12-13).

Kristi’s take: Producing more college graduates in Texas, and in a timely manner, is an economic necessity for our state. The State of Texas and THECB recognize this fact and are pushing very diligently to make it happen. This is where the current push to improve graduation rates began. The Closing the Gaps initiative, specifically graduation from college in a timely manner, will continue to dominate the higher education environment until and beyond 2015.