

University of Texas moves to enforce 'slacker' rule

Daniel de Vise

The University of Texas at Austin is one of the nation's top research universities. But you wouldn't know it from the school's four-year graduation rate.



University of Texas students pose for a class photo.(AP Photo/UT Austin, Marsha Miller)

Just 53 percent of 2004 freshmen graduated four years later, according to the latest data from the federal government. The graduation rate jumps to 80 percent by year six. Six seems to be the magic number: UT's grad rate improves only a few more points by eight years. All good things, as they say, must come to an end.

UT is one of many public universities where students tend to hang around. It's set, after all, in Austin, one of the great college towns. Tuition is relatively low, living expenses modest, and many fifth- and sixth-year students can think of no earthly reason to leave. (For further study, consult the seminal Gen-X movie *Slacker*.)

Low four-year graduation rates are one of higher education's dirty secrets. Berkeley, with a 91-percent graduation rate, gets only 69 percent of its undergraduates through in four years. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a six-year graduation rate of 83 percent —and a four-year rate of 50 percent. The University of Colorado, Boulder, has a four-year rate of 41 percent, and a six-year rate of 68 percent.

Notice a pattern? These are all great universities set in lovely college towns. All are relatively cheap, at least by comparison to the top private universities.

But four-year graduation is becoming a priority for all of those schools. President Obama wants to regain the world lead in college attainment by 2020. Lawmakers in every state want to lower the cost of higher education — and a six-year BA costs more than a four-year BA. The schools want to move seniors out so they can move more freshmen and transfer students in. UT summarized the case for on-time graduation in a report Wednesday:

"Students who graduate in that timeframe begin their careers or pursue graduate education sooner than their peers while taking out less in student loans. Their parents save money on tuition costs. The university, itself, proudly sends these graduates into the broader world as representatives of UT Austin while gaining additional capacity for new students."

UT's goal is to raise its four-year graduation rate nearly 20 points to 70 percent within five years.

Here are some of the report's recommendations. I noted with interest that Texas has codified a formal "slacker" rule. Richard Linklater is driving fiscal policy!

One key move is to identify "bottleneck" courses, which are required for graduation but perennially oversubscribed. Students at UT, just like their peers at Berkeley and the other top publics, literally cannot register for some of the courses they need to graduate, because of reductions in faculty and space in the downturn.

Another is to enforce the state's "slacker" rule, which increases tuition for students who fail to graduate despite having enough credits.

Others:

- Require orientation for all incoming first-year students,
- Create an online tool to better allow students and advisers to monitor progress to a degree.
- Develop more intervention programs to identify and assist students in academic trouble.
- Identify "bottleneck" courses where lack of available seats can impede students' ability to graduate.
- Make it more difficult for students to change majors after four semesters, or to add a second major unless the requirements can be met within four years.
- Creating flat-rate summer tuition to encourage students to take more courses then. Austin and other college towns are virtually empty in summer, and vast learning space sits idle.

Fonte: The Washington Post, Washington, 16 Feb. 2012, Internacional, online.