



Strategies for California? Texas university helps students cross finish line

**LATINOS AND BLACKS LEAD THE WAY
AT DIVERSE SAN ANTONIO INSTITUTION**

BY LARRY GORDON

The University of Texas at San Antonio's graduation rates were in the deep basement a decade ago. Only 1 in 10 students finished in four years and just 3 in 10 in six years.

But things have dramatically improved since then at the majority-Latino school, whose main campus is located 15 miles north of downtown's tourist attractions. Not only are more students graduating faster but, in a reversal from national patterns, Black and Latino students are doing better than other groups at UTSA.

Experts say the university's progress so far could provide insights for public colleges in California and around the country on similar campaigns.

While UTSA still has a long way to go to boost overall graduation rates, its improvement since 2010, "is very impressive," according to Charles Ansell, vice president for research, policy and advocacy at Complete College America, a nonprofit that works to increase college graduation rates and close gaps among ethnic and income groups. It is especially significant at a school where nearly half of undergraduates are in the first generation of their families to attend college and many are low-income, he said. About 58% of UTSA's 35,000 students are Latino, mainly Mexican Americans from the south Texas region.

Federal statistics show that UTSA has more than tripled its overall four-year rate for incoming freshmen to 25% in 2020, and pushed its six-year rate to about 46%. Those are still not stellar and remain significantly below national averages at public universities (62% for six years). But the overall change is notable, as is the fact that Latino and Black students have a higher



The campus seal.

rate of graduating in six years than whites and Asians, who nationwide usually do better.

After a challenging path, Ethan Guerrero graduated from UTSA in December as a psychology major on the pre-med track in 4.5 years. Since he worked many hours at off-campus jobs, he often took reduced course loads in fall and spring but made it up with summer classes. He couch-surfed for several semesters because of financial problems and occasionally took snacks and toiletries from the free campus pantry, he said.

Guerrero, who identifies as Hispanic, said the sense of community at a school where Hispanics are in the majority was a plus for him. "You see others of your same ethnicity succeeding and doing well at school. That keeps you motivated. You see you are not alone," he said.

The University of Texas at San Antonio graduation rate



Over the past few years, UTSA has started or expanded a variety of programs to encourage students to stay enrolled, succeed in classes and get to timely graduation. However, there is no silver bullet and no single explanation for improvements, officials emphasize.

Those changes include centralizing academic counseling; bolstering tutoring, especially in math; getting all freshmen into introductory courses that explore their majors and matching them with older students as mentors. A special team tracks grades and attendance data closely and contacts floundering students. Students get a clear plan for what classes they need in their major. Academic departments have sometimes added sections of required classes in high demand at convenient times and, if needed, revamped courses with high failure rates.

Other universities, including many state campuses in California, are trying similar strategies with varying results.

A PUSH OVER THE FINISH LINE

In 2018 UTSA began a more unusual service — “a graduation help desk” — that aids students who are close to finishing but face an obstacle that seems insurmountable to them: That could be required courses unavailable at that moment, a financial emergency or personal issues. Officials estimate that nearly 2,000 students have been pushed across the finish line as a result, saving \$3.2 million in extra tuition and costs.

Matt Keneson, who oversees the desk, said that sometimes means getting academic departments to accept a substitute but similar course to fulfill a graduation requirement or finding online classes at other colleges to fill in.

If the final classes can be taken in the summer immediately after the graduation ceremony, that student’s degree still counts toward finishing the same year in national statistics. The expansion of online courses at UTSA and elsewhere “has been extremely helpful,” he said.

Campus officials are on the lookout for shortages of courses in demand, especially required courses.

Departments and faculty are encouraged to add sections where possible and expand class enrollments a bit to accommodate waiting lists.

The graduation help desk came to the rescue last year for Nick Robinson, who faced a scary financial emergency as graduation approached. Robinson, who transferred from a community college, took extra time at UTSA after switching from biology to an environmental science major and stretched beyond the credit limit for financial aid. He also faced a substantial tuition surcharge for having taken too many credits altogether and violating a state policy. An academic adviser helped get the fine waived, and Keneson helped Robinson obtain extra financial aid so he could finish his final semester last spring. “I wouldn’t have graduated when I did or not at all if the graduation desk hadn’t been there,” Robinson said.

SHARING WITH COLLEGES

While UTSA’s overall graduation numbers still could use much improvement, the successes so far, especially among racial and ethnic groups, have garnered national interest. UTSA’s Black students earned the highest six-year graduation rate, 54%; followed by Latinos at 47%; whites, 44%; and Asians, 41%.

More in line with national patterns, the California State University system, for example, shows gaps averaged across its 23 campuses: 72% of white and Asian freshmen graduated in six years compared with 58% of Latino students and 49% of Black students. CSU reports that several of its campuses are getting close to erasing such differences.

That UTSA appears to have no graduation equity gaps “is absolutely notable,” suggested Jinann Bitar, director of higher education research and data analytics at the Education Trust, a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps for minority and low-income students. Bitar said the school seems to have administered reforms well, made good use of technology and student data, and provided “a culture of care” with coaching and tutoring.

Officials insist UTSA is not boosting graduation rates by changing admissions standards or enrolling much-better-prepared high school students. It remains

easy to get in: About 90% of applicants are accepted. “We are not interested in raising our selectivity. We are interested in broadening the success of our students and broadening the opportunities to high-wage jobs,” Provost Kimberly Espy said.

The university encourages students to take enough credits to finish in four years and is offering more summer school classes to facilitate that. But UTSA also recognizes that six years may better fit the many students of nontraditional age and those who work full-time jobs, Espy said. “In my mind, the six-year rate is so much more akin to the life stories of our students. We want to support their success and don’t want to have barriers get in their ways.”

The University of Texas at San Antonio six-year graduation rate by racial/ethnic groups

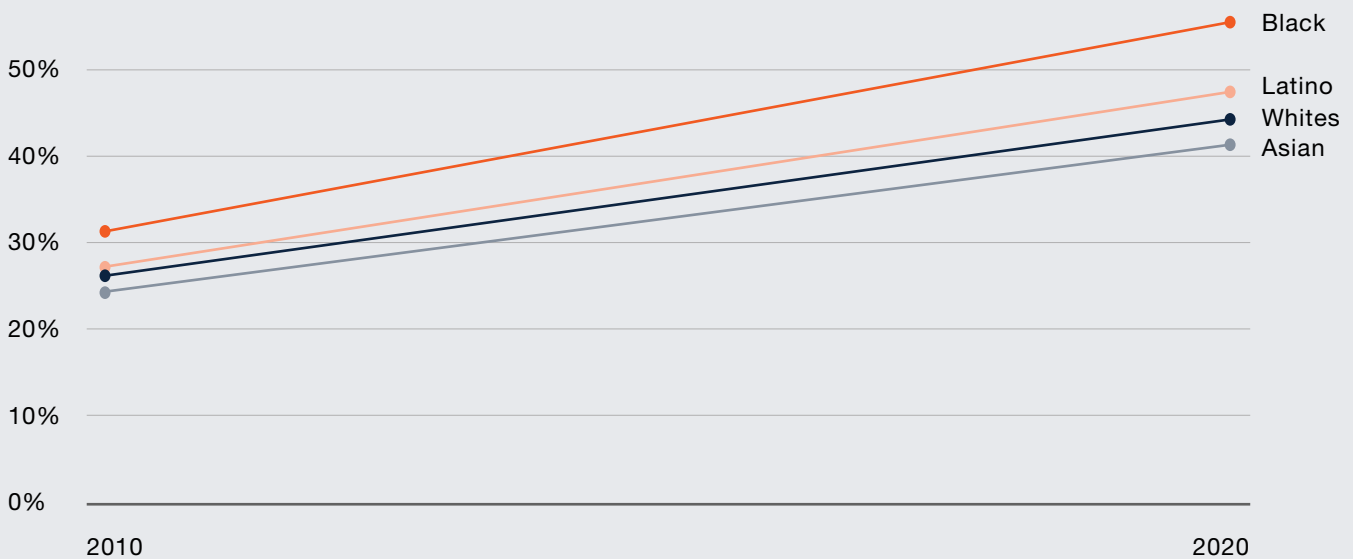
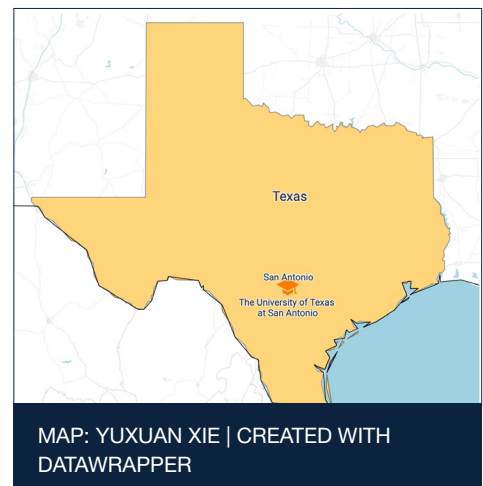


Chart: Yuxuan Xie Source: National Center for Education Statistics

DORMS ATTRACT STUDENTS

UTSA, a relatively new school, fully opened to undergraduates in 1976. It later established a satellite in downtown San Antonio.

Campus boosters say UTSA has developed a welcoming environment that attracts and keeps more students who in the past might have started at or transferred to the more prestigious flagship University of Texas campus at Austin. Part of that change has been building more dorms. About 4,000 students live on the main campus, and many more in private apartments nearby ride free shuttle buses to school. A 6-foot-tall, 1,000-pound statue of its mythical mascot, Rowdy the Roadrunner, anchors the campus center, and students often gather around that big bird.



“I think there is a greater sense of place. A greater sense of identity here, a greater sense of community here that we didn’t have before,” said Lindsay Ratcliffe, who has taught composition classes, often with an emphasis on environmental issues, at UTSA for 17 years. In the past decade, the campus has become more of “a place where people could see finishing out their studies.”

Jose Escobedo, who is from a Mexican American family in the Rio Grande Valley, passed up on his acceptance from UT Austin to attend UTSA with financial aid because he enjoyed its smaller size and how the younger institution is less tradition-bound.

“I personally liked starting our own traditions,” he said. A political science major, he got active in campus politics and won election last year as president of the campus student body. Now, he is about to graduate in four years and enroll in a master’s program in higher education administration at UTSA.

Escobedo, 22, said most students, especially the large share who come from lower-income families, want to finish school as quickly as possible to save tuition and get into a decent paying job. The university’s programs to foster completion “are doing a good job and made good progress, but we are not where we want to be,” he said. “I think we still have more to do.”

More attention should be paid to helping students with living costs beyond tuition, he added. (Tuition is about \$11,000 a year for Texas residents, not including housing, books and other costs.)

It is hard for students to concentrate on graduating if they “are worried where they are going to sleep at night and do they have food to eat,” Escobedo said in his office on campus. “When you fill in that personal need level, then you can start talking about whether they are going to counseling and tutoring services.”

The university notes that it offers emergency financial aid and that the free food pantry on campus is available to all.

HISPANIC THRIVING?

University officials say they are trying to move beyond its federal designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (where Latinos comprise at least 25% of their student

bodies) to become what is less formally considered a Hispanic Thriving Institution. But they say they do not offer any special help solely to Latinos.

The university has added programs that aid low-income students and those from families without college experience, which include sizable numbers of Latino students, according to Tammy Wyatt, senior vice provost for student success. “We are very intentional about the supports we provide,” Wyatt said. So while UTSA wants to make sure it lives up to its Hispanic Serving title, it has to do that “not at the cost of others.”

Another big shift was overhauling student advising. Departments and divisions had done this on their own in the past. Now, it’s centralized, and advisers get extra training on keeping students on track, Wyatt said.

And, she added, if students show worrisome declines in grades or enrollment, staff reaches and out asks, “How can we help you?” Referrals to tutoring and other services are likely.

Roger Enriquez, UTSA associate professor in criminology and criminal justice and an expert on Latino issues, said the university has helped more students, especially Latinos and Blacks, succeed in the past few years by trying to “adapt the institution to the students” and no longer trying “to adapt the students to the institution.” He noted improvements in academic advising and in the library offering free textbooks online, among other changes.

But with only about half of all freshmen, including Latinos, graduating in six years, “improvement is moving slowly,” added Enriquez, who is an alumnus. Before UTSA can be considered a Hispanic “thriving” institution, both state and philanthropic financial aid should be boosted to cover living costs for more students, said Enriquez, who heads the university’s outreach program to San Antonio’s traditionally Mexican American Westside neighborhood. He also suggested scheduling more classes, whether online, in person or hybrids, to better fit the lives of the many students “who have to balance school and work and family.” And he advocated more efforts to retain students in their early years on campus and to hire more faculty of color.

The pandemic at first did not harm graduation progress since some students took advantage of extra online courses, but now there appears to be a flattening, which officials hope will be temporary.

While helping students in academic jeopardy, UTSA also tries to attract academically very strong students to its Honors College, which offers special classes, internships and other perks.

Among this year's freshman group is Tanijah Kelly, who is a medical humanities major hoping to graduate in four years and later become a doctor. This year, frequent visits to a tutoring center helped her succeed in a difficult statistics class.

Kelly, who is Black, is pleased with UTSA's strong track record of enrolling and graduating minority students. "I wanted to feel comfortable where I go to school. I wanted to see a lot of different types of people, but I also wanted to see people who looked like me," she said. Seeing them "is more motivating to strive to reach your goal."