

GROWING THE FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE

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The Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is based in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education, Health & Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The mission of the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is to identify, conduct, and coordinate research on initiatives and ideas designed to enhance higher education at the institution, state, and national levels to enhance policy and practice.

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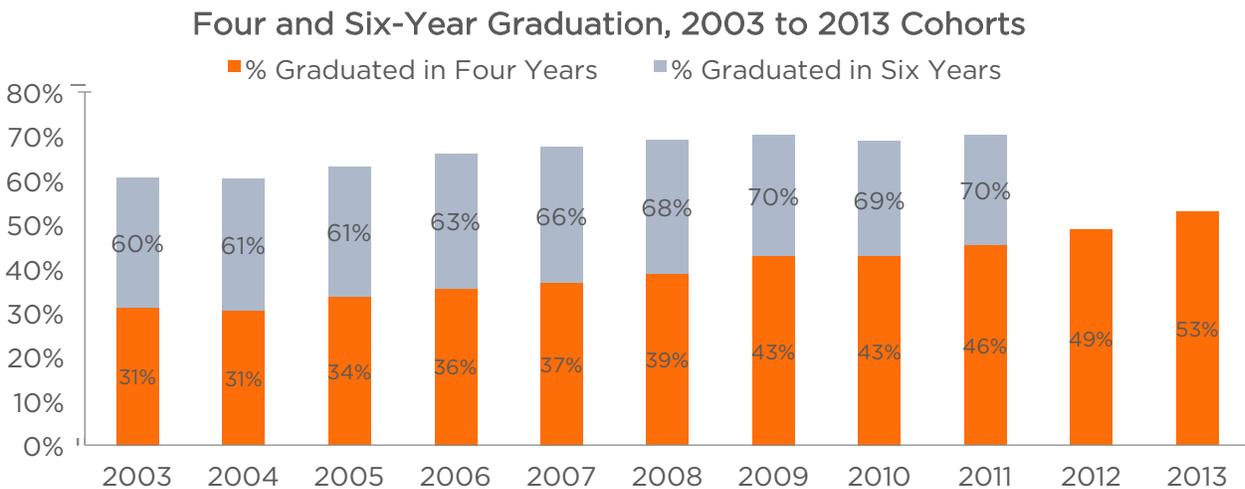
By the Board of Trustees of The University of Tennessee

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Background and Context

In 2007, the graduation rate for students who had started four years earlier (2003) at Tennessee’s flagship and land-grant University in Knoxville (UT) was at 31%.¹ At that time nationally, public universities also had a four-year graduation rate of 31%² and little was being done at UT to rise above that national average. In early 2010, multiple factors combined to shift the institutional focus. Chancellor, Jimmy G. Cheek, had been on the job for a year and was working with the campus to develop a strategic plan focused on making UT one of the nation’s finest public research institutions. That same year, then-Governor Phil Bredesen challenged UT to become a “Top 25” public research university. The strategic planning process focused on how to achieve this transformation. A pillar of the new plan was improving four-year graduation rates. On-time graduation serves Tennesseans in many ways: it reduces the total cost of college, decreases debt, and enables young people to enter the work force earlier.



Note: The numbers at the bottom of the chart indicate cohort year. For example, column one shows 31% of students who started in 2003 graduated by 2007 and a total of 60% graduated by 2009.

¹ [Office of Institutional Research and Assessment](#)

² [Graduation rates of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, and control of institution: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2006](#)

By 2017, the four-year graduation rate for students who had started in 2013 had increased by 22% to 53%. This case study traces key actions that led to that dramatic improvement in on-time graduation for undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee.

The “Big Four”

Four targeted actions focused on four-year graduation: the 15-in-4 tuition model, the Strategic Instruction Fund, uTrack, and consistent messaging about four-year graduation.

Money Talks

Prior to the fall of 2013, the undergraduate tuition model at UT was capped at 12 hours. In other words, students were considered full-time when they had enrolled for 12 hours and paid no additional tuition regardless of the number of credit hours for which they had registered. This model had two significant negative consequences. First, students who registered for only 12 hours per semester could not complete the 120 credit hours required for graduation in four years. Second, the university was not receiving revenue for all credits above the 12-hour cap, which led to financial constraints related to funding instruction.

A taskforce reviewed tuition models at peer institutions and developed a new model that requires all full-time undergraduate students to pay for 15 hours of instruction. The new “15-in-4” model was approved by the board of trustees and phased in over four years. The 15-in-4 model provided a financial incentive for students to graduate on time. Eliminating the need to return for extra semesters allowed students to better manage debt loads. Additionally, increased revenue was directed back to instruction, with a particular focus on increasing instructional capacity in “bottleneck” courses.

Bottlenecks Block

During the recession of 2008, UT experienced significant reduction in state revenue and experienced cuts to the instructional budget as a result. Some courses, such as introductory-level science, language, and composition classes, had far more demand than available seats. This problem was compounded by the fact that students who registered early often signed up for more courses than they actually planned to take with the intention of dropping one or more classes later in the semester. Students who registered late were left with few options for courses that fulfilled their degree requirements. Some students had to put off introductory level courses until their junior or senior year when they had higher registration priority and could sign up for those classes before all seats were filled.

Three specific actions were taken to address these bottleneck problems. In 2011, a policy change was put in place to reduce the “over-registration” problem. Under this new policy, students could only drop four classes during the course of their undergraduate program. Second, starting in 2012 between \$3 and \$4 million per year was directed toward a strategic instruction fund (SIF). The provost’s office worked directly with deans and associate deans to make sure that SIF dollars were used to hire lecturers and graduate teaching assistants who could teach additional sections of bottleneck classes and labs thus making the courses available to more students at more times and on more days. Third, extra sections of bottleneck classes were scheduled and funded during summer sessions as a way to help keep students moving forward toward graduation.

Milestone Markers

While all majors on campus already had guides that outlined specific requirements for degree completion, some students still struggled with progression through their majors. For example, some students repeated classes multiple times while trying to earn the grade necessary for moving to

the next course in a sequence. To address this problem, faculty reviewed all majors and identified key “milestones” that students needed to complete each semester to stay on track for four-year graduation. Those milestones served as the framework for uTrack, an internally developed tracking tool that launched in fall of 2013.

Designed to be a kind of GPS for degree-completion, uTrack helps advisors have sometimes-difficult conversations with students. If students miss milestones, they meet with an advisor who helps them get back on track and/or identify new majors that are consistent with students’ areas of academic success.

Messaging Matters

In listening to campus conversations, it was clear that students were not getting a consistent message about four-year degree completion. Among students, there was a widely recognize tradition of taking a “victory lap” by coming back for a fifth fall semester. This was often positioned as “one more football season.” Advisors had been giving some students the message that it was best to start with 12 hours to “get a feel” for college in their first semester or two. Even some social and academic organizations placed value on the fifth- or sixth-year “super senior” as someone who was ideally positioned to take on leadership roles.

But in fall of 2010, Chancellor Cheek led the way in changing campus conversations. One of the most concrete examples of this change occurred during Torch Night – a convocation for first-year students held just before classes begin. During the ceremony, the chancellor asked all students to open an envelope that had been placed on their chairs. Inside, students found a tassel with a signet bearing the year 2014. Chancellor Cheek told students he looked forward to seeing them wearing a tassel along with the rest of their academic regalia as they crossed the stage to graduate in four years. This messaging about being part of the class of 2014 carried through to other

communications with students and the tradition continued into future years. Advisors were also encouraged to talk with students about four-year graduation plans. And the notion of a “victory lap” or the role of “super-seniors” began to fade from the student vocabulary.

Supporting Programs and Services

In addition to the big-four programs outlined above, many other action items in the strategic plan supported four-year graduation. Those are presented in terms of three strategic priority areas: provide adequate core support, support transition into the first year, and engage students based on individual profiles.

Provide Adequate Core Support

UT added 20 academic advisors between 2011 and 2014 and as part of a new advising plan is committed to adding more advisors until student/advisor ratios are on par with national averages. UT also leveraged technology solutions to equip advisors to more effectively support students. New capabilities included web-based appointments, shared notes, new communications options, a robust Early Alert program, and new reporting functions. Learning support and tutoring centers in both the Student Success Center and Multicultural Student Life expanded services.

A new One-Stop Express Student Services center was designed to eliminate “student runaround” related to registration, financial aid, and bursar transactions. Prior to the One-Stop, students often spent hours in multiple long lines at different locations to complete basic transactions. At the One-Stop, a single location in the heart of campus, students can complete most transactions in a single visit with a single point of contact. Today, the University of Tennessee is recognized as a national model for one-stop student services.

Support Transition into the First Year

UT expanded the number of Ignite Summit sections, a pre-matriculation program that demonstrated a 94 percent retention rate in previous participants. UT also reinforced the four-year graduation message to students and parents during orientation and Welcome Week. Nine new learning communities and expanded first-year seminars were created. A new online course serves as the umbrella for the common reading program and also provides learning modules to smooth student transition to college.

Engage Students Based on Individual Profiles

Recruitment efforts focused on bringing in more highly qualified students while also continuing to serve Tennesseans, many of whom have high financial need. All students benefited from the development of high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, service learning, study abroad, and internships. As part of SACS-COC reaccreditation, UT developed a new quality enhancement plan that focused on experiential learning. For high-ability students, the honors programs were expanded and made more rigorous and the Volunteer Scholarship was created to recognize students with exemplary academic records.

For high-need students, Promise and Pledge Scholarships were expanded and students were provided special services to “fill gaps” resulting from

STUDENT VOICES:

“Staying on track in classes, never dropping a class or using a W, and following the recommended curriculum in order to graduate in 4 years.”

“My academic advisors have really helped me. They have been there to answer any question that I may have had.”

“The scholarship that I received and encountering teachers and professors that show they care and want you to actually learn.”

“I found it very important to live on campus, participate in freshman welcome week activities, and study abroad.”

“Going to Ignite Summit. That’s where I made my first friends on campus (I wouldn’t have known how to otherwise).”

“College Scholars Program, service learning based classes, and scholarship support.”

“My primary investigator on my undergraduate research is a huge motivation for me. He makes me feel like success is possible.”

“I am the first in my family to graduate from college and understand that my success will be for both me as well as my family.”

less-rigorous high school experiences and/or lack of family college-going traditions. For example, low-income students who lacked needed preparation in mathematics, were invited to an all-expenses-paid math camp during the summer before their first year.

Applying statistical models to data on student retention, a UT faculty team estimated relationships between student characteristics and first-year retention. UT was able to better define at-risk populations and develop targeted programs.³ UT also conducted survey and focus group research among students who left⁴ and those who stayed⁵ to determine contributors and inhibitors of student success. Both studies found the biggest challenges for students are finances, academics, and finding a “fit” at the university. See student quotes that highlight “secrets to success” from seniors who completed the stayers study.

Teamwork, Waiting, and Culture Change

While the Chancellor and the Governor set the vision and delivered the challenge, the development and implementation of the strategic plan was a campus-wide effort. The Provost’s office drove academic policy changes, instruction allocations, and development of campus-wide programs and services such as uTrack, One-Stop Student Services, first-year seminars, the Experience Learning quality enhancement plan, Math Camp, and expansion of honors, advising and learning support programs. These programs and services was supported by academic affairs units such as enrollment management and student success and by the deans and associate deans of each of the academic colleges. Faculty were involved in curriculum review (for uTrack and Experience Learning) and changes to policies. Faculty also conducted some of the foundational research that increased understanding of student opportunities and challenges.

³ See: [An Analysis and Forecasting Model of Student Retention at UTK](#)

⁴ See: [The Leavers Survey: 2011-2012 Cohort](#)

⁵ See: [Leavers, Stayers, and Contemplators: Understanding the Drivers of Student Success For Low-Income Students](#)

The division of student life was also a key partner in supporting four-year graduation goals. Messaging was carefully reviewed for all programs during orientation and Welcome Week to ensure that the 15-in-4 message was communicated and reinforced. Student life also expanded important success programs such as the Ignite pre-matriculation program and learning communities.

The division of finance and administration led in creation of the 15-in-4 tuition model. Finance also took the lead in identifying new revenue sources (e.g., differential tuition in high-demand programs such as engineering and business) and in allocating funds to remove bottlenecks and to fund scholarships that support students' academic progress.

The office of research and engagement created the undergraduate research program and also played a strong coordinating role in other engagement efforts including the development of the Experience Learning QEP. Finally, the office of communication and marketing played a central role in managing messaging around initiatives that support four-year graduation.

As the table presented in this case shows, growth in four-year graduation rates did not happen immediately. In the first three years of implementation, rates climbed slowly. Some programs (e.g., the 15-in-4 model and uTrack) took time to implement. Furthermore, it took time to change the culture. Centralized messaging about four-year graduation competed with student-based messaging about “victory laps” and “super seniors” in the first few years. But by 2013, four-year-graduation rates had leaped by 12 percent (for the cohort that began in 2009) and both programs and messages clearly supported the importance of on-time degree completion. By 2017, the four-year rate had reached 53% -- 22% above the baseline.

Conclusion

With a vision of becoming a top-tier university, UT was able to focus on four key actions and multiple supporting programs and services targeted at improving four-year graduation rates. The improvement in on-time graduation took a village. Improvement in graduation rates did not happen immediately. But change happened. The majority of students at UT now graduate in four-years.

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