



# **GONE** **FROM TEXAS**

Rising student debt, record numbers of applicants, flat appropriations from the state, and an economy that increasingly demands advanced degrees. These factors are behind an unprecedented, campus-wide push to get students out the door in four years. This is the story behind that effort and an overview of the many ways the university is working to get its four-year graduation rate up to 70 percent.

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY DIRK FOWLER**



## IN THE SPRING OF 2011, THE PUBLIC-POLICY DISCUSSION AROUND THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS COULD BE SUMMED UP AS A LOT OF SOUND AND FURY.

During those heady days, as the nation's economy languished and lawmakers searched for places to cut, higher education leaders around the country felt new pressure to evaluate how efficiently they were using their resources. Around this time, we were introduced to the infamous seven breakthrough solutions, the \$10,000 four-year degree, the idea that not all students needed a Cadillac-quality education (Bel-air would do), and the misbegotten notion that most UT-Austin faculty were dodgers and coasters, who would really be much more productive if only they spent their time teaching instead of doing research.

That summer, while preparing for his annual State of the University speech, UT-Austin president Bill Powers perceived that the university was trailing its peer institutions in one crucial measure of efficiency: four-year graduation rate. Powers decided he wanted to use the speech to set a big goal for the campus, and he decided that getting the four-year graduation rate up from 52 percent to 70 in five years was big and hairy enough.

He formed a task force to study the issue. The group's 111-page report identified dozens of recommended changes, chief of which was the hiring of graduation champion David Laude. His essay in this report, "Heat and Work," presents a chemistry-themed

overview of the many efforts currently underway on the campus to enable, equip, persuade, and cajole students to get their degrees in four years.

Freshmen orientation, now mandatory, focuses incoming students on preparing a plan to graduate in four years. The way students register for classes has changed; now students closest to graduating (not necessarily those with the most hours) get priority. New efforts to improve advising, identify and address bottleneck courses, and strategically use financial aid to encourage students to graduate more quickly are all underway.

For as much agreement as there is on the issue of improving graduation rates (and there is a lot), it is not unanimous. Reasonable people can—and in these pages they do—disagree about whether 70 percent is a good goal, whether it is too high or too

# EXPOSING FRESHMEN TO RESEARCH BOOSTS GRADUATION RATES

by Sarah Simmons

ASSISTANT DEAN, Freshman Research Initiative

**I**ncreasing the number and quality of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) graduates emerging from the U.S. higher education system is critical to improving American competitiveness in math and science. UT's College of Natural Sciences is one of the largest science colleges in the nation and a major current and future source of STEM graduates. The college enrolls more than 10,000 students each year and produces 1,600 graduates in STEM fields annually, more than double the number from 12 years ago. This is a significant achievement. This doubling has far outpaced increases in the size of UT's student body.

The doubling in STEM graduates can be attributed

largely to increased investment in undergraduate research experiences through an innovative program called the Freshman Research Initiative. Rather than wait for students to arrive by various means, and often against tall odds, at a transformational research experience as upperclassmen, the FRI program identifies students with an aptitude or an interest (perhaps undiscovered) in research via an entrance survey and provides an authentic research experience early in their undergraduate career. Participating students get the full experience of independent research, from conceptualization through execution and presentation, culminating in writing and publication. Our efforts have demon-

strated that a merger of research and education can benefit both the research infrastructure and undergraduate education.

Students in FRI see a marked and significant increase in participation in research and retention in STEM, particularly among underrepresented ethnicities, first-generation students, students with low socio-economic status, women, and students underprepared for college. Operating at an unprecedented scale of over 800 students per year, FRI has been overwhelmingly successful, increasing four-year graduation rates overall (42 percent for FRI students versus 29 percent in the comparison group), and more than doubling four-year graduation rates for Hispanic students.

low, or whether it's the right metric at all. Hillary Hart, chair of UT's faculty council, gives the effort cautious and caveated support. Raymund Paredes, Texas' commissioner of higher education, backs it fully. A talented student articulates why she is taking a fifth year. And philosophy professor Rob Koons makes the case that emphasizing graduation rates so heavily risks exacerbating a troubling trend in higher education toward grade inflation.

These reasoned perspectives augment our understanding of the clear and present issues in Texas higher education and at our university especially. This is not sound and fury. It was Ashbel Smith, the first chairman of UT's Board of Regents, who said: "Smite the rocks with the rod of knowledge, and fountains of unstinted wealth will gush forth." Now, that sounds more like it. **C**

### FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE

#### Men

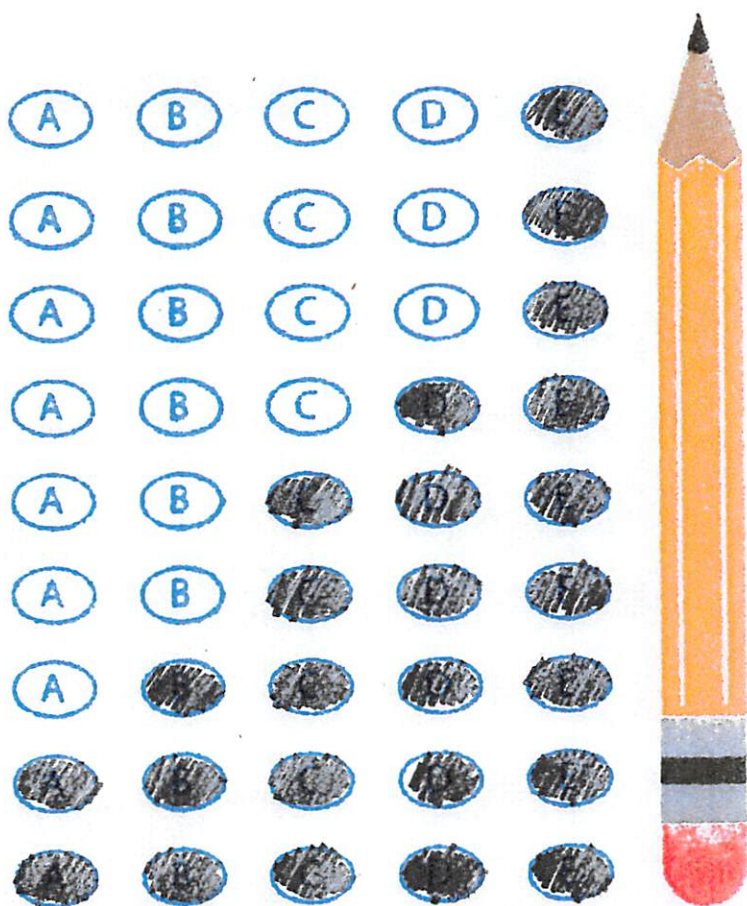
46.7%

#### Women

57.2%

\*The chief factor in why men trail women on the campus by more than 10 percentage points is that men are overrepresented in engineering and computer science, some of the hardest programs for graduating from in four years.





## UT'S GRADE ON GRADUATION RATES? 'I' FOR INCOMPLETE

by Charles Miller

FORMER CHAIRMAN, UT Board of Regents

**O**n one of the most crucial measures of a top university's success, four-year graduation rates, UT-Austin's grade is 'incomplete.' And if not for the recent plan put in place to improve that rate from slightly above 50 percent—where it's been flat for several years—to 70 percent within five years, the grade would be an F. For a school with UT's resources and high quality of entering students—from families which have income two to three times the average family—there is *absolutely no excuse for such a poor graduation rate.*

Low graduation rates are one of the most costly outcomes—to students, families, taxpayers, and contributors—on which we can make a quantifiable judgment. Considering the total per-student cost per year, including tuition, the significant additional subsidies from public and private sources, and the lost annual income from a student not entering the workforce, it is easily \$50,000 a year over the normal four years to graduation. And each seat occupied in the extra time to a degree takes away a potential seat from another qualified Texas student. With only slightly more than a 50 percent four-year graduation rate, it is easy to see the enormous financial

failure that's been left unattended to for years.

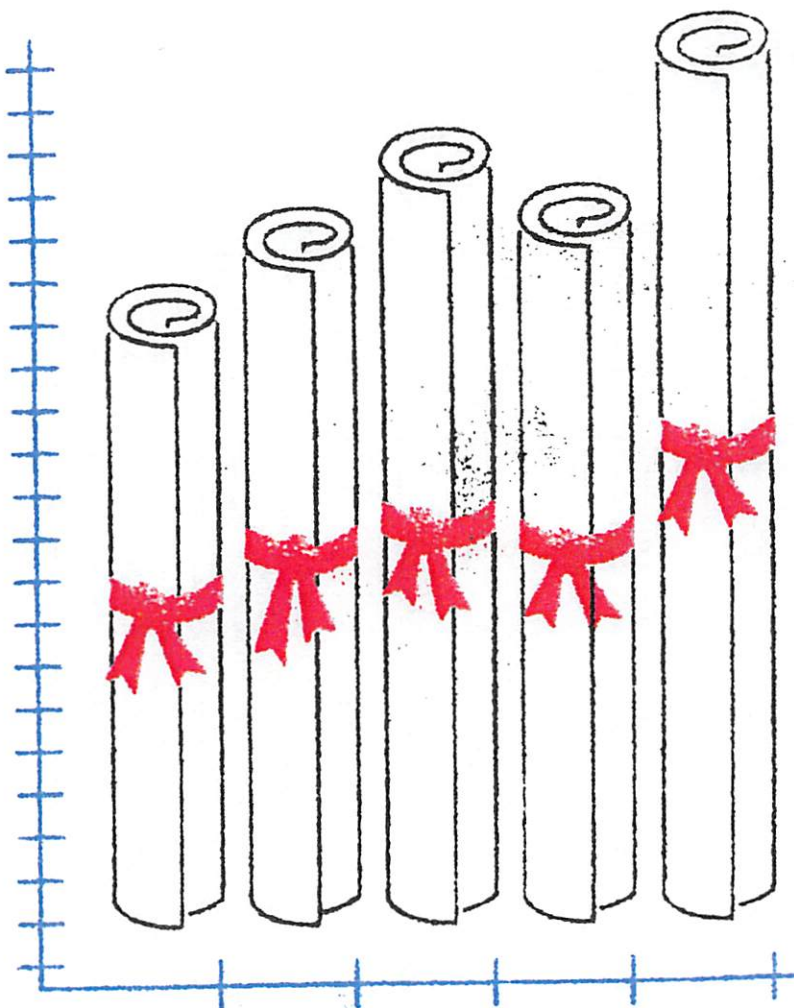
A high graduation rate is the highest priority and responsibility for institutional managers. UT leaders are clearly able to control the outcome by properly reallocating existing resources. UT revenues over the last 15 years have tripled, along with only small increases in enrollment and inflation, so ample resources exist to improve graduation rates without the additional funds claimed by current leadership. The steps required include a strong commitment to sound academic and personal counseling services for students, adequate financial aid for those in need, courses made available to students on time, and adherence to a plan regarding courses and majors designed to graduate in four years.

UT-Austin has not always received direct state funding equal to others or to its constitutional status, but that's not an excuse for low graduation rates. UT has been extremely well served by the people of the Texas, its leaders, its philanthropists, and its taxpayers. It deserves acclaim. It also needs to get much more productive in the current circumstances for higher education everywhere in order to improve its high quality and high ranking.

### FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE OVER TIME

1983	32.8%
1984	29.8%
1985	30.0%
1986	32.3%
1987	31.2%
1988	30.6%
1989	30.6%
1990	28.3%
1991	29.4%
1992	30.1%
1993	30.3%
1994	32.4%
1995	35.5%
1996	39.2%
1997	36.5%
1998	38.9%
1999	41.3%
2000	44.8%
2001	46.4%
2002	47.7%
2003	50.5%
2004	52.1%
2005	52.6%
2006	50.6%
2007	50.9%
2008	52.2%





## WHY INDECISIVENESS CAN BE A GOOD THING

by Brent L. Iverson

DEAN, School of Undergraduate Studies

**D**o high school seniors know what they want to study in college? Looking back, how many of us got it right? The School of Undergraduate Studies combines career counseling with course advising to help undeclared students explore options before choosing majors.

The school admitted its first 708 students in 2009. Today, there are 2,100 first- and second-year students enrolled. None of them have declared a major yet. And that's a good thing. Exploring before choosing means students make informed decisions and don't have to start over when they do discover what they eventually decide will be their major.

The school was first imagined by the faculty and students serving on the Task Force on Curricular Reform. Their 2005 recommendations align perfectly with the current effort to improve

### CHANGES HAPPENING FINANCIAL AID AWARDS INCREASINGLY INCENTIVE-BASED.

Money can be a powerful motivator, and UT is increasingly using financial aid to incentivize on-time graduation. The Summer Bridge Program identified 200 incoming students with financial need and invited them to take six weeks of class on campus. If they passed, they got \$1,000. Previously, only 25 percent of students who took the class in the summer would pass. This past summer, with the financial aid money conditioned on passing, every one of the 200 students made the grade.

the university's four-year graduation rate. As a contributor to first the Task Force on Curricular Reform and then the Four-Year Graduation Task Force, I consider them two important chapters from the same book. Collectively, the recommendations provide guidance for how to enhance the undergraduate experience for students.

The school was founded on five key recommendations: to establish a new college with a dean who is focused on transforming undergraduate education; create required Signature Courses taught by our best scholars to help new students transition to UT's high standards of critical thinking and scholarship; reimagine the core curriculum shared by all students; create a portal for undeclared students that incorporates strategic advising; and allocate the financial resources needed to pay for this effort.

All five of these recommendations are now reality, representing the kind of sweeping systemic change often thought impossible at a large Tier One university like ours. My colleagues at peer institutions are jealous. And frankly, they should be.

To be clear, the mandate that created Undergraduate Studies does not involve awarding degrees. All students must transition to majors in their sophomore year. While they're deciding, they are taking the core coursework and introductory classes they need to stay on track for graduation.

Notably, our students are sticking with the majors they first declare. Of students who started in Undergraduate Studies and graduated in 2012, almost 90 percent kept the majors they transferred into, a value between twice and three times that of the general UT population.

That success drives my central message: high school students who want to attend the University of Texas at Austin but aren't yet sure what to major in should join us in Undergraduate Studies. We are here to help students find their communities at the university, their paths to graduation in four years, and ultimately careers they're excited about.

I love being the dean of a school that exists solely to help undergraduates succeed. Our job is to ensure that by making well-informed decisions about their majors and, beyond that, their futures, these students are not losing ground but are ahead of the game.

CREDIT: Icon illustrations  
by Olivia Kwong



# STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND LAWMAKERS MUST ALL DO THEIR PART

by State Rep. Drew Darby

BBA '69, JD '71

**M**ost Texans agree with the push to increase graduation rates at our state universities. UT-Austin has set an admirable goal of a 70 percent four-year graduation rate by 2017. Beyond the attention students, parents, and educators are putting to this issue, what can the Texas Legislature do to help make this a reality?

As a member of the House Higher Education Committee and House Appropriations Committee, I took part in conversations this past legislative session about funding our colleges and universities based on their outcomes, rather than using traditional funding models. With outcomes-based funding, the university is rewarded for increasing graduation rates. Yet coming off a session in 2011 where higher education funding was cut, there was reluctance in the 2013 session to attach new strings to funding

that was simply being restored.

There were also questions as to whether any percentage of outcomes-based funding should be removed from an institution's formula funding and then restored based on performance, or whether it should be additional incentive money for universities. Community colleges are now under a system with partial outcomes-based funding and the Legislature will be exploring more issues related to formula funding prior to the 2015 legislative session. Increasing accountability for precious state tax dollars is a good thing; outcomes-based funding for universities deserves more discussion to ensure that, before it is implemented, we have a system that is fair and rewards our universities for the right results.

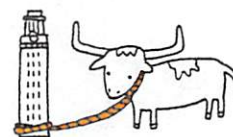
As a parent with kids in college, I strongly support more partnerships between our high schools,

community colleges, and universities to ensure that there are easier avenues to transition between institutions. Dual credit and AP classes at the high school level give students a clear advantage when they are able to begin their post-secondary education having already earned some credits. Common course numbering and simplifying credit transfer can also help ease the transition between schools and ensure that students do not have to retake—and pay for—the same course twice.

The expansion of two options that are already available may also help us reach the goal of increasing four-year graduation rates. Current statute allows universities to charge out-of-state tuition to resident students who take more than 30 hours above their degree plan requirements. While college is a time to explore and allow students to find their passion, we must educate them about the

tangible benefits associated with graduating on time. One innovative approach that UT-Austin is already employing is the relatively new School of Undergraduate Studies, where undeclared freshmen spend their first year taking core classes with intensive academic advising and career counseling. I hope that forthcoming data will show positive results that we can expand and replicate at other universities.

It is clear that we have the resources and innovative mindset to increase our four-year graduation rates. Students who graduate on time are statistically more likely to have less debt, and therefore contribute more to our economy; it is to their advantage and ours as a state for them to join the workforce as soon as possible. With educators, students, their families, and lawmakers all working together, we can continue to achieve higher education standards in Texas.



## CHANGES HAPPENING PAYING STUDENTS TO STAY ON CAMPUS.

Data show that students who work and live off campus have a much harder time academically and are less likely to graduate on time than similar students who either don't have to work or manage to find work on campus. Begun this year, a new \$10 million a year program called the University Leadership Network targets 2,000 of the most financially needy students and provides them internships on the Forty Acres, as well as leadership training.

The program places students in offices throughout campus, including at the Texas Exes. The university plans to pay these students \$5,000 a year for four years with the expectation that they graduate on time and leave having contributed meaningfully to campus life.

## FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE BY COLLEGE







## CHANGES HAPPENING REIMAGINING ORIENTATION.

Freshman orientation, once an optional affair, is now mandatory and squarely focused on helping students define their plan to graduate in four years. Once a student arrives on campus, each time he or she logs into UT Direct, the main student portal on UT's website, they will be shown how they are doing on progress toward graduation.

# DON'T CALL IT 'A VICTORY LAP'

by Hillary Ann Plocheck  
COMMUNICATIONS SENIOR

**E**ver since I was little, I've had big plans. They used to be silly things, like my sisters and I were going to build a lemonade stand, make \$100, and then buy a Barbie mansion. As I grew up, the plans got more realistic and complex: make all A's, get into college, be successful, marry Ryan Gosling (I'm still working on the last two). Whenever I talked about college with my dad, he had three rules:

1. I had to go to school in Texas.
2. I had to go to a four-year university.
3. I couldn't live at home.

Looking back, I bet my dad intended for me to go to a four-year university and graduate *in four years*. Yet, here I am as a senior corporate-communication major, and I am planning my fifth year. When I tell my family and friends that I am a senior but I am not graduating, they all say, "Oh, you're going for a victory lap?" But that's not the case at all. Just like when I was younger, I have big plans.

While my major is corporate communication, I am working toward a career in the entertainment industry. I was so fortunate to have been selected for an incredible internship at the *Conan O'Brien Show* this past summer, and ever since then I have known that my passion lies in late-night television. My grandpa likes to remind me that Confucius once said, "Choose a job you love and you will never work a day in your life." I am taking his advice to heart and pursuing the career that I am passionate about.

The University of Texas is a world of opportunity. I believe that we have the best of the best teaching, researching, and innovating on a daily basis. Our core purpose is to transform lives for the

benefit of society and ultimately change the world. To do that, I need to experience the world. UT has offered me the most enriching college experience that I could have ever dreamed of, but in the entertainment industry experience is priceless.

During the fall of my fifth year, I plan to move to Los Angeles to take part in the University of Texas Los Angeles program and intern for a major production company. Then, while I am in L.A., I plan to begin searching for other production internships in London. I know that I will regret it if I don't study abroad, and taking a fifth year will allow me to have that opportunity.

For some people, four years is more than enough time. For me, and the entertainment industry, I need a fifth year to build my résumé. By the time I graduate, I will have three major production internships on my résumé. Not only will this provide me with my worldly experience, it will also put me above my competitors when it comes time to apply for jobs. When employers look at that résumé, they will know I have a lot to offer them.

I am also aware that I am extremely fortunate to have such supportive parents that they started a Texas Tomorrow fund (a killer deal on tuition that the state no longer offers) for me when I was just 4 years old. Meaning that they have paid for my entire college education, before I even knew where I was going. Many of my peers will have accumulated a massive amount of student debt upon graduation, so for that I am grateful. Without my parents' foresight, I probably could have still taken this crucial fifth year, but it would have been a lot harder.

I understand the big push for students to graduate "on time." I even work for an office that is constantly creating new initiatives to increase graduation rates in the next four years. With today's competitive job market, most employers don't look for the perfect GPA but for experience. When spring 2015 rolls around, I will be leaving not just with a degree, but also an expansive professional network and meaningful work experience. What starts here changes the world—even if it takes five years.

# ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

by Hillary Hart  
CHAIR, Faculty Council

**I** am not what is now regarded as an "on time" college graduate. Officially, I took four and a half years to complete my BA in English. Well into my senior year, I still had no idea what I was going to do when

I graduated and basically panicked in the spring, leaving one course incomplete. So I couldn't graduate in May. What I did do was follow the passion that my Anglo-Irish poetry classes had ignited that year—I had fallen in love with

William Butler Yeats—and travel to the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, Ireland. There I met poets and scholars who shared a similar passion. So I applied to the Masters program at Trinity College, Dublin; went back to New York and finished my BA; went back to Ireland; and spent the next two years happily studying and, as it turned out, teaching. That extra time eventually led to a love of teaching and a 26-year teaching

position in the Cockrell School of Engineering (but that's another story).

I see versions of my own story played out every semester for my students. Engineering students regularly take more than four years to graduate, mostly because the degree programs are technically rigorous and gaining experience via an internship in the summer is seen as more important than taking summer courses. Elsewhere in

the university, I see students who, like me, just don't know until late in their college career what their enduring interests are or who realize that they have multiple interests that require more coursework or even another degree program.

Another reason students don't graduate "on time" is that people do not all learn at the same rate in the same way. Kolb and other researchers have identified



# HEALTHY STUDENTS GRADUATE FASTER

by Gage E. Paine

PHD '96, Life Member,

VICE PRESIDENT FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

**A**cademic success and health go hand-in-hand. By making sure our students are physically and emotionally healthy, we better prepare them to graduate in four years alongside their classmates. That helps them save money on education expenses, get a head start in their professional careers, and build a solid foundation for good health.

A recent survey shows that 54 percent of student withdrawals from campus were attributable to mental health, medical, or personal concerns. That's one big reason why we are creating the CARE Program (Counselors in Academic Residence) to place mental health professionals in several of the advising offices on campus. These professionals will help students who might not be reaching their full academic potential due to stress, personal concerns, or emotional and mental health issues. These counselors will meet individually with students and support groups, as well as with advisors and deans. A major goal is to educate students, faculty, and staff about how emotional fitness affects students' academic performance.

For 74 years, the Counseling and Mental Health Center has provided individual, group, and crisis counseling; psychiatric consultations; and prevention programs that facilitate students' academic and life goals. The center also has a telephone crisis line. The services are affordable: students only pay \$5 for each individual, psychiatric, or couples counseling appointment. And these programs are working. A survey showed that 88 percent of clients who were initially considering a withdrawal reported that CMHC services helped them remain in school.

University Health Services is another avenue for our students to stay healthy, helping them succeed academically. Like CMHC, most office visits at UHS are also just \$5. UHS accepts most types of insurance and provides significant self-pay discounts for uninsured students to prevent cost from being a barrier to students accessing health-care. A free, 24-hour Nurse Advice Line provides a safety net for students around the clock. During the 2012-13 academic year, students made 59,500 appointments for general medicine, women's health, sports medicine, urgent care, integrated health, physical therapy, and nutrition services.

The Health Promotion Resource Center within UHS helps our students get and stay healthy. Their outreach staff focuses on priority campus health issues, including nutrition, body image, physical activity, hydration, prescription drug abuse, healthy sexuality, sleep, and high-risk drinking.

UHS staff is also tuned in to the academic rhythms of campus. A recent survey showed that nearly 15 percent of students suffered a negative academic impact in the last 12 months due to colds, flu, and sore throats. UHS provides flu shot clinics across campus alongside a public information campaign each fall to immunize approximately 10,000 students, faculty, and staff. Almost 90 percent of patients agreed that their visit to UHS helped prevent a health concern from being a barrier to their academic performance.

By working to ensure that our students are healthy and supported during their university experience, we're not only helping them to graduate in four years but also to acquire the life skills they need to go out there and change the world.



CHANGES  
HAPPENING

CLASS IDENTITY IS  
COMING BACK.

In high school, classes have long had an identity: Stayin' Alive, Class of '85 or Class of 2001: A Space Odyssey. For whatever reason, that class identity has waned precipitously in college. UT is trying to change that, with a coordinated campaign from application to orientation to Camp Texas to Gone to Texas to ring ceremonies, where the class identity is stressed.

many learning styles that depend upon the individual's preference for abstract conceptualization, concrete experience, reflective observation, or active experimentation. A student may enroll in one major—say, chemical engineering, because she enjoyed chemistry in high school—and then discover that the courses move too quickly, without adequate time for the reflective observation that it turns out her

learning style prefers. So she switches to science communication and finds courses that better reflect both her interest in science and her learning style.

If students learn differently and at different paces, why would we expect that 70 percent of a cohort would graduate at the same time? President Bill Powers' self-described "audacious goal" to move the university's four-year completion rate from just over 50 percent

to 70 percent by 2017 is laudable. More students finishing within four years means less debt for students and parents; more efficient use of university resources means a potential easing of the current budget crisis and more seats for students to enroll. And UT has put many programs and services in place to help students navigate the requirements of their degree plans and get academic and practical support

where they need it. Resources are also now dedicated to using technology and research to provide, as the website puts it, "transformative approaches to teaching and learning." All to the good. And perhaps if I had had access to these new approaches I would have found my way to teaching. But I doubt it. I simply had to get old enough, realistic enough, and engaged enough to see that "sort of" liking to

write was not going to build a career for me.

The whole point of education is to help students ask questions by finding out what questions they want to ask. That takes time. Education is not job training, no matter what some of our higher-education governing bodies seem to think. Can UT succeed at raising the four-year graduation rate to 70 percent by 2017? For some, but not necessarily for 70 percent.



# WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS DONE

by Margaret Spellings

PRESIDENT, George W. Bush Presidential Center; FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

**T**hose of us who spend our time arguing the fine points of education often zero in on the fact that there is no better way to ensure a child's mobility than with education after high school. Getting into and out of college affordably and on time is especially tricky, and like many universities, UT-Austin averages just over half of its students getting a degree in four years. The struggle it takes for students to graduate at all, much less on time, was one reason I set up a higher education commission while serving as President George W. Bush's education

secretary. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which came to be known as the Spellings Commission, issued its report in 2006. Eight years later, here's what I see.

Colleges and state policymakers are beginning to focus more on results and on measuring their goals. No longer are schools content with simply admitting students. They are concentrating on graduating them. UT-Austin, for example, has set a four-year graduation rate goal of 70 percent and specific policies to help meet that goal.

More universities are reporting data

about their outputs. I'm proud that more than 300 universities, including UT-Austin, have joined the Voluntary System of Accountability that the commission prompted. We need to make sure the self-reported data has integrity and that we improve the comparability of it for consumers.

Here's where we need to focus even more of our attention:

A critical domestic challenge is ensuring the dynamic, growing Hispanic population moves ahead academically. Our future in Texas is especially linked to the academic progress of Hispanic students. They make up more than half

of students in Texas public schools.

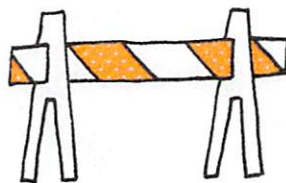
UT-Austin and other schools know this, but Hispanic college graduation rates have far to go. They increased almost six percent at public universities in Texas from 2011 to 2012. Still, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reports, their rates trailed those of white students by a two-to-one margin.

There are numerous ways to improve those numbers, but here's one suggestion: Governors and legislators should keep focusing on high academic standards in the K-12 years. Students who enter college unprepared

for the rigor they will encounter are more likely to fall behind.

Universities need to keep working with state policymakers and school districts to ensure the curriculum that high schools use is aligned to the requirements of a college. At the same time, universities need to let relevant community college courses transfer to their school. States like Texas have been working on making courses easier to transfer, but there is much more to do on this front.

States like Indiana and Tennessee have led the way in linking state funding to graduation rates. That is one sure way to get



— CHANGES HAPPENING —  
CHANGING MAJORS IS HARDER TO DO.

Students have fewer options than before when it comes to changing their major. In the past, they could essentially do so at any time, and the data show that the more they change and the later they change, the less likely they are to graduate in four years. Now students can no longer change colleges once they have accumulated more than 60 hours toward their degree (without petitioning to do so). Nor will they soon be able to change majors before completing their first year. The data actually show that the students most likely to graduate on-time are ones who change their majors one time.

## UT-AUSTIN SHOULD LEAD THE WAY IN BOOSTING GRADUATION RATES IN TEXAS

by Raymund Paredes

BA '64, PHD '73, Life Member, TEXAS HIGHER  
EDUCATION COMMISSIONER

**I**mproving time to graduation is an important goal for all Texas higher education institutions but perhaps most importantly for UT-Austin. As one of the nation's elite public institutions, boosting its four-year graduation rate to 70 percent by 2017 is a worthy ambition. Unfortunately, today the typical full-time Texas university student takes about five years to graduate, and part-time students take



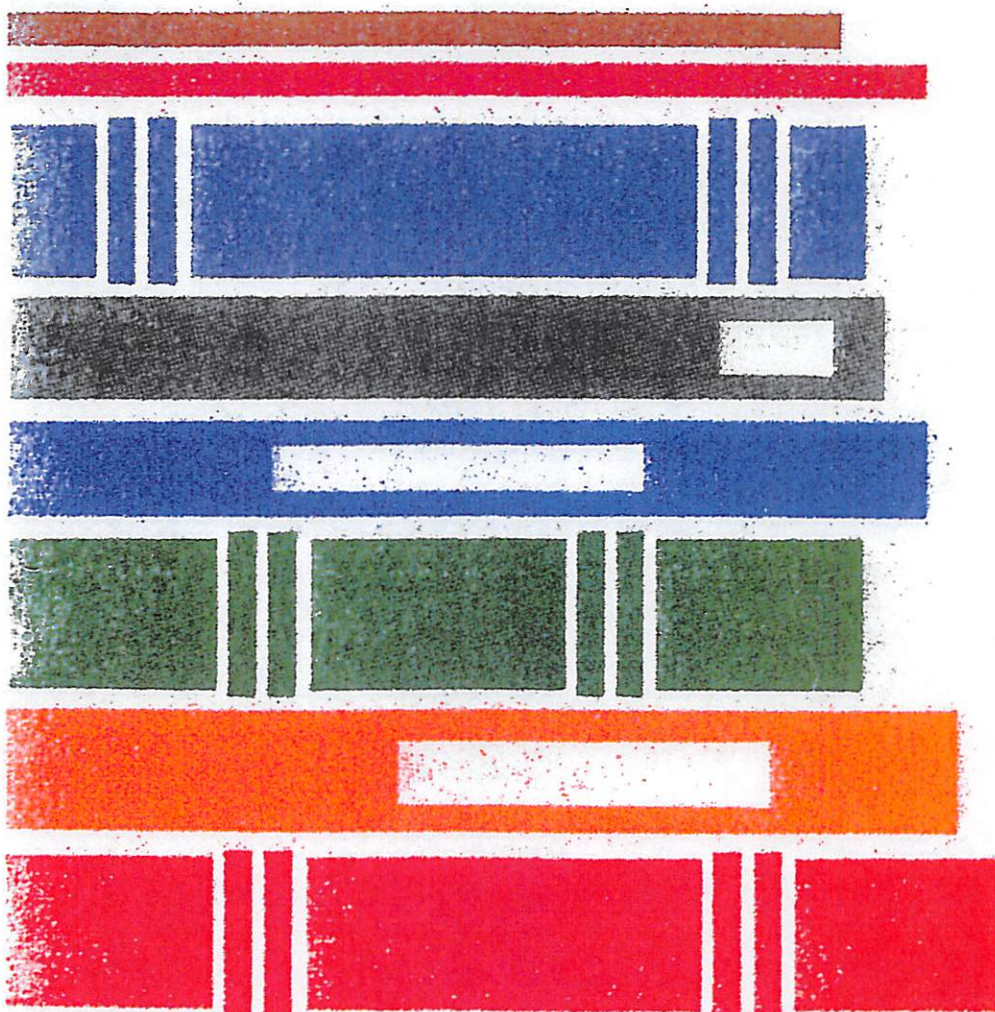
universities working on better completion strategies.

As with those K-12 debates, there is no magic bullet. How I wish there were one. But, as we have learned in elementary and secondary education, what gets measured gets done.

Students, taxpayers and the economy alike depend upon our colleges improving those rates, too. Let me close with these realities: Nearly 80 percent of the jobs in the U.S. require some kind of post-secondary degree. What's more, estimates show that 62 percent of new jobs in another four years will require the same.

If we get students ready for tomorrow's jobs, we will expand our economy. If we don't, students will be left behind, and so will our economy.

It should be clear which road we want to go down.



5.7 years to complete a bachelor's degree. We must do better. By improving time to graduation, students are able to begin the next stage of life sooner—whether that means starting a career or continuing to graduate school. It also means less student debt, freeing up state resources for future students, and ensuring an effective education pipeline to strengthen and support the Texas economy.

I recognize that not all students are able to graduate in four years, even at UT-Austin. Student demographics have changed over the past 20-25 years as more lower-income students go to college. Many students are enrolled part-time while working and managing busy lives. We need to do whatever we can to inspire, encourage, and support the success and timely graduation of all students.

By 2020, nearly 60 percent of high-demand, well-paying jobs in the United States will require postsecondary credentials. Texas needs to embrace new strategies in higher education that accelerate time to degree and dramatically improve student outcomes or our state's economy will suffer. Based on the work of Complete College America, we know that the following innovations can work:

1. Creating structured, guided pathways to a degree to help students more effectively navigate their courses of study;
2. Encouraging institutions to adopt "15-to-finish" programs aimed at encouraging all students to take at least 30 credits per academic year, which may include summer coursework for students who work; and
3. Linking a portion of state funding to student outcomes, to encourage institutions to identify and implement best practices aimed at improving student success.

The state's *Closing the Gaps by 2015* initiative was a groundbreaking call to action to increase higher education opportunities and achievements for all Texans. But we have a lot more work to do. Let's be honest. Making the commitment to change ingrained but outdated policies can be a daunting task. Accelerating time to degree is a challenge. But Texans are ready to move boldly to boost graduation rates. There are game-changing pilot programs and initiatives under way across the state, like those at UT-Austin. Making the commitment to innovate ensures that the work-ready, well-educated minds of Texas will help position the state as an international leader in an increasingly complex global economy.

#### AVERAGE STUDENT DEBT FOR UT STUDENTS

Four-year graduates

**\$8,044**

Five-year graduates

**\$11,711**

Six-year graduates

**\$18,041**



# PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL

## Unintended Consequences of the Push for High Graduation Rates

by Rob Koons  
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**W**ho could be opposed to efforts to raise the graduation rate in Texas universities? Isn't that like being against Mom and apple pie? There are some reasonable steps that can be taken to remove useless obstacles to graduation. For example, the Byzantine complexity of 'flags' introduced as new graduation requirements at UT-Austin eight years ago should be eliminated, and the statewide 42-hour core should be streamlined. Do all students really need a course in the performing arts?

However, we should think very carefully about the unintended consequences of putting pres-

### CHANGES HAPPENING DEGREE PROGRESS NOW DETERMINES REGISTRATION PRIORITY.

How close a student is toward graduating is now the deciding factor in when that student gets to register for classes. Students closest to graduating now go first; students with lots of hours but who aren't as far along in their degree plan no longer get an advantage over students with fewer hours but who are closer to on track to graduate.

## HEAT AND WORK

by David Laude

SENIOR VICE PROVOST, Enrollment and Graduation Management, PROFESSOR OF CHEMISTRY

**I** teach chemistry and spend a lot of time discussing the differences between heat and work. Heat is a fire and work is a battery—both are good, but one clearly gets the big jobs done better.

How might this apply to the Forty Acres?

This is a campus steeped in Texas individualism, and there is a lot of heat produced in our decentralized and independent approach to research and teaching. I certainly took advantage of this tradition while performing research for more than a decade in

Welch Hall, and I can guarantee you that no one was about to tell me or anyone else how to do it. UT-Austin is a powerhouse research institution precisely because of this academic freedom. Great teaching is in many ways the same: Professor James Pennebaker's synchronous online course or Professor Andrew Ellington's freshman research initiative stream are both the spark of inventive and unencumbered minds.

But work is different from heat. It begins with a common purpose, something easy to say, easy to under-

stand, and pretty hard to argue against. Something you can state simply on the cover of an alumni magazine like: graduation rates.

The nice thing about improving graduation rates is that everyone can get behind it. Student-success advocates exploit it to help students achieve their goals. The budget office sees it as improving the bottom line. Even academicians can approach it as a systems-optimization problem. Now everyone can ask the question, "What can I do to make it better?" Fueled by \$15 million in programs

and scholarships my office has awarded just this year, the answer is a lot.

These days, each incoming freshman is in a small community from day one. The Registrar is working with academic advisors to make course registration fairer. Mental Health Services is deploying counselors to the academic units. Campus partners are working with Financial Aid to provide on-campus internships for our 2,000 neediest students. New Student Services is working with University Marketing and Creative Services to brand and build cohorts that will want to gradu-

ate together in four years.

In my opinion, a culture change is happening on campus, certainly at the highest levels of the university, but I also believe it is percolating down to the individual student and faculty member. Right now a professor is giving a make-up exam to help a student pass a course. A department chairman is adding a course for the fall to meet demand. A student is deciding to take a Friday 8 a.m. class to graduate on time (OK, maybe that was pushing it).

Is it paying off? The early returns say yes. The Class of 2016



sure on universities to increase their graduation rates. Remember: there are no exit exams or other objective criteria for what counts as “earning” a bachelor’s degree. To graduate is simply to accumulate enough “credits” of the appropriate kind, which are dispensed at the discretion of teachers and departments. The easiest way for universities to increase the graduation rate is to lower academic standards.

This effect is no mere speculation. In fact, grades have inflated across the world of higher education over the last generation, from Harvard to the local community college. Over 40 percent of all grades awarded to college students last year were A’s, up from 7 percent in 1969. Essentially, all grades have been inflated by a full mark: what were D’s are now C’s, C’s are B’s, B’s and A’s are both A’s. It is not hard to see that if this trend continues, we will approach the point at which all students will earn A’s in all courses. Putting pressure on universities to increase graduation rates will only accelerate this trend.

What is the harm of grade inflation? Students are not working nearly as hard as they did a generation ago, as documented by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in 2011’s *Academically Adrift*. The average student responds rationally to grade inflation by spending (according to student self-reporting) about 13 hours a week studying, less than half the time spent 20 years ago. This lack

of academic rigor translates directly into more alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity and to a degraded work ethic. In addition, Texas A&M statistician Valen E. Johnson has demonstrated (in his 2013 *Grade Inflation*) that students respond to grade inflation in non-STEM fields by fleeing STEM majors. Paradoxically, an increase in graduation rates could result in fewer science and engineering graduates! (*Editor’s Note: This has not happened at UT. Demand for STEM fields is higher than UT can accommodate and growing.*)

In fact, a collapse of academic standards is, in the long run, an existential threat to the entire higher education system. If the system begins to fail to hold students to rigorous and consistent standards, it will not be able to justify the massive investment required to sustain it.

The solution is to combine higher graduation rates with an objective and disinterested measurement of learning outcomes. We could, for example, require all graduating students to take the College Learning Assessment, GRE subject exams, or Oxbridge-style honors exams designed and graded by Texas scholars and scientists. State universities should be rewarded for higher graduation rates only if they simultaneously raise the average exit scores among their graduates. Such exit measures will reverse grade inflation, since the only way for universities to elicit more student effort would be to raise the standard for passing grades.

**PERCENTAGE  
OF AT-RISK  
STUDENTS  
NOW ENROLLED  
IN A SUCCESS  
PROGRAM**

**100**

Every incoming student identified as at risk of not graduating within four years is now enrolled in a program designed to provide them more advising, better academic support, and a close-knit social community on campus.

has UT’s highest-ever first-year persistence at 93.5 percent, and the recently arrived Class of 2017 is on pace to beat it, with the best-ever first-semester persistence of 98.8 percent. (By contrast, first-year persistence in 1981 was just 79 percent.)

For those who are alarmed that the Wild West campus they loved is becoming perhaps a little too orderly for their tastes, we are still very much a campus of individuals. But it is a campus that is working together now—perhaps better than ever, even in the toughest of times—and if we wake up in a few years and measure a graduation rate that has taken off, we will be able to point to what is taking place right now: a campus at work.

## 15 FAMOUS DROPOUTS

Some of the best-known Longhorns walked off the Forty Acres without a degree. Many an athlete, entrepreneur, or Hollywood type has left the classroom to answer the siren call of fame and celebrity. They’re outliers, of course: a 2011 Pew study found that 48 percent of dropouts cited cost as their top reason for leaving school. The same study found that the average college grad earns \$20,000 per year more than those without a bachelor’s degree.

Below are 15 famous Longhorns who beat those odds.

### Roger Clemens

FORMER MLB  
PITCHER  
(1982–1983)

### Walter Cronkite

(DIED 2009)  
BROADCAST  
JOURNALIST  
(1933–1935)

### Michael Dell

FOUNDER,  
DELL INC.  
(1983–1984)

### Kevin Durant

BASKETBALL PLAYER,  
OKLAHOMA CITY  
THUNDER  
(2006–2007)

### Farrah Fawcett

(DIED 2009)  
ACTRESS  
(*Charlie’s Angels*)  
(1965–1968)

### David Geffen

FOUNDER,  
DREAMWORKS  
(1961–1962)

### Janis Joplin

(DIED 1970)  
MUSICIAN  
(1962)

### Ben Crenshaw

PRO GOLFER  
(1970–1973)

### Jayne Mansfield

(DIED 1967)  
ACTRESS  
(*The Girl Can’t  
Help It*)  
(1951)

### John Mackey

FOUNDER AND CEO,  
WHOLE FOODS  
(1972–1977)

### Sam Rayburn

(DIED 1961)  
FORMER SPEAKER OF  
THE U.S. HOUSE  
(1908)

### Mary Lou Retton

OLYMPIC GYMNAST  
(1987–1988)

### Karl Rove

FORMER WHITE  
HOUSE CHIEF OF  
STAFF  
(1977–1988)

### Neil deGrasse Tyson

ASTROPHYSICIST,  
SCIENCE  
COMMUNICATOR  
(*Cosmos*)  
(Left PhD program  
after earning  
MA in 1983)

### Owen Wilson

ACTOR  
(*Midnight in Paris*,  
*Wedding Crashers*)  
(1988–1991)