

# **THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM**

After careful consideration, we, the members of the University of Texas System Student Advisory Council (SAC), respectfully submit the following recommendations to the University of Texas Board of Regents. These recommendations concern a wide variety of students at multiple institutions in the University of Texas System.

## **Financial and Legislative Affairs**

### **Recommendation 1**

As higher education in the State of Texas faces further budget cuts this legislative cycle, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that The Board of Regents encourage each institution to implement budget advisory councils with student representation.

Decreased state funding for higher education during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 budget cycles requires campuses across The University of Texas System to prioritize spending through evaluating university programs. Students at our system campuses already provide feedback on non-academic spending through student fee committees. Students should have similar opportunities to manage how their tuition dollars are supplemented by state funding when directed at academic programs.

The University of Texas at Austin recently set up College Tuition and Budget Advisory Councils consisting of students, faculty and administrators in each college to evaluate how budget cuts will impact the operations of academic departments within their respective schools. Implementing similar councils at each campus will maximize the System's ability to solve difficult budget problems by allowing a significant population, our students, to be involved in the process of spending prioritization.

## Recommendation 2

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that The Board of Regents request its institutions reevaluate their tuition-setting process to ensure more active student participation.

The University of Texas System requires institutions to involve students in the biennial tuition-setting process for each university by having campuses “engage in extensive consultations with students to develop tuition and fee proposals.” However, student engagement in and awareness of the tuition-setting process are inconsistent across the University of Texas System campuses. The University of Texas at San Antonio and The University of Texas at Arlington are model institutions within the System that emphasize transparency and consultation with student groups through their tuition policy advisory committees with substantial student representation.

In light of the upcoming tuition-setting cycle, we recommend that each System institution form tuition advisory committees that operate with a similar level of transparency and involvement from the student population.

### **Academic Affairs**

## Recommendation 3

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council has signaled the importance of academic integrity issues on three separate occasions through recommending system-wide or institution-specific honor codes to The Board of Regents.

We understand that The Board of Regents does not wish to dictate requirements for honor codes to individual institutions. However, a student panel involved in cases of academic dishonesty would be an alternative way to facilitate student participation and awareness of academic integrity throughout the System. In the past, students have been advised against participating in disciplinary panels due to the System’s inability to provide legal defense for students acting on “behalf of the UT System or a UT

institution.”<sup>1</sup> However, this policy changed as of October 2009, allowing for the legal representation of students by The Office of General Counsel.

Academic dishonesty devalues the integrity of students’ education in The University of Texas System institutions. The Council believes that “by giving students genuine responsibility in a collaborative effort with faculty and staff members such a commitment [to academic integrity] can be fostered and maintained.”<sup>2</sup> Student representation on a hearing panel provides for due process by creating a jury of peers.

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that Regent’s Rules allow students facing allegations of serious academic dishonesty to have the opportunity to request an impartial hearing panel with student representation in deciding cases.

#### Recommendation 4

The UT System Student Advisory Council recommends that The University of Texas System Board of Regents establish a task force to assess academic advising, particularly in the pivotal areas of student satisfaction, effectiveness, and efficiency for each institution.

The main priority of each institution is to provide students with the highest quality educational experience possible. By examining the level of student satisfaction with academic advising, The University of Texas System would improve its overall quality. The 82nd Texas Legislature also identifies this issue as a priority in Senate Bill 36.

In 2006, The University of Texas System Board of Regents unanimously passed a resolution to improve graduation rates over the next decade. Furthermore, in an opening statement to The University of Texas System Board of Regents, Chairman Powell included an initiative to increase the number of degrees conferred as one of the Board’s top three priorities (Executive Summary of Remarks, 2011). Effective academic

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Texas System Office of General Counsel, Guidelines on Providing Legal Representation to Students, October 2009

<sup>2</sup> Gary Pavela, Applying the Power of Association on Campus: A Model Code of Academic Integrity

advising is imperative to The University of Texas System's mission to increase freshman to sophomore retention, graduation rates, and overall student success.

Finally, in today's tough economic times, it is crucial that The University of Texas System re-examine programs for efficiency. Academic advising has a direct impact, not only on student success and timely completion rates, but also on the optimal use of funds.

For these reasons, we recommend The Board of Regents create a task force to develop recommendations geared towards improving academic advising with emphasis on the aforementioned core areas.

### **Health and Graduate Affairs**

#### **Recommendation 5**

As The University of Texas System continues to produce well-educated Texans, we also have the opportunity to provide a healthier generation.

In 2009, the American College Health Association classified nearly one in three college students as obese. Studies from the National Cancer Institute show that a regulated diet is a key factor in obesity prevention. Investigative reports from around the nation, including Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, show that displaying nutritional facts on menus leads to healthier dietary choices.

Therefore, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that The University of Texas System Board of Regents strongly encourages all institution dining facilities display nutritional facts including, but not limited to, caloric, fat, sodium, and sugar content.

#### **Recommendation 6**

Although the expectations of graduate students in The University of Texas System typically require year round commitment similar to employees, their classification as students or trainees does not afford them minimal protected time off. This situation often

results in an unhealthy lack and sometimes complete absence of leave time for students in graduate programs.

Research has shown that 44% of graduate students have high levels of emotional or stress-related problems affecting their well-being. One study further noted that graduate students are a population exposed to a higher level of stress due to “isolation from broader components of campus life, intense academic pressures, and increased presence of family and financial obligations.”

Overtaxing students results in deficits in performance, such as lapses in attention, an overall decrease in efficiency, and critical mistakes that may put both students and those around them in danger. However, providing adequate time off reduces stress, increases productivity, and improves mental and overall health.

In response to increasing national concern, the American Medical Association and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education have acknowledged these risk factors and imposed work-limits and time off regulations for medical students.

Notably, The University of Michigan System now includes time off and sick time as standard benefits for graduate students. These protections are not in place for graduate students in The University of Texas System.

We acknowledge that some mentors realize the benefits of, and currently provide, adequate time off for graduate students. However, this is not the case for all graduate students in The University of Texas System.

Given the need for rest and personal time to achieve adequate job performance and to maintain a minimum standard of mental and physical health, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council strongly recommends that The University of Texas System Board of Regents implements sufficient time off guidelines for graduate students. These guidelines should be a bare minimum, allowing for additional time off negotiations between students and mentors.

## **Student, Faculty and Employee Campus Life**

### **Recommendation 7**

In the United States, more than one in four college-age adults smoke, placing smokers and those around them at increased risk for health issues. In 2010, the Surgeon General concluded that exposure to tobacco smoke leads to serious illness or death, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, second-hand smoke exposure causes approximately 46,000 deaths per year.

Providing a smoke-free environment on college campuses will decrease smoke-related health issues, promote a healthier and more environmentally-friendly learning atmosphere, and will likely reduce smoking-related custodial costs.

Therefore, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that The University of Texas System Board of Regents require all System institutions to implement a policy establishing smoke-free campuses within two years. For those institutions that have already adopted, or are seeking tobacco-free policies, we recommend that these policies are implemented and remain in effect.