

A New Framework for Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

After years of increases in the number of students earning bachelor's degrees, completions at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) began to plateau and decline by 2013. UTEP's Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning (CIERP) had already determined 1) that most risks related to degree completion are mitigated by the senior year, 2) that course-load and course-taking pattern determine time-to-degree for seniors, and 3) that advising and administrative adjustments in course scheduling could remove barriers for seniors whose progress had stalled, allowing them to complete their degrees. Moreover, CIERP's research revealed that timely graduation for seniors is largely determined by the availability of courses students need, and the effective completion of advanced degree requirements (e.g., capstone courses), which are generally managed by faculty and chairs within academic departments. To move beyond these findings, UTEP's Provost Office led the implementation of the Student Success Continuous Improvement Initiative to empower faculty leaders with accessible, actionable student-level data and to increase degree completion by focusing on seniors.

One major aspect of UTEP's initiative was shifting perspectives from the administrative/system view of degrees awarded as an aggregate metric that appears on accountability dashboards to a more student- and faculty-centric view of degrees as a measure of individual student success. While chairs and faculty have limited interest in accountability dashboards, they have strong internal and external

motivation to positively impact the success of students, their families, and the community.

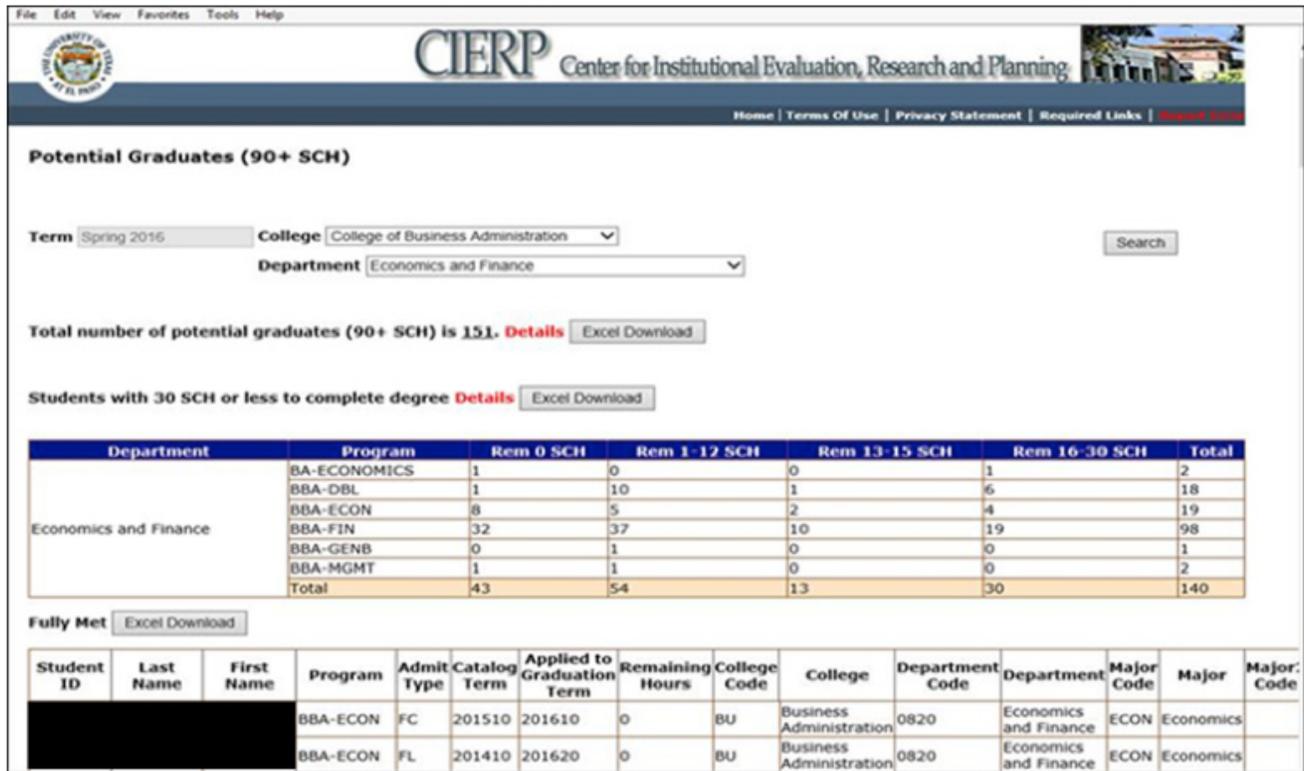
USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

In conjunction with faculty chairs and program directors, UTEP's Student Success Continuous Improvement Initiative focused on increasing degrees awarded from year to year by establishing the importance of continuous improvement in outcomes. Having discovered that a student who stopped out for even one term was far less likely to graduate, CIERP created a web-based tool that displayed both aggregate and student-level, term-to-term retention data for deans. The tool indicated trends by college, including the number of students who needed to be retained to match retention rate benchmarks, such as the highest rate over the last decade. Additionally, the tool was updated daily with details on academic standing and financial holds on students who had not re-enrolled. All data provided in the tool is already available to academic deans and department chairs, but the tool makes the data easy to access by authorized users.

With their Potential Graduates Tool, CIERP could display data from multiple data systems (e.g., completion status of degree requirements, current course registration, and student academic history) in a simple format. Each faculty chair or program director could see trend data for degrees awarded in their department alongside information about students with pending degrees, including any barriers students may face (e.g., missing required courses). CIERP pilot-



Figure 1. Potential Graduates Tool



ed the Potential Graduates Tool with five department chairs to assess its usefulness and its ability to inform action, and then modified the tool as needed (see Figure 1).

To ensure that all chairs had a stake in the process, the initiative required them to explore sample data together in face-to-face meetings and to address common issues that blocked students from graduation. Soon after these sessions, chairs and program directors were asked to provide the provost's office with their projections about when students with pending degrees were expected to graduate. In subsequent meetings, chairs were asked to share their successes and challenges in meeting their projections for student graduations. Departments and strategies that proved successful in increasing degrees awarded were celebrated in these meetings. The provost's consistent meetings with chairs affirmed the project's importance and positively influenced participation.

RESULTS

The Student Success Continuous Improvement Initiative led to results. UTEP awarded 146 more degrees in spring 2014 than in spring 2013, the largest increase in seven years. Total degrees awarded in the 2013–14 academic year increased by 91 degrees over 2012–13, a 2.9 percent in-

crease that met the institution's original goal. The efficiency ratio of seniors graduating in an academic year to the number of seniors enrolled in fall suggests that the increase in degrees awarded was not just due to an increased number of seniors, but also from chair and faculty efforts to graduate their seniors.

More than 70 percent of individual departments and programs showed increases in degrees awarded over the previous academic year, and more than 60 percent increased their efficiency ratio. In the 2014–15 academic year, degrees awarded continued to increase, raising the efficiency ratio to its highest level in the last 10 years. These figures demonstrate that this chair- and faculty-engaged initiative succeeded in reversing a predicted drop in the number of degrees due to lower enrollment and sustaining the effect over three years so far, indicating promise beyond short-term problem solving. As of this writing, preliminary data for the 2015–16 academic year show a continued increase in undergraduate degrees awarded over the previous year. During UTEP's 2016 reaccreditation process, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges evaluation team widely praised UTEP's new approaches to supporting student success.

LESSONS LEARNED

UTEP learned some valuable lessons during their initiative that are applicable to other institutions.

- ▶ **Track progress and share success stories as a community.** Doing so led UTEP to annual growth in awarded degrees. The key elements are to 1) focus on students; 2) identify a limited set of meaningful performance indicators; 3) emphasize continuous improvement; 4) provide access, training, and ongoing support in using data; 5) empower stakeholders; and 6) celebrate shared successes. These steps can be emulated at any academic institution or organization.
- ▶ **Review existing capacities, staff, and programs before starting.** Institutions do not always need to

start from scratch. While no new financial resources were needed to implement UTEP's initiative, new ideas and collaborative efforts require institutional support for planning in new ways.

- ▶ **Advocate for access to national-level student data.** Current student success initiatives, at all institutions, are based on insights generated from student-level data available within institutional databases. Having access to student-level data available through U.S. Department of Education sources related to enrollment, post-graduation enrollment at other institutions, employment, and salary would have an even larger impact on student success.