July 19, 2012

Ms. Samantha Dallefeld
Chair, Student Advisory Council
The University of Texas System
c/o Office of Academic Affairs
601 Colorado Street
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Ms. Dallefeld:

I write to express my gratitude to you and to the members of the Student Advisory Council for your thoughtful recommendations presented to the Board of Regents at their May meeting. I also offer my sincere apologies for this belated formal response to the Council.

The recommendations of the Student Advisory Council have received very careful consideration and review by me and members of my executive team and I share the following responses:

Recommendation 1

Recognizing the unique nature of each UT institution, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council is concerned that the focus on 4-year graduation rates does not provide an accurate measurement of institutional success. Given that only about 30% (excluding UT Austin) of UT System students are included in the calculation for 4-year graduation rates, the UT System Student Advisory Council recommends that the Board of Regents modify the definition of the current 4-year graduation rate used by the System or focus on other metrics that provide a more complete picture of institutions.

While current 4-year graduation rates are measured against peer institutions, given the large portion of students left out of that statistic, UT System Student Advisory Council recommends a more comprehensive evaluation of institutions that takes into account the diversity of each student body. There are growing numbers of non-traditional students matriculating in the UT System, and they are being marginalized by this measure. Preferred metrics include, but are not limited to, degrees conferred, transfer rates, acceptance rates to graduate and law schools, and board pass rates as they relate to each institution’s mission.

The UT System Student Advisory Council further recommends that these comprehensive metrics be considered by the Board in regards to tuition decisions because they provide a clearer understanding of the needs of each institution for improvement, in addition to a more well-rounded definition of quality. We believe this comprehensive focus is consistent with the Chancellor’s call for improving value and quality, while respecting the individuality of each institution.
Response:

I am in full agreement with the Council. Graduation rates cannot be the only factor considered when making tuition decisions that affect an institution’s ability to support its mission. I have reinforced that position in the Framework and in my communications with the university presidents.

The University of Texas System recognizes and takes pride in the diversity of the student body across the UT System institutions. As increasing attention is paid to the need of improving the graduation outcomes of students across the state, we have made efforts to provide different methods of understanding the success rates of our students. Texas accountability measures currently require both a four-year and six-year graduation rate report, and transfer rates and number of degrees conferred are also reported.

The Board of Regents unanimously adopted A Framework for Advancing Excellence throughout the UT System in May 2011. Within this framework, there is special focus on improving student success. Increasing the number of degrees conferred across the UT System is a priority of this plan. The need to improve four-year graduation rates is included, with a specific requirement to measure the graduation rates for different cohorts of students – including transfer students and students that enter UT Austin under the Coordinated Admissions Program.

Another focus of the Framework is the recently launched Productivity Dashboard, a web-based system that allows users to view performance data across the UT System institutions, and is useful in supporting the decision and policy-making aspects of the Regents’ responsibilities. The Dashboard includes data on four-year and six-year graduation rates as well as number of degrees awarded and other student success metrics such as persistence rates, licensure pass rates, percentage of undergraduate students enrolling into Texas graduate schools, and percentage of undergraduate students employed in Texas within a year after graduation.

Recommendation 2

Recognizing that The University of Texas System is comprised of a heterogeneous group of campuses requiring tailored action to their specific agenda, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council is concerned that several avenues for student input regarding tuition and fee setting are not being adequately heard. Therefore, the UT System Student Advisory Council recommends that student opinion, including perspectives expressed in campus-wide referenda and student input in the campus’ tuition recommendation process, be given greater consideration by the Board of Regents. This is increasingly important as the state and federal contributions to higher education continue to fall.

While student success and access to affordable higher education should be priorities, there are instances of pressing student initiatives needing to be addressed that are not directly related to graduation. These include interest in new student unions, facilities, and sustainability initiatives. In the recent tuition setting cycle, students were asked to consider graduation rates and containing costs related to our tuition recommendations. This stymied the ability to discuss other institutional goals, such as seeking Tier One status, transportation needs, the quality of student life, or becoming the nation’s best public research institution.

Student representatives are attuned to the diverse needs of their respective campuses and take seriously the responsibility of communicating important issues for the Board of Regents’ considerations. We ask that the UT System Board of Regents remain open-minded to student-led initiatives and fee proposals backed by a majority vote of the student population at the individual campuses and to the student input given in matters of tuition setting.
Response:

Student input into decisions affecting their campuses, particularly those involving financial impacts, is an important part of the decision-making process and your voices should be heard and considered. As we address the needs of students, while maintaining sensitivity to the current budget challenges affecting the state, we rely on the representation of our Student Regent and our Student Advisory Council Representatives to help shepherd the process. In setting tuition, every campus must have procedures in place to solicit student input. During the past cycle of tuition setting, every campus held public hearings to gain feedback from students on planned tuition and fee increases. Many campuses requested online feedback for those that were unable to make it to the hearings. The feedback received from those events was taken into consideration by each of the campuses in their recommendations brought forth to System.

Student referendums on fee increases are, at times, a part of the budget process, and activities such as student recreation and student centers are not supported by the tuition dollars you pay each semester. As your student bodies consider projects to improve campus life, know that we always take into consideration the results of your student referendums regarding fees as one important factor in the decision to approve tuition and fee increases on each campus.

While there are many opportunities for students to express their views in the tuition and fee process, there is always room for improvement in the ways in which those views are expressed. Student Advisory Council representatives are one way to do this, and we appreciate the role you play. There may be alternative avenues of communicating student feedback that we need to explore, and we would appreciate your suggestions on how to improve the channels of communication between students and the Board of Regents.

Recommendation 3

In January 2012, the U.S. Department of Education reported that hybrid courses are “increasing the availability of learning experiences” reflecting the positive influence these courses have on students. Some benefits of these courses include accommodating a variety of learning styles and scheduling needs.

Hybrid courses are “courses in which significant portions of the learning activities have been moved online, a combination of traditional classroom and internet instruction.” This will promote optimal space utilization for campuses experiencing a space deficit, aid a significant population of non-traditional students, and enhance learning outcomes across student populations.

To ensure our students receive the highest quality education, in conjunction with continued opportunity for educational advancement of technology within the classroom, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that The University of Texas System Board of Regents continue the further development and research of hybrid courses that will meet the needs, missions, and goals of each institution.

Response:

Thank you very much for your support of our efforts to encourage greater use of alternative course delivery methods. UT System has been very active in the use of online courses, most recently with the launch of Finish@UT through The University of Texas System Online Consortium, which allows individuals that have completed most of their college coursework to complete their bachelor’s degree online.

The Framework for Advancing Excellence addresses the need to increase blended and online learning to augment student success. I am in the process of hiring a national expert to lead the effort to develop a plan toward this goal. Presidents from each campus have been instructed to
enhance their use of technology to improve student learning, including distance education and hybrid instruction.

The use of internet instruction in conjunction with traditional classroom instruction is currently in use at various levels across the UT institutions at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Institutions are finding that a well-planned and well-designed blended course is a very effective instructional method of delivering course content to students. We will continue to support the campuses in their pursuit of innovative and effective alternative techniques to instruction and content delivery.

**Recommendation 4**

In 2006, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council proposed the creation of an online degree audit program. The Chancellor acknowledged this recommendation as an ongoing process.

Effective outlining of course requirements is an essential component of timely degree completion. The council requests revisiting progress made on this recommendation since in some cases the creation of online degree plans has yet to be fully implemented. The council further recommends full utilization of online tools to aid in academic advising. Specifically, this should include the following:

- Creation of program specific online degree plans
- Online scheduling of appointments between student and advisor
- Degree plans adaptable to individual student progress and planning
- Student accessibility to degree audit

**Response:**

I wholeheartedly agree that there is a great need to make better use of online tools to decrease time-to-degree. To this end, the Board of Regents entered into a partnership last fall with MyEdu to help students map a path to graduation. Each of the nine academic campuses are currently working with My Edu to upload degree plans and course schedules to develop a robust online tool for students to use in their planning and scheduling. My Edu is not meant to replace advising; rather, it will be utilized to augment the efforts of our talented academic advisors and faculty. Students will be able to track their own progress throughout their college years and communicate with faculty and advisors when concerns arise. This is an ongoing process of improvement, but we anticipate that each campus will have their degree plans and schedules available to students through MyEdu before the Fall 2012 semester begins.

In addition, System campuses are incorporating online initiatives in academic advising, student information systems, and learning management systems as technology and resources allow.

**Recommendation 5**

The University of Texas system has been very active in improving the quality of care at student health centers. However, patient experience with student health care services has been unsatisfactory at multiple institutions. As such, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that each institution implement a means of evaluating patient satisfaction of student health care.

In order to further improve the standard of care received by students at The University of Texas System institutions, we recommend each institution:
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- develop a Student Health Advisory Committee or appoint a student representative in any existing committee to serve as a liaison between the Health Advisory Committee and the student body,
- create a patient satisfaction evaluation process, and
- ensure oversight of the evaluation process with periodic reviews by The University of Texas System.

Response:
The health and well-being of our students is very important to us. The student health centers on our campuses are focused on keeping students healthy so they can continue to pursue their academic goals and dreams. Many of our campuses with student health centers have either a Student Health Advisory Committee or a student representative on an existing committee, as you recommended, and share student concerns with student health center administrators. I will forward your request to our presidents so that those campuses that do not currently obtain student input in this fashion may consider doing so. I will also encourage the consideration of a patient satisfaction evaluation as another means of determining the success of each health center in meeting the needs of their patients. I will discuss with the presidents the best way to ensure that students are receiving the quality care they deserve from their student health centers.

**Recommendation 6**

Given the rising cost of living near many of the campuses, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that the Board of Regents establish a cost-of-living evaluation system for graduate students on each campus. Evaluation for graduate stipends differs widely across the System and is based on competitiveness, cost-of-living, or a combination thereof. This issue is of particular importance to non-STEM fields where no stipend levels are set by a federal agency. There should be a minimum standard to ensure that the UT System will continue to attract high quality students.

In addition, implementation of a cost-of-living evaluation system will aid tuition and fee discussions, and help determine allocation of graduate and professional school loans. This measure will help relieve the student debt burden, especially with the recent loss of subsidized loans and changes in the management of unsubsidized loans for graduate and professional students. Therefore, we request a cost-of-living evaluation system be implemented across The University of Texas System.

Response:
The costs associated with attending a university are significant, particularly for a graduate student. The University of Texas System institutions strive to make their graduate student stipends competitive with other schools within and outside of the state, but the level of those stipends varies, as the amount is dependent on the student’s duties, experience, funding source, and location. It would be difficult to impose a standard that would be applicable across all institutions and disciplines.

The Office of Student Financial Aid at each campus develops a cost of attendance for their respective institution which includes living costs. These are typically calculated based on local housing availability and rental rates, along with transportation, food, etc. Many campuses recognize that graduate students might incur higher costs as they often do not live on campus or in a group setting, and adjust the rates accordingly for graduate student cost of attendance. Furthermore, federal financial aid guidelines allow only the costs for the student to be considered in determining cost of attendance, even if that student had dependents.
We will encourage the UT System institutions to examine the process they use to determine cost of attendance to ensure that graduate student living expenses are being appropriately calculated for their geographical locale.

**Recommendation 7**

Multiple UT System institutions have more than 1,000 students who receive military and/or veteran benefits. In light of current events, there is evidence that various institutions will be increasing their military and/or veterans enrollment, such as UT Pan American estimating a 25 percent increase for fall 2012.

By providing military and veteran dedicated personnel in a centralized location to assist with advising, financial aid, counseling, and registration, we will ensure that our United States military personnel and/or veterans and their dependents are receiving the highest quality of education experience that each of our respective universities has to offer.

In the 82nd Legislative Session, Senate Bill 1621 was proposed to establish regional military and/or veteran affairs offices. The bill did not pass due to potential negative fiscal impact. However, we recommend the creation of institutional centers within The University of Texas System schools, which will meet the needs of each campus.

This will encourage our military personnel, veterans and their dependents to obtain an education with UT System institutions. Adoption of this initiative will justify the application for grants to aid in providing the best educational services to our respective military personnel and/or veterans and their dependents.

Therefore, in order to accommodate the needs of the UT System population at-large, the members of The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council propose the creation of a population-based center, to enhance the services provided to our United States military personnel and/or veterans and their dependents.

**Response:**

As our military veterans and their families pursue their educational goals across Texas, we have an obligation to ensure that we do all we can to make their transition into the academic environment as encouraging and supportive as possible. Each of our campuses recognizes that our veterans require assistance in understanding the federal and state benefits they are eligible to receive, along with other services available to them. As such, all of our academic institutions have a staff member who serves veterans and their dependents; however, where these centers are housed and the space and staff allocated to veteran’s assistance varies across the UT System. This may result in some veteran’s affairs offices being less visible to those that require their services. I will speak with the presidents and encourage them to ensure that their veteran resources are conveniently located and easily accessible on campus.

**Recommendation 8**

Current research shows that student stress levels are increasing in higher education. Students face the rigors of demanding workloads, difficult classes, and time-consuming extracurricular activities which easily can lead to mental and behavioral problems affecting student success. Various institutions in The University of Texas System have adopted successful intervention teams to address circumstances resulting from the negative impacts of stress, and these teams have been largely effective in managing troublesome situations.
The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that the Board of Regents encourage all UT institutions to form behavioral intervention teams and market this preventative mechanism for central reporting of disruptive, threatening, or concerning student behavior.

Effective team implementation includes the following:

- gathers and manages reported information from concerned faculty and staff,
- assesses the level of threat a student’s behavior poses to persons or property in the university community or to disruption of university activities in accord with policies stated in the Student Code of Conduct,
- consults with administrators, faculty, staff and other students affected by inappropriate behaviors,
- develops strategy to manage the threatening behavior with regard to safety and rights of others and minimize negative impact to the university community, and
- intervenes, as necessary, with students and connects them to support services.

Response:
In 2009, each campus was instructed to establish a Behavioral Intervention Team, with a purpose to ensure a coordinated and systematic response to behavioral incidents and assist in protecting the health, safety, and welfare of all members of the academic community. I understand that each campus has established such teams, and I will encourage campus leadership to ensure that students are aware of these teams and ways in which to report incidents and make contact.

In addition, UT System’s General Counsel has worked to understand the extent to which campus personnel can disclose information concerning potentially dangerous student conduct while maintaining compliance with relevant privacy laws.

Samantha, please accept my thanks for the Council's formulation and presentation of these ideas and recommendations. Student voices and input are paramount and I look forward toward building a world-class system of higher education with the assistance of the SAC. The Council’s recommendations, and my comments, will be shared with the presidents and others here at the System office. I am grateful for your service to higher education and to the State of Texas.

With great respect,

Francisco G. Cigarroa, M.D.
Chancellor

FGC/jbp
cc: Dr. Pedro Reyes
    Kenneth I. Shine, M.D.
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