

UTSA Graduation Improvement Plan

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Prepared by the Graduation Initiative

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Launched in June 2007 through a charge from the Provost, the Graduation Initiative has as its primary mission the identification of means for improving UTSA's undergraduate graduation rate. To this end, Retention and Graduation Analysts "took to the streets" so to speak, conducting extensive research within seven of UTSA's eight colleges, gathering data on barriers to graduation from faculty, staff, and students. The Honors College was omitted from our research, as that college had just begun to offer its own academic program and had, as yet, not produced any undergraduate degrees.

Based on this research, our analysts worked with key members of the colleges to develop a college-specific Graduation Improvement Plan designed to help students be more successful, overcome barriers, and graduate in a timely fashion. The plans, grounded in the academic literature on higher education, and knowledge of an array of successful programs at this and other institutions across the country, were reviewed and accepted by the colleges in the 2008 spring semester. The Retention and Graduation Analysts continue to remain involved with the colleges by assisting with implementation of each college's plan. In addition to this research and planning process, analysts also work directly with students, helping them to overcome individual barriers to six-year graduation through the Late Intervention program.

Following the development of the college-specific plans, we reviewed all of the documented barriers. In conjunction with our research on retention and graduation efforts across the nation, we identified barriers that were: (1) common across multiple colleges, (2) rooted in institutional policies, or (3) could only be addressed at the highest institutional level. This report represents the end result of our research effort. Herein, we make institutional recommendations for improving UTSA's graduation rate, along with specific actions for implementation. Barriers that are unique to a college or can successfully be addressed at the individual college level are not included in this plan. As a separate appendix, we have included all seven college plans.

A Tale of Two Missions

In researching the barriers to graduation within the colleges at UTSA, our analysts found faculty and administrators eager to talk, to comment both on what was going well and to express their concerns with problems they perceived as impediments to student success. The intent of our inquiry was to find what faculty and students felt were the barriers to graduation for undergraduate students in their college. What often developed during the course of the conversations was something related, but unexpected. Many faculty members reported that they felt torn between the university's quest for Tier I Research status and the older mission, which many still consider the university's primary mission, to teach students and help them to acquire bachelor's

degrees. Their concern was that money and faculty resources were being diverted from teaching to support the research quest. As one professor in the College of Business remarked ruefully, “Our ambitions have outstripped our resources.”

There is a similar rift to be perceived within our hierarchical chain of command. The Texas state legislature has said in no uncertain terms that we must “close the gaps” and see to it that more students can access our postsecondary institutions and graduate with a bachelor’s degree. Strong forces are at work behind closing the gaps in support of business and industry within our state. For the legislature, graduation improvement is a priority. Yet, the UT System exercises equally strong forces emphasizing research, grants, and access to special funding through attaining Tier I Research status. This push for research is nationwide, as portrayed at its most cynical by M. Nemko in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article.

Colleges are quick to argue that a college education is more about enlightenment than employment. That may be the biggest deception of all. Often there is a Grand Canyon of difference between the reality and what higher-education institutions, especially research ones, tout in their viewbooks and on their Web sites. Colleges and universities are businesses, and students are a cost item, while research is a profit center.
Marty Nemko, 2008

It is to our credit at UTSA, that we are not yet as jaded as Nemko suggests. Yet, our faculty do feel the tension of the dual missions and it is reflected in their conflicted feelings about the rewards to be found in research and the lack of them for teaching. However, despite the relative lack of status and rewards for teaching at UTSA, there remain faculty who see the transforming power of education and the life-changing effects of the bachelor’s degree as related to their own personal feeling of mission. Where that personal mission is missing, faculty feel caught trying to navigate a strategic path for themselves.

Barriers to Student Success

This report identifies several institutional-level barriers to graduation reported by students, faculty, administrators, and supporting staff. Often, the barriers have their etiology in the conflicting missions. Lack of classroom space is perceived to be

caused by the transformation of classrooms to research space, while at the same time UTSA enrollments continue to grow. New buildings are built for research with few or no classrooms. The undergraduate curriculum is increasingly the province of adjunct faculty and their percentage swells as tenure track faculty are reassigned or choose to pursue research. Due to the twin shortages of space and faculty, our undergraduate students report having difficulty finding the courses they need to graduate. In the Student Perceptions on Barriers to Graduation Study (Johns, 2006), this lack of classes was the number one student concern.

Another major theme in our research was money, or the lack of it. Tuition and fee increases, which have funded the hiring of research stars and the continual upgrading of facilities in the STEM disciplines, have effectively priced some of UTSA’s traditional students and their families out of the higher education market. Since 2002, UTSA students have experienced a 112% increase in their tuition and fees. Those students who persist in coming to us often feel driven to work long hours or mortgage their future through the accumulation of crippling levels of debt. Money, and the trade-offs made between work and studies, appeared in feedback from faculty and students alike. Further, the imposition of new fees to achieve special, non-academic purposes, such as the creation of a football team or to augment transportation services, also serve to increase the debt load and postpone graduation for many students. Even more egregious is the fate of an indebted student who fails to graduate and must repay a student loan from the meager wages of a non-college graduate.

To be fair, all of the barriers to graduation are not to be laid at the doorstep of the mission conflict. For example, it is certainly true that some students come to UTSA academically unprepared for the challenges they will meet or unaware of how to navigate the complexities of college. Also sometimes true is the formula invoked by faculty that students work for the luxuries they think they cannot live without, the cell phone, the i-pod, the payment on a late model truck. This may be the case, although students more often perceive the rising costs of tuition and fees as leading them to work too many hours.

For students able to overcome the financial barriers, additional difficulties exist in obtaining academic advice or even in registering for their classes. A strong, recurring theme from students in all the colleges, as well as from a surprising number of faculty, had to do with the provision of academic advising. Repeatedly, we heard about inaccuracies in advising, difficulties in accessing advising services, and inconsistencies among advisors. Even if a student were not to encounter problems with academic advising, he or she was quite likely to have problems at some point related to the availability of classes to meet degree requirements.

In the face of this grim assessment, what can be done? That is the substance of this report. The colleges are now engaged in removing the specific barriers, discovered or rediscovered, and documented in their own graduation improvement plans. Encouraged by the President and the Provost, the implementation of the plans will be the job of the colleges. Similar barriers were found across some or all of the colleges, along with others that are systemic to UTSA and must be dealt with at a level above that of the individual colleges. These barriers make up the heart of this report. Barriers of this sort are often difficult to remedy, but remove them we must, if UTSA is to remain true to our mission of educating the citizenry and San Antonio and South Texas and to changing lives for the better.

Research Based

As with the college-specific reports, this report relies on an intensive research effort conducted by the Graduation Initiative during the 2007-2008 academic year. We collected both quantitative and qualitative

Stakeholder Contacts	
Faculty	196
Staff	48
Students	1,400

data from a variety of sources. In gathering this data, our Retention and Graduation Analysts worked closely with faculty, staff, and students within each

college, researching strategies for student success and identifying barriers to graduation. We conducted detailed interviews with 196 faculty members (including nearly all department chairs) and 48 administrators or professional staff members. In order to encourage open and frank feedback, interviewees were assured their responses would be held in strict confidence. Over 1,400 students were either surveyed

or contacted directly. Because interviewees were assured confidentiality and the student surveys were anonymous, quotes from these sources appear in this report with only a generic attribution. Finally, the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), Career Services, Testing Services, and Enrollment Services provided quantitative data for trend analysis along with qualitative input relating to barriers that students encounter while attending UTSA.

Helping students to be successful in their academic pursuits, to overcome barriers, is a laudable goal and one that we very much believe in pursuing. However, the Graduation Initiative was not born of such lofty, altruistic goals. Instead, we are in the fortunate position of serving a worthwhile goal because of legislative pressures for demonstrating performance in higher education. We are, in a very real sense, the result of this state's mandate for change. We exist to help raise UTSA's four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates.

Mandate for Change

An array of political forces drives the need for improved graduation rates. Fundamentally, the impetus is economic necessity. Texas needs skilled, well-educated citizens to sustain and grow its economy. If we cannot produce more college graduates, the poverty rate will increase and average household income will drop. This cycle would place an increasing burden on public support services, while at the same time reducing the tax base used to support such services (Murdock, et al., 2002).

Governmental Incentives

In 2000, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) launched *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan* aimed at closing educational gaps within Texas, as well as between Texas and other states. The plan outlined four primary goals: participation, success, excellence, and research. Institutions of higher education in Texas were required to set targets for these goals and report annually on their progress. Further, the THECB recommended that the state, "fund colleges and universities to reward increases in retention and graduation while sustaining quality programs" (THECB, 2000).

Three-years later, in 2003, the legislature passed HB 3015, essentially deregulating tuition for state institutions of higher education. In addition to allowing institutions to set their own tuition, they were charged with improving their graduation rates (HB 3015, 2003). The following year, Governor Rick Perry reinforced the focus on graduation rates by issuing an executive order requiring comprehensive accountability reporting for public institutions of higher education. The order links this accountability, which includes graduation and persistence rates, to state funding, stating that “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” (Executive Order No. RP31, 2004).

These governmental efforts put pressure on universities to improve graduation rates, with the clear implication that not doing so could result in reductions of state funding. Related legislative efforts have applied pressure to students as well. Two recent bills have focused on timely graduation. In addition to its requirements for increased academic counseling,

implementing online degree progress systems, and changes to TEXAS grant program funding, HB 1172, effective in 2005, lowers the cap on the number of courses a student can take in excess of those required to attain a degree. Now, at 30-credit hours (formerly 45-credit hours) beyond that required for the student’s degree, state funding for classes cease. At UTSA, this results in students paying an additional \$121 per semester credit hour for every class taken beyond the 30-credit hour cap. Two years later, in a related effort to encourage timely graduation, the passage of SB 1231 limited to six the number of courses a student may drop during the student’s entire undergraduate higher education career.

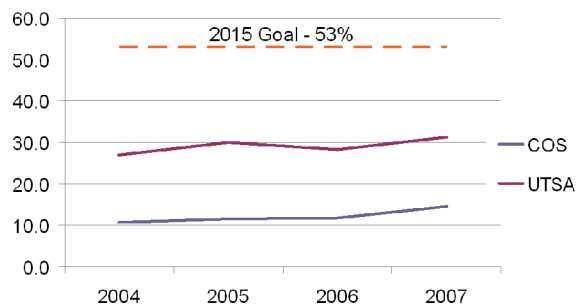
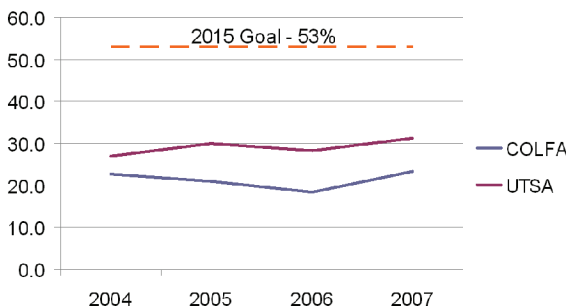
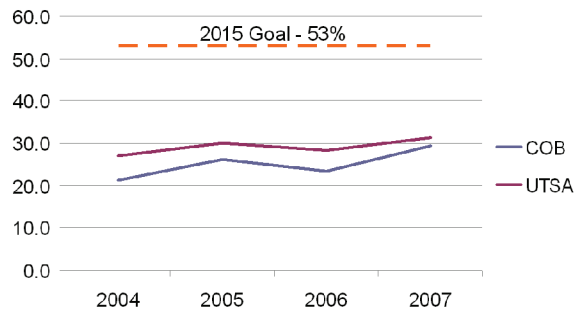
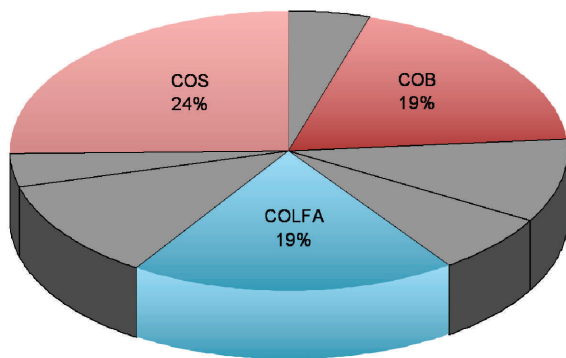
Each of these changes in the state laws governing higher education places additional pressure on universities to increase graduation rates. It is within this environment of increased state scrutiny that we currently find ourselves. The recommendations in this plan are aimed at overcoming institutional barriers to graduation and at helping students reach their goal of a bachelor’s degree in a timely manner, thus increasing UTSA’s six-year graduation rate.

Recent & Targeted
UTSA Graduation Rates

Year	Six-year Graduation Rate
2004	27.1%
2005	30.0%
2006	28.2%
2007	31.3%
2010	37%
2015	53%

Source: UTSA and UT System

2001 Incoming Freshman Distribution and Six-year Graduation Rates for 3 Largest Colleges



Source: UTSA Office of Institutional Research

Graduation Rates

We focus here on the undergraduate, six-year, graduation rate reported to the THECB, not the rate reported to the United States Department of Education which is available in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This is an important distinction, as the reporting methodologies differ for each agency. In calculating the THECB rate, the OIR uses a cohort of full-time students who enter the institution during the fall semester and who have not previously attended another college or university and intending to pursue a degree from UTSA. Students participating in UT Austin's Coordinated Admission Program, are excluded from the cohort, though this exclusion may be dropped in the future, creating a cohort similar to

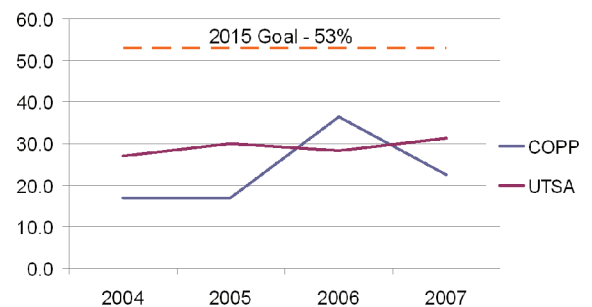
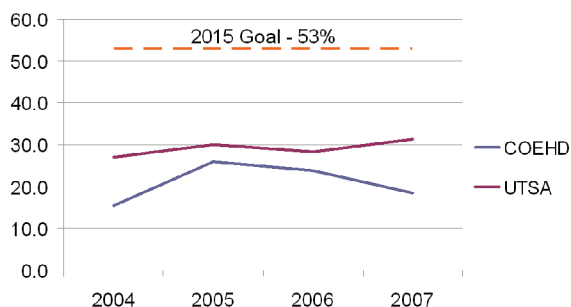
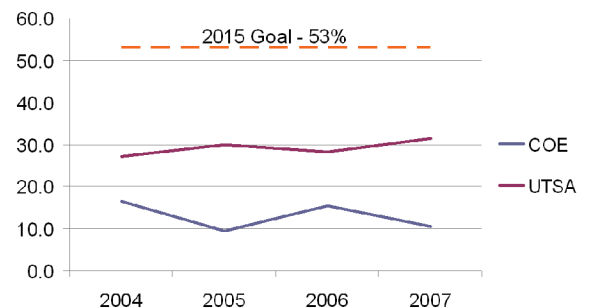
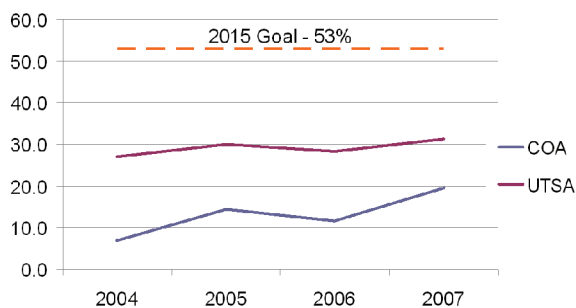
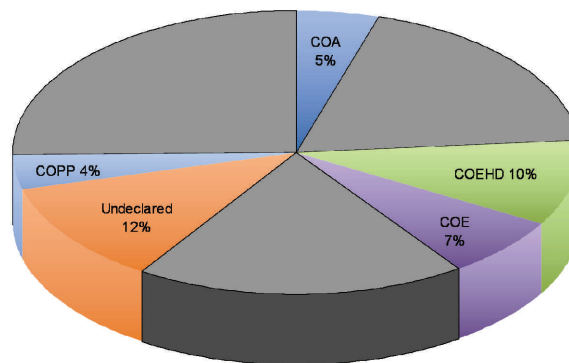
that used in calculating the graduation rate available through IPEDS.

Every October, the OIR reports UTSA's graduation rate for the previous academic year. Our most recent six-year graduation rate was 31.3% (for freshmen entering the institution in the 2001 fall semester). In looking to the future, UTSA is committed to raising its six-year graduation rate to 37% by the year 2010 and to 53% by the year 2015 (UTS, 2008).

A Foundation for Measurement

Several different graduation metrics exist for measuring the individual college's graduation rates. These may take into account students who graduate from the same department or program in which they

2001 Incoming Freshman Distribution and Six-year Graduation Rates for All Other Colleges



Source: UTSA Office of Institutional Research

began or students who started in one college and graduated from any college at UTSA. For purposes of congruence, we will apply the same methodology to the colleges used in calculating the institutional graduation rates—tracking students who graduated from the college into which they matriculated, also known as the “same college” graduation rate. Note that these same college graduation rates fall below the UTSA institutional rate. That is because the UTSA rate includes students who matriculated into one college but graduated from another as well as graduating students who originally entered with no declared major.

The OIR has calculated these six-year graduation rates for our individual colleges. On the previous pages, we’ve illustrated these rates for each of the seven colleges researched, showing the rates for the past four years (representing the four most recent freshman cohorts, 1998 through 2001, for which we have six-year graduation rate data). For comparison purposes, each graph also contains the UTSA institutional graduation rate along with our 2015 goal. Also of interest are the numbers of students in each college’s entering freshman cohort. In reviewing the size differences between the various colleges, it is clear that some colleges have a much greater impact on the overall UTSA graduation rate due to the large number of enrolled students. For example, in 2001, the three largest colleges accounted for 62% of all incoming freshmen.

★Recommendation: Mandate to Colleges While not addressing a specific barrier to graduation, this recommendation forms the establishment of the foundation for measuring an individual college’s efforts at improving student success. Given the widespread acceptance of graduation rates as a measure of institutional performance, we recommend that the Provost adopt the same college graduation rate as a means of evaluating individual college performance, rewarding those colleges showing improvement in their rates. Earlier improvement may be indicated by an increase in one-year retention rates.

Throughout the remainder of this report, we will present a series of institutional barriers to graduation, along with additional recommendations for overcoming those barriers.

Institutional Barriers

So far, we have provided an overview of the problems we face, explained the context in which we operate, and established the need for improving graduation rates. What follows are detailed discussions of and specific recommendations for addressing and overcoming barriers in the following five areas:

- Barrier I: Problems with Academic Advising
- Barrier II: Student Underpreparation
- Barrier III: Course Availability
- Barrier IV: Reliance on Adjunct Faculty
- Barrier V: Cost of Education

Barrier I: Problems with Academic Advising

Gone are the days when a student, armed solely with a course catalog and a schedule of classes, could successfully navigate the undergraduate curriculum to achieve the desired destination of a bachelor’s degree. Now, complex college or departmental admissions requirements, cascading pre-requisites, and 43 separate holds that can block registration present a confusing and often treacherous landscape through which students must find their way. To aid students in their journey, the university offers guides in the form of academic advisors paid for by student fees.

The benefits of good advising can be great, as indicated by the National Survey of Student Engagement, (NSSE) which states that more frequent advisor contacts result in greater student engagement and, “...greater self-reported gains in personal and social development, practical competence, and general education” (NSSE, 2007). To this end, academic advising at UTSA touches all students at least three times during their career as undergraduates (during orientation and then twice more when students reach 45- and 90-credit hours), with some students having many more interactions than that before they reach graduation.

Such large numbers of students interacting with academic advisors make it imperative that advising be effective and efficient in performing its role. Further, students, depending on their major, pay \$80 to \$102 per semester in advising fees and have the right to expect good service.

Sadly, feedback from both students and faculty indicates a high level of frustration with advising at UTSA. Stakeholders in every college expressed concern about academic advising. While a service this extensive can be expected to generate some negative feedback, if for no other reason than the sheer volume of students accessing the service, both the frequency and the consistency of concerns indicate deeper, more systemic problems than can be attributed simply to disgruntled students.

Dissatisfaction

The NSSE survey measures, among other things, student satisfaction with their advising experience. The latest published survey results show that among all UT System component universities, UTSA ranked lowest for first-year students reporting satisfaction with advising (62%) and second to the bottom among seniors with 61% (UTS, 2008). These results also fall well below the national averages of 76% and 69% satisfaction respectively (NSSE, 2007). UTSA's Graduating Senior Survey (Wilkerson, 2008) along with the Student Perceptions on Barriers to Graduation Study (Johns, 2006), corroborate these findings, showing a high level of dissatisfaction with advising services.

Undergraduates per FTE Advisor		
	# FTE Advisors	Students per FTE Advisor
UTA	41.0	459
Austin	138.4	271
UTB	27.5	593
UTD	38	258
UTEP	31.5	541
UTPA	28.0	542
UTPB	3.7	830
UTSA	80.2	312
UTT	11.4	471
Avg.	44.4	370

Source: UT System

and its 80.2 FTE advisors, has a student to advisor ratio of 312:1, well below the 370:1 average for the entire system (UTS, 2008). Furthermore, the UTSA ratio comes close to the 300:1 ratio suggested by NACADA (Habley,

2004). Following the publication of these statistics by the UT System, even more advisors have been hired at UTSA. Clearly, lack of advising personnel is not a valid excuse for poor performance.

From our research within the colleges, we found that concerns about academic advising clustered around three areas: (1) inaccurate advice, (2) access and availability problems, and (3) lack of consistency with or among advisors.

Inaccurate Advice

Faculty across the colleges commented frequently on what they considered advising inaccuracies or misinterpretation of the curriculum. For many, the perception was that academic advisors were minimally familiar with a specific department's curriculum or that advisors were not able to explain to the student the rationale behind the curricular requirements. Several department chairs said they felt that there was little communication between themselves and the advisors, with one chair commenting, "I have gone down there to tell them what they should be doing and they agree and then things go back just the way they were." Students too expressed concern about inaccuracy in advice received from academic advisors with a common complaint being that students were advised to take the wrong classes.

Access and Availability

The second concern, primarily one expressed by students, had to do with access to advising services. In many cases, this manifested as complaints about the delay in being able to see an advisor, with appointments often needing to be booked weeks in advance. In other cases, students complained that while walk-in services may be available, they were often limited, offered infrequently, or only offered at inconvenient times. At least one advising center has eliminated walk-in advising altogether. The most recent results of the UTSA Graduating Senior Survey show little more than half (56.8%) of students agreeing that advising services were accessible and available at the times needed (Wilkerson, 2008).

Lack of Consistency

One possible reason for the first concern, inaccurate advising, could be the turnover occurring among academic advisors leading to a perceived lack of consistency within a single advising center and

between different centers. For students, concerns about consistency centered on not having their “own” advisor, frequently having to talk with several different individuals, and receiving different (sometimes conflicting) advice in the process. Faculty view the problem from a slightly different perspective, one more related to relationship management and a concern of losing an advisor who had become familiar with their academic department, whether through attrition or frequent assignment changes.

Unworkable Structure

Such concerns are lamentable, but perhaps not unexpected, with an academic advising structure referred to as “unique (if not puzzling)” in a 2005 report by the NACADA Consultant Bureau, commissioned by UTSA to conduct a review of academic advising at the university (Grites, King, & McCauley, 2005). Here, the NACADA consultants were referring to the division of responsibility for the advising centers. As currently configured, the college undergraduate advising center directors report directly to, and are evaluated by, Associate Deans in that center’s respective college. However, the overall academic advising process is the responsibility of the Vice-Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies. This creates oversight and implementation problems in that the Vice-Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies has the responsibility (through the Executive Director of Advising) for setting advising policy, but does not have the authority to directly enforce that policy, since the directors of the advising centers report to Associate Deans outside of Undergraduate Studies.

Furthermore, students, depending on their specific circumstance, may receive advice from upwards of seven different advising organizations: Colleges’ Freshman Advising Center (CFAC), Tomás Rivera Center for Student Success (TRC), the academic advising center for the college of their major, Intercollegiate Athletics, Honors College advising, University Health Professions Office, and Teacher Certification. With so many different, separately managed and supervised organizations providing academic advice to undergraduates, the potential for confusion and misunderstanding escalates.

The convoluted, confusing, and “puzzling” structure of advising at UTSA hinders students’

progress towards their degrees as much as the individual efforts of the university’s academic advisors might help those same students in achieving their goals. While the findings of the aforementioned NACADA review identified several areas for change or improvement, they were necessarily rooted within the discipline of academic advising itself. As a result, the NACADA consultants may have had insufficient distance from the advising process to objectively identify problems with the entire advising system.

★Recommendation: Advising Study Commission a high-level, systems analysis of the entire UTSA academic advising process by a consulting organization with experience in conducting systems analyses of higher education processes. The organization selected should not be affiliated with academic advising, so as to ensure objectivity freed of theoretical biases. The Provost himself should oversee implementation of the findings, since the divided nature of management responsibility would make distributed implementation difficult.

Barrier II: Student Underpreparation

Consistently, as with academic advising, faculty from across the colleges commented directly on the skill level of students, repeatedly citing lack of academic preparation for college level work as a problem. Beyond the academic sphere, we find that students can have difficulty adapting quickly to the expectations of college. Faculty consensus indicated that many students experienced both these problems.

Academic Preparation

While often considered an open access university, recent test scores and acceptance rates of incoming freshmen show that UTSA is becoming progressively more selective in admissions. The UTSA Fact Book for Fall 2007 shows that non-provisionally admitted cohort students entering in fall 2007 had a mean SAT composite score of 1014, more than 15-points higher than the mean four years earlier. Over the same time frame, the mean ACT composite score went from 20 to 21, an even greater percentage increase than with the SAT score. Both test scores place UTSA firmly in the “Traditional” rank for admissions, two ranks higher than “Open” on the ACT, Incorporated scale of admission selectivity (ACT, 2003).

Admissions Selectivity Levels

Level	Typical SAT Score	Typical ACT Score
Highly Selective	1220-1380	27-31
Selective	1030-1220	22-27
Traditional	950-1070	20-23
Liberal	870-990	18-21
Open	830-950	17-20

Source: ACT, Inc.

As the SAT and ACT scores of incoming freshmen have increased, acceptance rates of students who apply for admission to UTSA have decreased. From 2003 through 2005, UTSA accepted over 99% of first time undergraduate applicants. Fall 2006 and fall 2007 showed decreases in these rates to 91% and 93% respectively.

Even with this increase in selectivity, we still have significant numbers of students truly unable to function at the college level in one or more areas. Currently, 25-30% of our incoming freshmen require remediation in reading, writing or mathematics, with mathematics accounting for over 70% of those remediation needs.

Higher admissions standards going into effect in fall 2008 will likely result in even lower acceptance rates. Through enrollment management, we continue to fine-tune our admissions standards in an attempt to find the level that will allow UTSA to preserve access for underserved students while admitting only students with good prospects for success. It is, and will remain, a delicate balance.

In the long run, increasing admissions standards will likely lead to higher graduation rates by focusing admissions on better prepared students. However, these changes will not begin to effect the six-year graduation rates until 2014 – one year before our target for achieving a 53% graduation rate. While we should continue to use outcomes of current students to project the best level for admission standards, other, more immediate, actions are required to help the students currently enrolled to overcome barriers of poor academic preparation.

Academic support can help students struggling against preparation deficits. UTSA has a very strong suite of academic support services with proven track records for helping students to overcome academic

deficiencies and persist to graduation. Expanding these services would directly benefit students, improving retention and, ultimately, increasing graduation rates. Unfortunately, most of our academic support programs have reached maximum capacity, due to insufficient space on campus. Among all the UT System components in 2007, UTSA has the least amount of assignable space, with only 64 square-feet per FTE student. This is significantly below our UT peer institutions of Arlington, Dallas, and El Paso with 89, 106, and 93 square-feet per FTE student respectively. As is the case with all UT System universities, we have seen a reduction in assignable space from 2003 to 2007 (UTS, 2008). While not unique to academic support programs on campus, we must address the space constraints so that we can allocate sufficient instructional space to meet student demand for these programs.

★Recommendation: Space for Academic Support Programs: Support the provision of appropriate space resources for those academic support programs which have been proven effective (such as Supplemental Instruction).

College Literacy

Beyond academic skills, there exists a set of behavioral skills that, when lacking, presents barriers to student success. These skills, which we'll collectively refer to as "college literacy," include such items as how to navigate the college bureaucracy, appropriate classroom behavior, negotiating successfully with authority figures such as professors or work supervisors, and making use of available university resources. Both faculty and staff identified the lack of these skills as a problem for students. Even though students themselves did not directly identify college literacy as a barrier, items on surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 of student-identified barriers to graduation included concerns such as: conflicting priorities, study habits, campus issues, degree requirements, professors, and policies. Each of these can be attributed to a lack of college literacy.

The impact of this knowledge gap occurs early in students' college experience, often manifesting within the first weeks of classes. Especially hard hit are low-income students for whom "the 'open door' to American higher education has become a revolving door" (Tinto, 2008). Tinto goes on to recommend

basic skills learning communities as a means for overcoming this knowledge gap.

The freshman seminar component of UTSA's Learning Communities program, currently enrolling some 1,200 students, teaches these students how to navigate and manage the college experience. In addition, the seminar's small class size not only helps to increase student engagement, but also affords the seminar instructor increased opportunity for early identification and intervention of at-risk behaviors. Behaviors such as poor attendance, poor test performance, and lack of class participation are strong predictors of future student academic failure and, if uncorrected, can result in lower retention rates.

UTSA can further enhance the college literacy of incoming students by producing a series of online, multimedia modules designed to familiarize students with college. This has been successful at other institutions with an excellent example provided by the University of Louisville Student Tutorial Online Module Program, or STOMP (2007). Students could complete these modules prior to attending their summer freshman orientation. By offering students this information-rich experience in a manner allowing for self-paced viewing, we can scale back the content of freshman orientation, focusing solely on the social and class registration portions. As an added benefit, the online materials provide a ready reference for future questions.

★Recommendation: Space for Additional Freshman Seminars Currently, we can offer no additional freshman seminars, due to the lack of instructional space. Increase the space available for small class instruction allowing additional freshmen seminar sections to be offered. This can be accomplished by reallocating existing space or by the installation of temporary classroom buildings.

★Recommendation: Create Online Guide Commission and fund a comprehensive, professionally produced, online guide to the UTSA experience. Make completion of the online materials, including passing comprehension tests on the material, a requirement for summer orientation registration.

III: Course Availability

Students need to take classes to graduate. It's a simple truism, but one fraught with difficulties for many students and presenting complex problems to university leadership. The most frequently identified barrier in UTSA's Student Perceptions on Barriers to Graduation Study was "course offerings/availability" cited by 49% of respondents (Johns, 2006). Conversely, the problem students see as a lack of course availability is often viewed by faculty and department chairs as the result of two situations – lack of available instructors and lack of classroom space.

Infrequent Course Offerings

Feedback from students shows a high level of frustration with the lack of available classes. While some faculty and department chairs attribute this to students' desire for greater convenience in scheduling (such as only wanting classes Tuesdays and Thursdays at 11:00am), comments from students suggest otherwise. Frequently, students identify not just too few courses, but the infrequent offerings of courses as well. This stacking of prerequisites and limited number or frequency of available classes may contribute to the "swirling senior syndrome" where an increasing number of senior-level students persist, yet do not graduate.

...not enough classes being offered for specific courses in a major. Even if you finish a prerequisite, you have to wait a whole year to take the class you need. That class may also be a prerequisite for other upper division courses offered once a year.
*UTSA student
2006 Barriers Study*

Faculty & Space

Many of the colleges work very hard to offer sufficient course sections to meet student needs but often find it a struggle to do so. All of the available metrics indicate that we do not have the necessary faculty to meet the academic course needs of a 28,000+ student campus – a problem further exacerbated by faculty attrition. In the 2006-2007 academic year, the 58 new faculty hires were almost negated by the fact that 50 had left the university that same year. This resulted in a net increase of 8 faculty to keep up with the increasing growth in enrollment. Compared to our 16 peer institutions, UTSA's student to faculty ratio of 24:1 is the second highest, exceeded only by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee at 30:1 (UTS, 2008).

A shortage of instructional faculty does not represent the sole reason for insufficient course offerings. As mentioned previously with academic support programs, the increasing shortage in classroom space is also at work here. From 2003 to 2007, the number of available classrooms at UTSA decreased from 155 to 142. At the same time, enrollment surged from 24,665 to 28,533. In fall 2007, UTSA's classrooms averaged 43.8 weekly hours of use. This was not only the highest of any UT System university but significantly exceeded the state average of 31-hours (UTS 2008).

UT Components Classroom Average Weekly Hours of Use in 2007

	# of Class-rooms	Avg Weekly Hours
UTA	185	30.3
Austin	442	38.1
UTB	74	37.2
UTD	93	35.1
UTEP	126	34.8
UTPA	136	36.5
UTPB	33	33.7
UTSA	142	43.8
UTT	56	33.6
State Avg.	-	31.0

Source: UT System

Lack of available classrooms has forced those scheduling classes to be creative in finding and using unlikely space. As a result, dormitory and other non-classroom spaces have been pressed into service for instructional purposes. Even with this imaginative use of space, we're still not providing our students with sufficient numbers of classes to graduate in a timely manner. Students need more course sections offered at more varied times during the day. While there may be no new classroom construction scheduled, there are several steps that can be taken to address this issue.

★Recommendation: Provide Space for Classes Erect temporary, modular buildings to provide additional classroom space. Modular buildings are reasonably priced and can be purchased or leased to fill current needs until additional, permanent classrooms can be built. Aesthetic objections should not override the provision of needed classroom space for our students to get the courses they need to graduate.

★Recommendation: Change Class Scheduling Implement an alternative class scheduling model. Both faculty and students prefer the two-day-a-week class schedules. Rather than only offering this class schedule once per week on Tuesdays and Thursdays,

change the scheduling of classes so as to offer two-day-a-week classes in three separate tracks: (1) Mondays and Wednesdays, (2) Tuesdays and Thursdays, and (3) Fridays and Saturdays. This will allow for scheduling of more classes by taking advantage of underutilized Fridays and Saturdays.

★Recommendation: Leverage Online Resources

Increase the use of online and hybrid courses to reduce physical seat requirements and provide students access to needed courses on a 24-hour basis. Significant financial and personnel resources must be allocated to support the development of on-line courses, staff the Distance Learning and Academic Technology office, and train faculty, staff, and students on the availability and applicability of online courses and other alternatives such as CLEP tests.

IV: Reliance on Adjunct Faculty

Increasingly, UTSA is relying on adjunct faculty to teach our undergraduates and present our curriculum. Between 2003 and 2007, the percentage of lower division semester credit hours (SCH) at UTSA taught by these adjunct faculty has increased from just over 56% to 73% (UTSA, 2007). In some colleges, the percentage of lower division SCH taught by adjuncts exceeds 90% (UTSA, 2008b). These percentages do not take into account the developmental courses, all of which are taught by adjunct faculty.

Percent of Lower Division SCH Taught by Adjuncts

Year	Adjunct Taught
2003	56.2%
2004	60.7%
2005	65.7%
2006	68.8%
2007	73.0%

Source: UTSA Fact Book

Primarily, we are concerned with part-time adjunct employment. Because part-time instructors often cobble together a career based on appointments at numerous institutions or work full-time within their field, they tend to be less available to students, know little or nothing about campus resources and procedures, and develop little connection or loyalty to the institution. Perhaps as a result of these characteristics, student retention rates, especially among freshmen, decrease the more large gateway

classes they attend which are taught by part-time instructors (Glenn, 2007).

With adjunct faculty providing the majority of an undergraduate's instruction, there clearly exists a need for these instructors to be well trained in both pedagogical methods as well as knowledge of the university and its curriculum. This is emphasized by Derek Bok, President Emeritus of Harvard, who stresses the importance of ensuring that adjunct faculty be properly trained in order for the university to attain its educational goals (Bok, 2006).

It may be possible to achieve an important educational goal without the participation of regular professors, but it is folly to count on such success without making sure that the necessary courses will be competently taught.

Derek Bok, 2006

Repeatedly, we heard concern from both faculty and administrators in the colleges about lack of adjunct training.

Similarly, students expressed their concerns that adjunct faculty were rarely available to meet with them and cannot help them locate resources or solve problems because the adjuncts themselves do not know the campus well. Since UTSA will likely continue to rely on adjunct faculty to provide instruction to undergraduates, we must strive to improve the knowledge and skills of these faculty members.

★Recommendation: Make Adjuncts Full-time Offer full-time appointments to our best adjunct faculty. In cases where this is not feasible, consider assigning part-time faculty to smaller, upper-division courses and not to large, gateway courses.

★Recommendation: Orient and Train Adjuncts Task the Teaching Excellence, Advancement, and Mentoring Center with the orientation, training and support of adjunct faculty members, to ensure that these instructors have the pedagogical training necessary for instruction along with knowledge of the university and its resources.

V: Cost of Education

The rising cost of education and the impact of these costs on when (and if) our students graduate form the final barrier we'll consider in this report. We found this barrier to encompass a constellation of causes,

effects and perspectives. First, UTSA students are more likely than their national counterparts to work off campus and to work earlier in their academic career. Second, the conflicting demands between the workplace and academic responsibilities are seen by both faculty and students as a factor in poor academic performance and progress. Students reported these conflicts as the second most frequent barrier in the Student Perceptions on Barriers to Graduation Study (Johns, 2006). Even the first most commonly reported barrier, that of course availability, is likely related to the restrictions that work hours place on class scheduling.

Why do our students work long hours?

But why do students feel they must work and work long hours? The answer to this question divides faculty from student responses. Many faculty, though not all, believe that our students work primarily to maintain their lifestyle. Anecdotes are presented about students in expensive clothing and carrying high-end electronics who report to faculty that they must work excessive hours to stay in college. Such students, faculty say, miss classes, assignments and tests and fail to participate in discussions and group assignments. Thus, faculty conclude that student priorities are skewed to favor lifestyle over college.

Money, money, money... financial aid is available, but who wants to owe the government thousands of dollars? Why does tuition increase every year? Why do books cost so much? This intimidates people from going to school. Make school more affordable and students won't have to worry about working so much and can concentrate on school. This equals a higher graduation rate.

*UTSA student
2006 Barriers Study*

Students on the other hand are far more likely to cite the rising costs of tuition and fees as the reason they must work too many hours, to avoid falling into debt or dropping out for whole semesters.

Students are not wrong in their perceptions of rising costs and they certainly are more keenly aware of these increases than faculty seem to be. From fall of 2002 to fall of 2007, the cost of attendance at UTSA has risen 112% (THECB, n.d.). A recently published letter from a regent to the *Houston Chronicle* negating the impact of tuition increases contained several

problematic assumptions (a full analysis of the letter's premises is available upon request).

The always increasing cost of tuition...as it forces some to have to work more (or take out more loans); therefore, not allowing as much time for studies and in some cases some classes would be dropped.
*UTSA student
 2006 Barriers Study*

When UTSA students do rely on financial aid, they are more likely than students at other UT System components to be given loans, rather than institutional grants, to supplement their federal Pell Grant.

Student borrowing and tuition increases

Nationally, students entering their fourth or fifth year at a public, four-year institution borrowed a total of \$15,500 in federal Stafford loans in 2003-04, about \$4,500 more than their predecessors borrowed in 1995-96 and \$1,200 more than students borrowed in 1999-2000. Three-quarters of students offered loans accepted the total amount of subsidized and unsubsidized loans offered (Wei & Berkner, 2008). Of course, federal Stafford loans offer only a partial picture of total student debt, since students can also borrow from private and state sources along with federal sources other than Stafford loans. Data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey indicates that the total education loan debt increased 116% to \$17,250 between 1993 and 2004. Adjusting these totals for inflation still left a 65% increase in the debt of graduating seniors. The highest fourth of graduating students in public institutions carried \$22,822 in student loans in 2004. The highest tenth owed at least \$32,994 (Project on Student Debt, n.d.).

This increase in student debt due to federal loans corresponds directly with an increase in the national cost of tuition at public institutions, an increase of 40% from 2000 to 2005, *after adjusting for inflation* (Baum & Ma, 2005). This belies the common misperception of faculty at UTSA that students either work more or take on more debt to accommodate their lavish lifestyles. It would appear that students are both working more and taking on more debt to cover the cost of increasing tuition at public universities.

It is important to note that, nationally, borrowing for education has remained relatively steady among students from low income families but borrowing has

risen substantially for students from lower middle, middle, and higher income families. In fact, a larger percentage of students from lower middle income families (39%) than from lower income families (36%) took out student loans in the 2003-2004 academic year (Wei & Berkner, 2008).

About two-thirds of UTSA students graduate with student loan debt. In 2007, students at UTSA graduated with an average of \$18,051 in student loan debt, an increase of 6.9% from the previous year (Project on Student Debt, n.d.; UTSA, 2008a). Once again, these figures do not cover private loans or credit card debt. During the same year, tuition and fees jumped 7.7% from the year before (THECB, n.d.). The table shows the statewide average tuition and fees compared to tuition and fees at UTSA from 2002, prior to tuition deregulation, through 2007. Tuition and fees have more than doubled at UTSA (112%) since 2002 at the same time that average

**Tuition and Fees per Semester (2002-2007)
 for Texas Public Universities and UTSA**

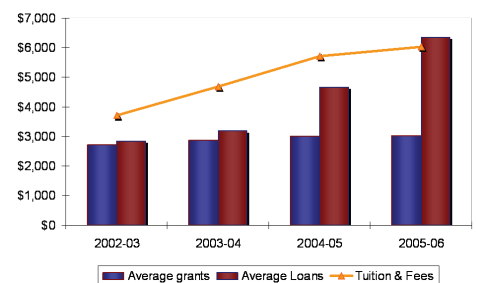
Year	Statewide	Increase from previous year	UTSA	Increase from previous year
2002	\$1,658		\$1,703	
2003	\$1,934	16.65%	\$2,222	30.48%
2004	\$2,284	18.10%	\$2,849	28.22%
2005	\$2,464	7.88%	\$2,985	4.77%
2006	\$2,713	10.10%	\$3,362	12.63%
2007	\$2,951	8.77%	\$3,621	7.70%

Source: THECB

tuition and fees for the state have increased by 79% (THECB, n.d.).

The chart displays the average federal loans and grants accepted by first time, full-time freshmen at UTSA along with tuition and fees for the year the students entered. For instance, freshmen entering in the fall of 2002 could expect to pay about

**First-time, Full-time Students
 Federal Financial Aid and Tuition and Fees**



Source: NCES

\$3,702 in tuition and fees for both fall and spring combined (THECB, n.d.). In the 2002-2003 academic year, 57% of first time, full-time freshmen received federal student loans with an average loan amount of \$2,843. In the same year, 43% of these students received federal grant aid with an average award of \$2,710 (Wei & Berkner, 2008).

Three years later, freshmen entering UTSA in the fall semester of 2005 could expect to pay \$6,016 for both fall 2005 and spring 2006 (THECB, n.d.). In contrast to entering students in 2002, 52% of students entering for the first time in fall 2005 received federal student loan aid at an average award of \$6,345. Less than one-third of entering first time, full-time students received federal grant aid with an average award of \$3,019.

In other words, by the 2005-2006 academic year, tuition and fees had increased 62.5% from tuition and fees in 2002-2003 but federal grant awards increased only 11%, with a lower proportion of cohort students receiving grants (THECB, n.d.). In the meantime, the average loan taken out by first time, full-time students for one year in 2005-2006 increased 123%.

★Recommendation: Freeze Tuition and Fees Freeze tuition and fees at the current rates. Guarantee that any student referendums for fees or fee increases be approved by a majority of the student body, rather than a majority of students actually voting.

★Recommendation: Increase Work Study Positions Support increases in the number of work study positions, since on-campus work aids rather than delays or hinders graduation.

★Recommendation: Support Student Money Matters Support the functions of the soon-to-be Office of Student Money Matters, within the Graduation Initiative. Modeled on national services, this educational program, located in a neutral venue, will help students to make reasoned choices in managing their time and money resources, so as to graduate in a timely manner.

Conclusion

UTSA will be under ever-greater legislative and financial pressure to increase our six-year graduation rates. Our current annual increments in the six-year graduation rate are not sufficient to meet our long-term goal

of 53% by 2015. Decisive positive changes must be made and made quickly. No simple strategy—such as increasing admission standards—will take us to that point. Instead, a comprehensive, focused, and dedicated effort is required to achieve that goal.

This report sets the stage for making that effort by identifying five institutional barriers that place significant limits on our ability to graduate students in a timely manner. Each of these barriers can be overcome, if UTSA commits itself to making the required changes. In that spirit, this report makes specific policy recommendations for surmounting each barrier. Each policy recommendation identifies high-impact actions that can be taken by UTSA to improve its graduation rate.

Given the magnitude of the task before us, it would be unwise simply to call for further study of the problem. Numerous on-campus reports over the past five-years, reflecting a continuing consensus among students, faculty, and administrators, have previously documented these issues. What is required instead is the setting of action priorities, the commitment of necessary resources, and the monitoring of implementation efforts. Anything less than an immediate, concerted effort is a disservice to our students, the University, and the community.

Contributors

In addition to the data sources described earlier, the following individual members of the Graduation Initiative provided analysis and support in the preparation of this report:

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