Record-Level Data and Post-Collegiate Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

During the recession, families, lawmakers, and the media asked universities to justify their cost and demonstrate the return to students for that investment. The University of Texas System (UT System) wanted to have data-informed responses that demonstrated the value of a degree. In 2012, UT System created the Student Debt Reduction Task Force to explore issues of affordability, success, and student debt. The group's final report proposed helping students match their financial investment to the financial returns they might expect to receive from their degree. Based on these recommendations, UT System partnered with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) which provided 13 years of quarterly earnings for UT System students working in Texas. This data partnership resulted in two major outcomes: 1) the creation of seekUT™ (utsystem.edu/seekUT), a free, online tool to help prospective and current students with college and career planning by providing earnings and loan debt data based on real graduates; and 2) ongoing research and analysis to answer complex questions about students' post-collegiate success.

USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

UT System and TWC used aggregate- and record-level data to create seekUT (Search + Earnings + Employment = Knowledge). Along with TWC record-level earnings data for all students that attended a UT System institution since 2001-2002, UT System tapped data from other sources to offer a comprehensive picture of student employment outcomes. The result is a powerful tool that displays information using interactive visualizations to give users customizable data for more than 200,000 UT graduates across 14 UT institutions by degree level and institution and for nearly 400 degree majors. Data includes (in part):
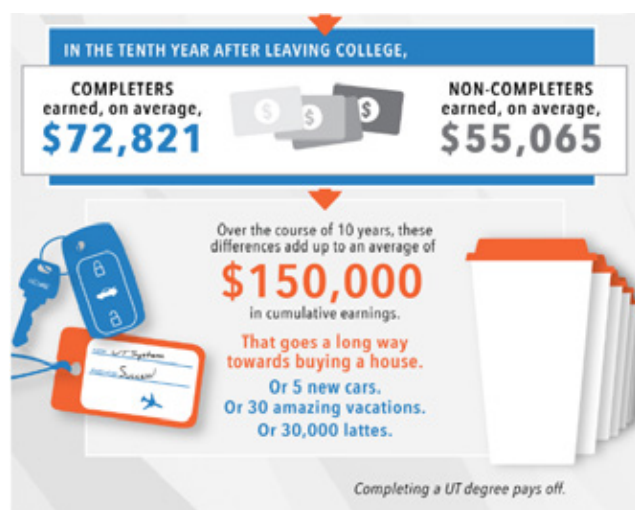
- Median earnings (by degree major) from graduates 1, 5, and 10 years after graduation
- Median student loan debt by major for those students taking out student loans (and percent of students who borrowed)
- Estimated monthly loan payment compared to median gross monthly earnings (debt-to-income ratio)
- Industries that are employing UT graduates
- Percent of graduates continuing their education (National Student Clearinghouse)

RESULTS

A TOOL FOR SUCCESS. UT System engages counselors and advisors at the high school and college levels to urge them to adopt the seekUT tool as part of their advising routine and to recommend it to more students. UT System has also made substantial efforts to obtain student feedback, which it uses to improve and enhance the tool to best meet student needs. Consequently, seekUT has received more than 120,000 views since its launch. By embracing a practical, user-friendly data culture, UT System has created a go-to site for students—especially first-generation students—that helps them compare earnings and debt for var-

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ious majors; realize the costs and the value of an education; understand the importance of completing their degree in a timely manner; and know the labor market demand and salary for desired occupations. The information and analysis will help UT System build a better pipeline of college-ready students and ensure those students find success in and out of college.

Figure 1. A Portion of the Completion Matters infographic

BEYOND THE TOOL: DIVING DEEP INTO THE DATA. UT System also has used record-level data to answer research questions, inform policy, and create metrics to measure institutional performance. Some of the initial, ongoing work includes analysis on the value of completing a degree (see Figure 1 for UT System's infographic showcasing these findings for students) and the effects of gender and ethnicity on earnings, among other findings. For example, UT System learned that full-time, first-time students working exclusively on campus are more likely to be retained the following year compared to those not working, and are more likely to graduate both within four years and six years compared to students who work off campus or who do not work at all.

Meanwhile, on the UT System Dashboard (http://data.utsystem.edu), stakeholders can find a variety of metrics, including two for post-graduation outcomes related to earnings and debt-to-income ratios, and one for state economic impact that explores a view of the ROI that Texas receives for its investment in higher education (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Infometric from UT System Dashboard

TAPPING DATA BEYOND BORDERS. The major limitation of UT System's partnership with the TWC is that it is limited to those students who work in Texas. While most UT System baccalaureates remain in Texas after graduation, this is not true at the graduate levels. Even with this relatively high match rate, there are a significant number of missing graduates, with the largest holes involving graduates from the flagship. To fill in some of the blanks—and perhaps to approach an employment rate—UT System has a new 10-year agreement with the United States Census Bureau to provide data for all graduates working in the US. This will allow UT System to find out more about where students are going when they leave the state after graduation. As the demand increases for data on outcomes, value, and return on investment, the federal government may need to consider the benefits of a federal record-level system.

LESSONS LEARNED

UT System identified several lessons that will prove valuable for the future implementation and evaluation of their efforts.

▶ **Gather regular input from the end user to build a successful tool.** In the case of seekUT, the end users are UT System students. Through focus groups, surveys, and working with student leaders, UT System discovers what students want and need from the tool. Implementing the student feedback continually updates and improves the tool.

▶ **Maintain ongoing marketing and communications efforts to reach the target audience.** A major challenge UT System faces in reaching its target audience (students) is that seekUT is not a tool/website that students need to visit all of the time. In turn, outreach efforts must begin anew with each entering and exiting class.

▶ **Allow space for discovering other uses for the tools and data.** At UT System, seekUT and its related data expanded the footing in areas such as career services (employment by occupation and region report), legislative staff (accumulated earnings report), as well as presidents, provosts, deans, and department heads (employment outcomes report), to name a few.

▶ **Involve a wide array of stakeholders.** UT System created the Vertex Conference to engage individuals from private industry, leaders from two-year and four-year colleges, institutional researchers, policy analysts, career services and financial aid advisors, government representatives, and economic development advisors to discuss the critical challenges facing higher education.