

Jan. 30, 2007, 10:14AM

UTEP's degrees don't add up

Formula misses bigger picture at predominantly Hispanic school

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EL PASO — Diana Natalicio, president of the University of Texas at El Paso, asks the same question at every commencement: How many of you are the first in your family to graduate from college?

The majority of students stand. The crowd cheers. Parents cry.

Natalicio loves the scene, which captures the persevering character of the predominantly Hispanic campus. But the same students often tarnish the university's image because they take eight, nine and even 10 years to reach this moment.

Less than 30 percent of UTEP undergraduates complete their coursework in six years. The graduation rate is among the lowest in the nation, drawing the ire of state lawmakers who look closely at the numbers when allocating money.

But how relevant is the "graduation rate" for a university where 54 percent of students receive need-based financial aid and many work jobs on the side? Isn't earning a degree enough, especially in a state that needs more Hispanic graduates?

How should colleges and universities measure success?

Those are the kinds of questions that have stumped higher education, state and federal officials. U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings recently called for universities to report how well their students learn, and Gov. Rick Perry has floated the idea of an exit exam for college students.

For now, lawmakers place great weight on a university's ability to keep and graduate its freshmen within six years. With limited resources, they want students to complete their coursework on time rather than taking space at crowded campuses.

Not counted

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, an El Paso Democrat, in particular has been sharply critical of UTEP's sagging graduation rates, saying taxpayers will not continue to support a university that graduates 4 percent of its students in four years.

But the federal formula for graduation rates misses the bigger picture at urban, largely commuter institutions, such as the University of Houston, the University of Texas at San Antonio and UTEP, education experts said.

That's because those who attend part-time or transfer from a community college — the majority of UTEP's student body — are not counted in the formula.

The graduation rate is derived by taking the number of first-time, full-time students at the start of an academic year and determining how many of them have graduated four and six years later.

"In the public policy arena, we want to find fault, and it's easy to point to the colleges for low graduation rates," said Teresa Sullivan, a former University of Texas System administrator and now provost at the University of Michigan, where the six-year graduation rate is 86 percent.

"But not everybody is staying at one school, and not everyone is on full scholarship for four years," Sullivan said.

The formula may work for ivy-covered universities, such as Princeton, where many students come from wealth and the best high schools. They are on an "express train" to graduation in four years, while many at UTEP ride a "commuter train" that makes many stops, with students getting on and off at different times and for various, but mostly financial, reasons, Natalicio said.

"Everyone wants a number, and we haven't come up with one that is good," she said. "If we focus on graduation rates, everyone is less satisfied, including ourselves, with our performance. What it does is frustrate everybody and leads to quick-fix solutions to a problem that is overstated."

She added: "I'm hopeful that we can think of this in a different way."

Natalicio would prefer to focus on the total number of undergraduate degrees awarded each year. UTEP conferred 2,106 bachelor's degrees last year, up from 1,715 five years ago. The increase outpaces enrollment growth over the same period.

What's more, UTEP graduated more Latinos than all but two universities nationwide last year, according to Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education magazine. The university also produces more Hispanic engineers than any institution.

Still, by 2015, Natalicio wants 50 percent of freshmen to earn degrees within six years of enrolling at the university because the state's changing demographics call for more Hispanic graduates.

To accomplish this, she recently guaranteed low-income students enough financial aid to graduate debt-free and promised to freeze tuition rates for incoming freshmen who intend to earn their degree in four years.

The university also has hired more academic advisers, created more on-campus jobs, revised degree programs to eliminate unnecessary courses and worked with local school

districts and El Paso Community College to prepare more students for university-level work.

"There is no silver bullet here," Natalicio said. "There is no one thing that will address every person's complex mix of challenges. We don't disagree with policymakers about the importance of getting students through in four years. But it's not the real world."

'So many constraints'

Elvia Botello reflects UTEP's reality. She graduated last month — 11 years after starting college — but her journey was anything but a leisurely stroll through academia.

The daughter of an assembly-line foreman and stay-at-home mom, Botello enrolled at El Paso Community College after graduating from high school in 1995. By the time she transferred to UTEP in 2001, she had a family and a full-time job.

Botello squeezed in three courses every semester for nearly four years before dropping out of school just one accounting course shy of a bachelor's degree. She didn't have the time or money.

She only re-enrolled after a phone call from the university, which last year started contacting students who had left campus in good academic standing.

"If there weren't so many constraints in my life, I would have graduated in four years," said Botello, now 29. "But I had a job and a family."

She is hardly unique at UTEP, which draws 82 percent of its 19,842 students from El Paso County, one of the state's poorest areas. More than a quarter of the county's 720,000 residents live in poverty, only two-thirds of adults graduated from high school and three-quarters of residents speak a language other than English at home.

Ten percent of the university's students live across the Rio Grande in Juarez, Mexico. And while many people in this border region believe higher education is the ticket to a better life, few know how to obtain it.

Cash flow is a real problem for many students, and too many are averse to taking loans, so they may leave school for semesters at a time to work or take fewer classes because the textbooks are too expensive, campus officials said.

UTEP's students graduate with the lowest average indebtedness among the country's public research institutions, according to the Institute for College Access and Success's most recent data. In response, the university is trying to educate students and their families about the long-term advantage of borrowing over taking more time to graduate.

Considering the financial issues, improving the graduation rate to 50 percent in six years will be a daunting task, said Howard Daudistel, the university's dean of liberal arts.

"We know and they know from the beginning that they won't finish in four years," Daudistel said. "A lot of people are identifying academic success with speed, but we look at students as investments. Some will pay dividends faster, and others will take longer. But we're looking for the quality of the returns."

At the same time, Shapleigh, the state senator, has pushed for a series of reforms, including offering more off-hours courses, creating online degree and financial plans for students and parents, and providing early registration and flat-rate tuition for those who promise to graduate in four years.

Shapleigh said 50 percent of UTEP's undergraduates should be earning a degree in four years by 2015, if the university follows his plan.

"The standard measure of success in academia is a four-year graduation rate, whether you're at Princeton or Peoria," he said. "It's the one number that presents a clear indicator of the job we're doing. Just ask a parent what they think of the six-year graduation rate."

Despite the low graduation rates, UTEP has received high marks within education circles. The National Science Foundation has selected the university as one of six models for excellence in science, engineering and mathematics, and other schools have copied its programs to ease students' transition to campus.

"They get praised and beat up in the same breath," said George Kuh, a professor of higher education at Indiana University Bloomington. "Unfortunately, they're both accurate."

Universities should place an emphasis on graduation rates, but it's inappropriate to compare UTEP to the University of Texas at Austin and elite private colleges, he said. In fact, Kuh said, UTEP graduates more students who aren't expected to graduate because of their economic hardships.

Jerry Villagrana, for one, lived in a house without running water on the outskirts of El Paso when he started high school. Now he is a semester away from earning a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering in under six years. His father, who wants Villagrana and his younger sister to be the first in their family to finish college, would rather spend money for a calculator than to tile the concrete shower.

"All of us are in the same social class," his son said. " ... Everyone is working for the future their parents didn't have."

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