

Critical Task Force on Four Year Graduation Rates Final Report

Submitted on July 2, 2015

A Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee Appointed by Former Speaker, Jim Woosley, in October 2014

Committee Members: Gregg Cobb, Julie Harlin (chair), June Martin, Matthew Whiteacre

Committee Charge: Please consider your charge to not only look at four year undergraduate graduate rate but graduation “excellence”/employability. Might the emphasis on four year graduation be affecting excellence in our programs and in our graduates? Are there circumstances we need to be aware of or consider? Can the faculty help our administration and the legislature to improve our four year graduation rate performance and continue excellence?

Committee Activity: The committee met on November 10, and December 8, 2014, February 2, March 2, June 1, and June 29, 2015. The committee met with David Martin, Executive Director of Data and Research Services, and his staff on January 26 and with Karan Watson, Provost and Executive Vice President, on May 28, 2015 in order to gain further insight into the issues related to the charge.

Problem summary: Four year graduation rates are an important piece of our university’s rank and accreditation; increasing our rates isn’t an option, it is a requirement. Though the four year graduation is simply a reflection of a cohort group of full time, first time freshmen who enter Texas A&M University, it is an important piece of information. Generally, this metric is used to compare us to peer institutions. Tied with this metric is time to degree. Time to degree looks at all graduating seniors to determine how many years it took them to complete their degree. Currently, at Texas A&M University the four-year graduation rate for the 2010 FTFT cohort was 52.2%. This rate was 50.7% for the 2009 cohort. The four-year graduation rate was 49.6% for the 2008 cohort. Though we are headed in the right direction, there is still work to be done. Accountability Data:

<https://accountability.tamu.edu/content/action-2015-metrics-retention-and-graduation-rates>

Problem Findings: In visiting with Data and Research Services, the Provost, and through our own discovery, we found much information related to this topic. In fact, the amount of information is almost overwhelming. Below is a concise list of findings.

- We need to do a better job of retaining students we accept.
- Four year graduation rates are closely tied to time to degree; graduation rates looks at first time in college as a cohort, while time to degree looks at all those graduating and how long it took them to graduate.
- We are now at about 50% four year graduation rate; the target should be the low 60% and realistically it takes 4.5 years for most students.
- The legislature is paying us to teach students who never end up with a degree—this is a problem.
- The average debt for students at TAMU is \$24000 at graduation; ½ of graduates have no debt.
- Some colleges are doing an excellent job at four year graduation rates, however, they need to do a better job of high impact experiences with their students.
- Would like to see 60-70% of students with high impact experiences (study abroad, internships, undergraduate research, etc.).

- We need to be careful about using credits on internal transfers (example: student leaves engineering and comes to ag)—especially on core curriculum, we should use every course that makes sense to use and not hold students hostage on courses that are required but not necessarily helpful down the road in the degree plan.
- We must creatively solve the problems to help students reach their goals; the creativity will likely look different for different programs, departments, degrees.
- The biggest thing we have done to date to impact graduation rates was flat rate tuition and encouraging students to complete 15 hours fall and spring. 30 credits/year is the goal.
- The undergraduate degree planner could be a useful tool—it could help departments predict course demand and better plan scheduling options to keep students on track to a timely graduation.
- The provost is funding more core curriculum classes in terms of increasing technology use (not an online course, but a face to face course that incorporates more technology). This could help us move some courses to an online format if it makes sense to do so. Students should be prepared to pay a fee for the convenience of online courses. An example was College of Ed Accelerate to Graduate courses offered online in the summer.
- There is a difference between a student receiving credit for a course and a course meeting degree requirements; for dual credit and transfer courses, we need to do a better job of communicating the requirements for particular degree programs and majors, however this is complicated by students thinking they know what they want to be when they grow up (they are taking the course in high school, dual credit, at 16 years of age).
- Since the state holds us to a 42 hour core curriculum, tracts related to specific degree programs may be helpful in communicating the core requirements for degree programs. We had this at one time, but need to revisit with again with the new core requirements.
- There are opportunities for discussion at the departmental and college level related to scorecards. There may be specific reasons that a program has a longer time to degree—faculty should look creatively at how to maximize and optimize degree requirements and balance those with high impact experiences.
- At the end of the program, do we have students who can be highly successful in the jobs of tomorrow? The information they learn today may be obsolete tomorrow; are they learning to learn, problem solve, and think creatively?

Summary and Final Recommendations:

The committee finds that four year graduation rates, time to graduation, retention, debt, and high impact experiences are concepts that are unique and complex. Currently, Texas A&M University boasts the second highest graduation rate in the state, <https://dof.tamu.edu/content/texas-am-4-year-graduation-rate-second-state>, however there is still room for improvement in order to become more competitive with peer institutions across the nation. The committee has identified several strategies that could help improve this problem.

Potential strategies to improve graduation rates:

- Invest in on-time marketing campaign toward students and faculty
- Identify and invest in at-risk students
- Implement summer provisional program for at risk students
- Increase average semester hours taken—the goal is completion of 30 hours per year
- Reduce number of students who change majors through educational programs at the high school/junior college/freshman level
- Create transition programs for high schools who offer high dual credit hours/associate degrees

- Require summer courses for students to increase the number of hours taken—give a break on fees to encourage enrollment as this is currently a barrier
- Utilize the undergraduate degree planner to assist departments in planning course offerings
- Limit scholarships to four years, including summers, as part of the scholarship package
- Implement software to notify advisors/lock students out of registration if they are failing to take the appropriate courses in their major
- Create and share a formula for graduation rates and completion so that both are easily found. Currently this information is not readily available. One or the other is found, but not both together.
- Increase the recording of high impact experiences through zero credit hour or other means to make these easier to count.
- Create an index/score that includes four year graduation, time to degree, and high impact experiences.
- Survey a random sample of students to determine the barriers to graduating on time (work, money, time, change of major, losing transfer credits, etc.)
- Provide rewards, recognitions, and incentives to faculty who are creative in helping to solve these problems.

Questions to be addressed by the Faculty Senate, Caucus Leaders, and Faculty:

How can faculty help with graduation rates and time to degree?

- Faculty can take the initiative to look at all courses, determine if we are doing what is best for students. Are we focusing on what is best or most convenient for us as faculty?
- Faculty should optimize all experiences with students at the center of programmatic decision making.

What can faculty senate do to facilitate these conversations?

- Caucus leaders and others can initiate these conversations at the departmental and college level.
- Faculty should not wait to be told; we must be proactive in optimizing student activities related to courses, degree requirements, and high impact experiences.

The committee believes that the Faculty Senate Executive Committee should consider how best to implement these recommendations and initiate conversations amongst faculty. Whether we have brown bags to discuss this topic or simply encourage faculty to be aware of these issues and work at the departmental level to initiate change, are some of the options to consider. We are hopeful that the culture at our university will embrace innovation in these areas and that faculty are well-equipped to provide creative solutions to these problems if given an opportunity to do so.

Respectfully submitted, Gregg Cobb, Julie Harlin (chair), June Martin, Matthew Whiteacre.