

Report on
Time to Degree
at
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

by the
Time-to-Degree Task Force

July 3, 2006

The Time-to-Degree Task Force was appointed by the Provost to study the time it takes for TAMU-Kingsville students to complete the undergraduate degree and to examine ways to shorten this time. The 14-member Task Force, drawn from the faculty, professional staff, and student body, first convened and planned a program of work on March 21, 2006.

The Task Force studied time-to-degree concepts from various sources of information and through various activities. The group met several times in person and exchanged numerous emails, databases, and other documents. Members made personal contacts to individuals at selected institutions to inquire about policies and programs addressing time to degree. The Task Force participated in a student time-to-degree forum, sponsored by the Student Government Association. The essential results of fact finding are presented in the following paragraphs. After gaining a level of understanding of the issues and options, the Task Force compiled a set of possible remedies. That list was refined into the Table of Strategies that accompanies this narrative.

Status of Time to Degree at TAMU-Kingsville

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board tabulated graduation rates as of Fall 2003 for students entering as full-time freshmen in 1997.¹ Their data indicate that the state average six-year graduation rate at the institution of first enrollment was 46.0%,

¹ THECB, *Baccalaureate Graduate Rates—First Time Entering Undergraduates, Fall 1997 Enrolled for 12 or More SCH*, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006 (<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us>).

while the rate for TAMU-Kingsville was 22.1%. Comparing our four-, five-, or six-year graduation rates among peer institutions on a national scale, TAMU-Kingsville falls in the 2nd decile (second from the lowest) in each category.² On a positive note, the graduation rate at TAMU-Kingsville trends upward, placing the university in the 6th decile for rate trend.

TAMU-Kingsville graduates attended 11 semesters and attempted 168 hours. Graduating with debt may be associated with prolonged stays in college. Although students at all neighboring institutions required 11 semesters to graduate, their students attempted fewer hours and were less likely to graduate with debt, as indicated below.

Institution	Hours attempted ³	Graduates with debt ⁴
TAMU-CC	155	58%
TAMU-International	163	50%
TAMU-Kingsville	168	84%
UH-Victoria	158	*
UT-Brownsville	158	*
UT-Pam Am	167	83%

* Data is not available.

Time-to-Degree Programs

Many Texas institutions with more favorable time-to-graduation rates than those at TAMU-Kingsville may attribute their relative success to higher admission standards and fewer students in remedial programs. Personal contacts with peer institutions failed to uncover any remarkable ideas. However, Texas Tech University has adopted a comprehensive and ambitious program that includes flattened tuition rates and tuition rebates. UT-Pam American articulated strategies including improving financial aid information dissemination, updating degree plans, reducing changes of majors, improving course drop practices, and rewarding fulltime enrollment.⁵ TAMU-Corpus Christi initiated flat-rate tuition in 2005, and observed 35% of students taking 15 or more hours in Fall 2005, compared to 26% in Fall 2000.⁶ Their students pay the equivalent of a 14-hour “board authorized” tuition rate for any course load beyond 11 credit hours. “Board authorized” tuition refers to the local component of tuition. Because the state component of tuition continues to increase by \$50 per hour beyond 11 credit hours, so does the total tuition at TAMU-Corpus Christi.⁷

² TLC Research Division, *Facts at a Glance: Higher Education Graduation Rates, Finding a Benchmark*, Texas Legislative Council, 2006 (<http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/pubslegref/pubslegref.html>).

³ J. Zafarini, unpublished data, 2006.

⁴ Economic Diversity of Colleges, *Percent of Graduates with Debt (2003-2004)*, 2006 (<http://www.economicdiversity.org>).

⁵ UT-Pam Am, Compact with the University of Texas System, FY 2—7 through 2008, UT-Pam Am, Edinburg, TX (<http://oire.panam.edu/publications/utcompact0708.pdf>).

⁶ P. Orser and R. Lovitt, personal communication, 2006.

⁷ TAMU-CC, *Undergraduate Catalog 2005-2006*, TAMU-CC, Corpus Christi, TX (<http://www.tamucc.edu/catalog>).

Input from Students

On April 11, 2006, the Student Government Association, in collaboration with the Task Force, held a forum to discuss time-to-degree options and obstacles. About 27 students attended the forum. The student moderator, a member of the Task Force, proposed some ideas for discussion and invited additional ideas from the floor. Students tended to be dissatisfied with quality of advising in many instances, quality of teaching in a few instances, degree requirements, minor requirements, and information dissemination in general. Students were supportive of charging a flat rate for tuition beyond some threshold level, restricting course drop policies, imposing credit-hour limits on minors, and offering eight-week courses. Students were not supportive of raising the minimum course load for scholarship eligibility.

Strategies

Strategies for shortening time to degree are described in the Table of Strategies. Items are not listed in priority order, except that the first ten items are recommended for adoption; whereas the final three items are recommended for reconsideration later. Forming another committee or task force may be desirable to guide the implementation and to assess the outcomes of policies and strategies adopted to shorten the time to degree.

Table of Strategies, Time-to-Degree Task Force, July 2006.

Strategy	Rationale	Feasibility		Costs	Recommendation
		Pros	Cons		
1. Improve communication with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Information could be provided on Blue and Gold website. •All students should be issued email accounts, linked to their preexisting email service at their request. •Ensure adequate internet access for all students. 	Clear and direct communication could minimize confusion over financial aid and academic policies, degree requirements, and incentive programs such as B On Time.	100% student participation in email may never occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Staff time for administrative tasks. •Costs to maintain Internet access may increase. 	Implement ASAP.
2. Impose mandatory advising for freshmen and new transfer students	Restrict access to registration until permitted by appropriate advisor. Restrictions would remain until freshmen earn 30 credit hours and transfers earn 12 hours at TAMUK.	Students could no longer register without knowledge needed to navigate through their degree plans. Fewer unneeded courses would be taken.	Advisors would be busier; and students may be bothered by need to obtain advisor approval to register.	Costs could be incurred if adopting the policy required more advisors.	Implement in next admission cycle.
3. Limit credit hour requirements for minors to 18 to 20 hours	Curriculum changes would be proposed to ensure that specific minors are not too burdensome.	Students would not delay graduation to complete lengthy minors.	Some loss of rigor and of semester credit hours.	None.	Implement curriculum change requests ASAP.
4. Cap tuition at 12 credit hours	Develop a new tuition schedule, raising the cost of 12 credit hours beyond the present rate (such as to the present 14 hour rate), with flat tuition beyond 12 hours.	Most students take 12 or fewer hours per semester. The flat rate is an incentive to take more than 12 hours.	Students taking 12 or fewer hours would pay more than the current tuition rate.	Revenue may or may not diminish depending on how the tuition schedule is structured.	Implement Fall 07.

Table of Strategies (continued), Time-to-Degree Task Force, July 2006.

Strategy	Rationale	Feasibility		Costs	Recommendation
		Pros	Cons		
5. Improve number and quality of online courses	Add many more courses to our online offerings.	Students would have greater scheduling flexibility. Courses could attract non-traditional students.	Course rigor could be diminished in some cases. Less mature students may experience low retention or high failure rates.	Greater support services for course development and website maintenance.	Strengthen existing efforts ASAP.
6. Bolster and standardize 1201 courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Courses should include ~51% academic content and ~49% transition instruction. •Transition should include: degree plans, time management, test-taking skills, study skills, money management, academic expectations, and connectedness. 	Students would gain practical knowledge and skills needed to thrive in college. Some 1201 courses, now perceived as weak, would be more rigorous and purposeful.	Academic units may resist changes, especially if mandated or if perceived as a challenge to academic freedom.	None.	Begin development of standardized curricular elements ASAP.
7. Improve academic advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide training for advisors and ensure they understand add/drop policies, course sequencing, degree plans, and action dates. •Provide incentives for summer advisors, especially for Hoggie Days. 	Students would receive more reliable information and could plan schedules more efficiently.	Some faculty members may not value advising enough to participate in faculty development programs for advisors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Faculty time for training and advising. •Time or consulting fees for trainers. •Stipends for summer advisors. 	Implement ASAP.

Table of Strategies (continued), Time-to-Degree Task Force, July 2006.

Strategy	Rationale	Feasibility		Costs	Recommendation
		Pros	Cons		
8. Limit general education core to 42 hours	Drop required number of core curriculum hours to state minimum of 42.	Change would eliminate 3 hours from degree plans without encroaching on courses in major.	Student performance on exit tests may drop.	None.	Implement along with current efforts to update degree plans.
9. Expand student access to childcare	Optimize use of the Center for Young Children to meet needs of students with children.	Students with children would be more willing and able to take courses.	Other users of the Center may be denied service.	None.	Begin ASAP.
10. Offer tuition rebates	Give partial tuition rebates to students earning a GPA of at least 2.0 for 30 credit hours during an academic year.	Rebate program would encourage students to complete 30 hours each year and to maintain a 2.0 GPA.	Potential to diminish tuition revenues.	As with the tuition cap, revenue may or may not diminish depending on the new tuition schedule.	Begin Fall 07.
11. Revise course drop policies	Current drop policy may be too liberal; but student drop patterns may change if new policies are enacted.	Students may not try hard enough to pass a class knowing they can drop freely.	Students may accumulate poor grades if dropping is restricted.	None.	Reconsider at a later time.
12. Offer 8-week courses	Allow two 8-week sessions to run consecutively within long semesters for selected courses.	Students could concentrate on fewer courses and fewer exams.	Scheduling, financial aid, and census date issues could be difficult to resolve.	Staff time to develop new policy and procedures.	Explore options and feasibility.
13. Correct BA vs. BS discrepancies	Requirements used to distinguish BS from BA degrees may be illogical but may be corrected on new degree plans.	Some students perceive lack of fairness with present degree plans.	Degree plans may reflect intent of the faculty.	None.	Reconsider as degree plans are updated.