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# A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM FOR STUDENT OUTCOMES

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## I. RATIONALE

Over the years, institutions of higher education have attempted to evaluate quality and success using various criteria, such as entering SAT scores and student-faculty ratios. Previously, the focus of these evaluations has been students and parents researching higher education options. But the way institutions of higher education define and assess quality and success is now in question because that focus has broadened to include concerns about access and affordability, as well as reputation. And, policy makers and taxpayers have added a new dimension to the equation—return on investment for both the government and the student. In recent years, the state and federal government have become extremely interested in documenting the value-added of higher education institutions (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006). Moreover, there has been much discussion and policy implementation focused on accountability—with more to come.

For higher education, return on investment can be assessed in many ways. From the standpoint of the student, the outcomes of obtaining a college education must be determined and tools for evaluation must be identified. Accountability for student outcomes and institutional success in the 21st century should measure the results of students' learning and overall educational experience, not just the traditional indicators like student characteristics and financial ability. Ideally, such outcomes will indicate the value the institution has added to a student in terms of knowledge and skills and, taken together, these trends will be indicative of the overall impact of institutional investments and educational programs.

At the system level, the UT System Board of Regents recently approved *The University of Texas System Strategic Plan 2006-2015*. One of the key strategies in the plan is to develop and maintain a focus on student outcomes. To that end, the UT System has established a set of performance indicators for student outcomes within its accountability reporting framework. These indicators help each institution evaluate graduation rates; student pass-rates on licensure exams; student experience in school; post-graduate experience; and student learning in broad areas such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, writing, and computer literacy.

In addition to meeting UT System accountability standards, there is another incentive for each campus to develop student outcome measures because student learning is a critical part of an institution's accreditation. For example, according to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, an accredited institution "... identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results" (*Principles of Accreditation*, 22).

The UT System is now beginning to consider the relationships between and impact on student success of investments and initiatives to guarantee financial aid, to improve advising, to increase graduation rates, and student outcomes. Using the UT System model for student outcomes discussed below, this essay highlights these trends and relationships that are emerging.

## II. UT SYSTEM STUDENT OUTCOMES MODEL

The model depicted in Figure II-1 displays the key elements in assessing institutional success for UT System academic institutions.

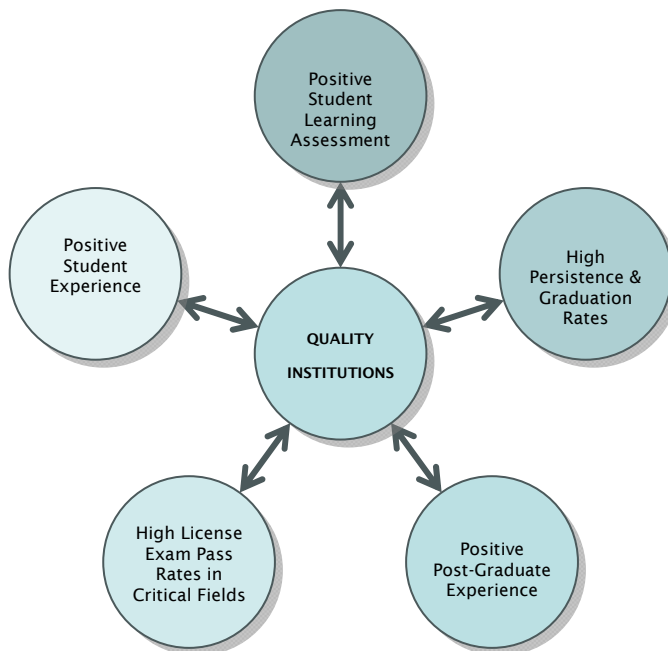
**A. Student Learning.** The University of Texas System is engaged in a broad-based research project to measure student learning outcomes for all nine universities.

Selection of national test: the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). In 2004-05, the UT System and 123 other colleges and universities across the country began administration of the CLA in partnership with the Council for Aid to Education and the Rand Corporation; by 2007-08, the number of participating institutions increased to 210. This test is unique, carefully designed to provide a means to assess general problem solving and critical and analytic writing abilities of freshmen and seniors – skills that are fundamental to future success in the workplace or in future graduate or professional study.

Because a national cross-section of over 200 institutions of every type participates, the CLA test makes it possible for institutions to benchmark their performance against others with similar student bodies, as well as to compare senior and freshmen performance within an institution.

Figure II-1 UT SYSTEM STUDENT OUTCOMES MODEL

It provides at least a preliminary answer to the questions: "How do the problem solving and critical thinking and writing skills of students at an institution compare with similarly prepared students at other institutions?" and "To what degree do seniors have higher levels of problem solving and critical thinking and writing than freshmen at the same institution?"<sup>1</sup> (See Section I, p. I-15, for the most recent results.)



**B. Student educational experience.** The second element in this framework is the UT System’s participation annually in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). All nine UT System academic institutions participate in the NSSE, which surveyed 313,000 freshmen and seniors from 610 institutions in 2006-07. This survey provides the UT System and institutions with national benchmarks against which trends in learning outcomes can be compared and progress can be tracked.<sup>2</sup> In this accountability report, the UT System extracts summaries of results on satisfaction with advising and overall experience, answering the questions posed to freshmen and seniors: “How would you rate the quality of academic advising you have received at this university?”; “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this university?”; and “If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?” Each institution receives detailed results on numerous measures of engagement. (See Section I, p. I-16, for NSSE results.)

**C. Persistence and graduation rates.** In February 2006, the UT System Board of Regents adopted a resolution for each academic institution to adopt specific targets and pursue specific initiatives to improve persistence and graduation rates. The institutions, working with the Office of Academic Affairs, established targets for improvement over five and ten years, benchmarked to national trends. (See Section I, pp. I-7-9.)

To achieve these goals, each institution has implemented or enhanced ongoing programs to improve student success. These strategies include:

1. Modified tuition structures to incentivize students to take more semester credit hours, accelerating time to graduation.
2. Policy changes that encourage students to re-enroll and finish their coursework.
3. Employment opportunities so that students remain on campus, based on evidence that students employed at the university are more likely to perform better academically.
4. New retention programs that will help keep students in college and thus able to finish coursework on time.
5. Combined academic advising with financial aid advising so that students understand how continuous enrollment, supported by financial aid packages, will accelerate their time-to-graduation.

<sup>1</sup>See Council for Aid to Education, *Collegiate Learning Assessment*, [http://www.cae.org/content/pro\\_collegiate.htm](http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm)

<sup>2</sup>The NSSE provides a robust set of data on many aspects of the student experience. For history, studies of the survey and more information see <http://nsse.iub.edu/>. Annual survey results attract considerable attention, for example, “Half of Seniors Took Courses Elsewhere before Enrolling at Current College,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 11, 2005, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i12/121a03701.htm>.

6. Redesigned courses and added supplemental instruction to ensure student success and to avoid the need to repeat courses to master the material.
7. Strengthened collaborations with community colleges that, in some cases, involve financial aid and curriculum reform.

Ultimately, as students stay enrolled and complete their degrees in less time, these efforts will also have a positive impact on students' experience, learning outcomes, and preparation for ongoing study or employment.

- D. Post-graduation employment or continuing study.** Using data collected by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the UT System tracks the proportion of students who are employed or enrolled in a graduate/professional program in Texas one year after graduation. These data provide a positive answer to the question, "Are graduates of UT System institutions prepared to join the workforce or for further study?" The data are limited, however, because only students who work or study in Texas can be tracked, so those who find jobs or enter graduate programs in other states cannot be included. (For detail, see Section I, p. 17.)
- E. Pass rates on program or degree-specific licensing examinations.** The fifth tool is focused on program- or discipline-specific success. Licensure exam pass rates help illustrate an institution's success in preparing students for post-graduation employment in particular regulated professions, including production of teachers. These indicators help answer the question, "How well are students prepared for employment in specific professions?" (For specific data and trends, see Section I, p. 14.)

### III. UT SYSTEM STUDENT OUTCOMES, 2006-07: TRENDS AND CORRELATIONS

General trends. Overall, the trends lines for these five outcome measures are moving in a positive direction (see Section I).

- More students are persisting and graduating.
  - From 2001 to 2005, first-year persistence rates increased on five campuses.
  - Four-year graduation rates also increased on five campuses; at UT Austin, in 2006, nearly 48 percent of students graduated in four years (up from 39% in 2001).
  - Six-year graduation rates increased and are nearing the targets established by the Board of Regents for 2010 on four campuses (Arlington, Austin, El Paso, Pan American,).
  - The combined proportion of students who graduated or were still enrolled at a UT institution or another institution in Texas within a six-year period has also increased significantly on six campuses to between 55 and 65 percent and reaching over 86 percent at UT Austin.
- Preparation for careers is increasing. Students' knowledge of their fields is assessed through certification, licensure, and national board examinations.
  - These exam pass rates for students at UT System institutions have increased to 90 percent or more in nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, and medicine. The pass rate in 2006 was 100 percent at UT Tyler in engineering and UT Dallas in teaching.
- Student learning.
  - Results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment in 2006-2007 show that seniors obtained higher CLA Total scores, on average, than freshmen at all eight campuses who participated.
  - The absolute level of freshman and senior performance at UT Austin, UT Dallas and UT San Antonio exceeded the national averages while seniors at UT Permian Basin and freshmen at UT Arlington also scored higher than national averages.
  - Relative to other institutions with similar entering students, freshmen at UT El Paso and UT San Antonio performed well above their national comparison group in writing, and at UT Austin they performed above expected. Freshmen at UT Austin, UT El Paso, and UT San Antonio also performed above expected in problem solving.
- Students are satisfied with their college experience.
  - Results of the National Survey of Student Engagement show that on six campuses, more freshmen rated academic advising good or excellent in 2007 than in 2003, as did seniors at five institutions.

- And on seven campuses, more seniors in 2007 than in 2003 said they would be likely to attend the same institution again.
- For freshmen, this trend was reversed: although still generally around 80 percent, compared with 2003, fewer freshmen in 2007 said they would be likely to attend again compared with 2003, except at UT Tyler.
- Graduates are prepared for careers and advanced degrees.
  - Well over 80 percent of baccalaureate graduates in 2006 were employed or attending a graduate or professional school in Texas.
  - Since 2002, the proportion increased at UT Pan American, UT Permian Basin, and UT San Antonio.

Correlations. Table II-2, on the next page, arrays the most recent outcomes data for each UT System academic institution. These data, and those displayed in tables and charts in Section I, provide the basis for an initial analysis of relationships among the trends:

- Positive freshman and senior experiences correlate with high licensure and certification exam pass rates.
  - UT Tyler's freshmen and seniors reported positive advising and educational experiences, and over 97 percent of first-time test takers passed the teaching certification, nursing, and engineering licensing exams.
- Positive senior educational experience correlates with high employment rates after graduation.
  - At UT Permian Basin 90 percent of the seniors surveyed reported an overall positive educational experience. UT Permian Basin also reported that over 93.5 percent of its baccalaureate graduates were employed or enrolled in a graduate or professional program within one year of graduation (increased from 91 percent the previous year).
  - At UT Pan American and UT Tyler 85 percent of seniors reported an overall positive educational experience. Over 90 percent of the baccalaureate graduates at both institutions were employed or enrolled in a graduate or professional program within one year of graduation.
- First-year persistence and graduation rates show a strong correlation.
  - UT Austin and UT Dallas report the highest first-year persistence rates within the UT System, at 92.1 percent and 79.9 percent, respectively.
  - These two institutions also have the highest six-year graduation rates in the UT System, 76.4 percent at UT Austin (up from 75 percent the previous year) and 55.3 percent at UT Dallas.
- Institutions where students scored above the national CLA mean on the Performance Task seem to have higher employment rates and pass rates on professional licensure and certification exams. For example, seniors who took the CLA at UT Dallas scored well above the mean score of 1195 and report high employment rates and exam pass rates.

Table II-X SUMMARY OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

	Persistence	NSSE - Advising Experience		NSSE - Educational Experience		CLA - Performance Task	
		First Year	Seniors	First Year	Seniors	Freshmen	Seniors
UTA	64.1%	70%	66%	78%	82%	1071	1129
Austin	92.1%	80%	75%	89%	91%	1257	**
UTB		77%	63%	88%	82%	--	--
UTD	79.9%	73%	68%	77%	83%	1198	1330
UTEP	67.3%	78%	54%	86%	75%	1019	**
UTPA	72.1%	84%	67%	85%	85%	956	1028
UTPB	57.0%	80%	82%	86%	90%	980	**
UTSA	64.5%	62%	61%	75%	79%	1097	1220
UTT	58.7%	75%	71%	92%	85%	1038	**

	CLA - Writing Task		Licensing/Certification Exam Pass Rates			6-Year Graduation Rate	Postgraduate Experience
	Freshmen	Seniors	Teaching	Nursing	Engineering		
UTA	1125	1220	98.9%	99.3%	63.0%	41.6%	86.8%
Austin	1296	1326	98.5%	96.7%	88.4%	76.4%	75.5%
UTB	--	--	92.6%	--	--	--	90.9%
UTD	1264	1333	99.6%	--	--	55.3%	86.0%
UTEP	1132	**	91.9%	91.0%	32.0%	28.9%	79.9%
UTPA	1035	1144	88.9%	93.2%	--	32.4%	92.6%
UTPB	1037	**	98.2%	--	--	29.2%	93.5%
UTSA	1203	1243	94.2%	--	76.9%	28.1%	85.2%
UTT	1083	**	97.9%	98.1%	100.0%	40.0%	90.2%

Notes:

Persistence: First-year persistence rates for first-time, full-time degree-seeking students entering in fall 2005.

NSSE Advising Experience: % of survey respondents that rated the academic advising "good" or "excellent", 2007.

NSSE Educational Experience: % of survey respondents that evaluated their entire educational experience "good" or "excellent", 2007.

CLA Performance Task: Student results on performance task, Freshmen 2006 and Seniors 2007.

CLA Analytical Writing Task: Student results on analytical writing task, Freshmen 2006 and Seniors 2007.

Pass Rate: % of first-time test takers that passed the exam, 2006.

Graduation Rate: Six-year graduation rate for students first enrolled in fall 2000.

Postgraduate Experience: % of baccalaureate graduates employed and/or enrolled in a graduate or professional program within one year, 2005-06.

For UT Austin: The employment proportions are slightly lower because, in addition to students employed or enrolled in a Texas graduate program, a significant number of graduates are recruited into universities around the country or work for corporations

