

CASE STUDY: GROWING THE FOUR- YEAR GRADUATION RATE

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

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GROWING THE FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE

A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

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In 2008, the graduation rate for students who had started four years earlier at Tennessee's flagship and land-grant university in Knoxville (UT) was at 31%. At that time nationally, public universities also had a four-year graduation rate of 31% 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.

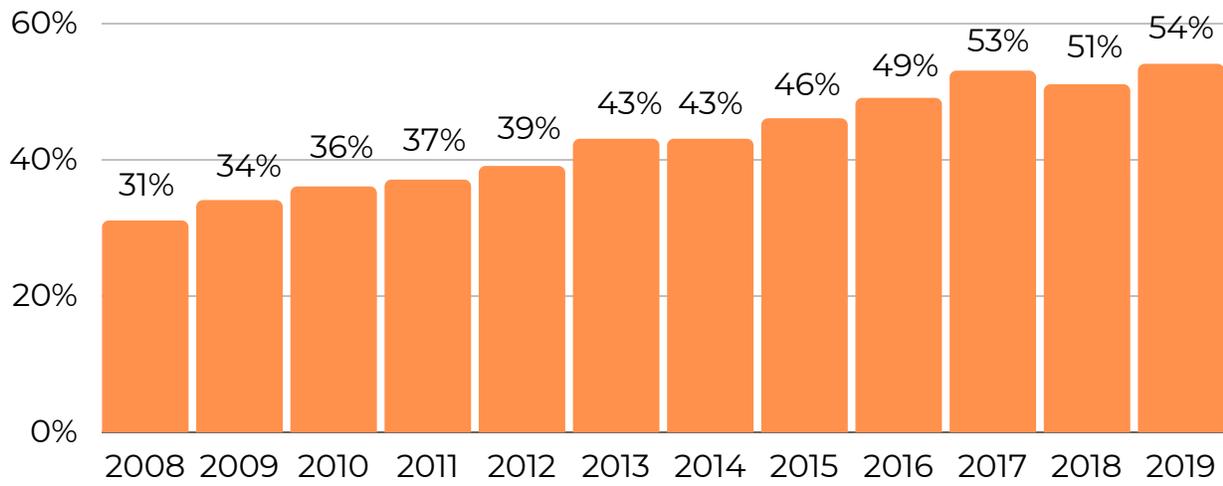
SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED

- Identify and remove major structural barriers to success
- Make targeted investments for quick wins
- Focus student communication messages to support intended outcomes
- Take a student-centered approach to improve programs and services
- Build a broad coalition of supportive campus partners

TORCHSTAR EDUCATION CASE STUDY

One of the key pillars of the new plan was improving on-time graduation of undergraduate students (four-year graduation rates). On-time graduation serves Tennesseans in many ways: it reduces the total cost of college, decreases debt, and enables students to enter the work force earlier.

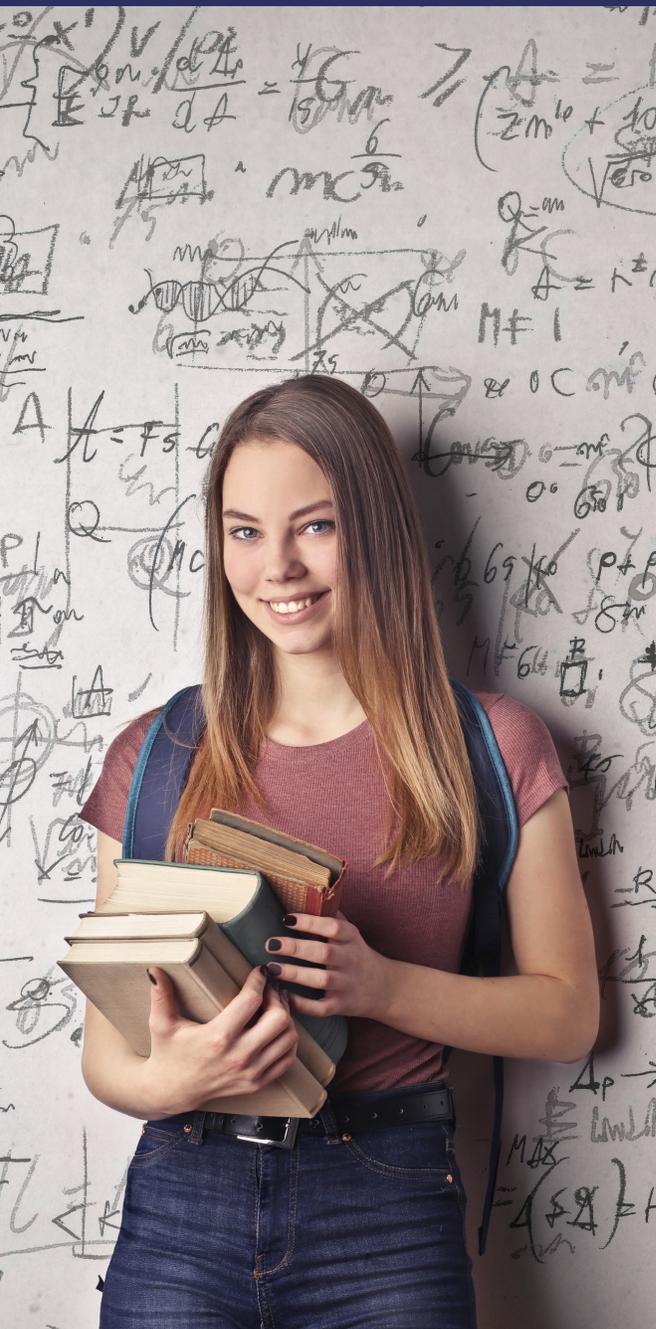
Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2008 to 2019 Graduation Years



Note: The chart tracks shows cohorts by graduation year. For example, column one shows students who started in 2004 graduated by 2008.

By 2019, the four-year graduation rate at the University of Tennessee was 54%, a 23 percentage point improvement rate from 2008.

This case study traces key actions from 2010 to 2015 that led to that dramatic and sustained improvement in on-time graduation.



THE BIG FOUR: STRATEGIES THAT MATTERED

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

Money Talks: Tuition Model

Prior to the fall of 2013, the undergraduate tuition model at UT was capped at 12 hours. 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 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 developed a new model that required 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 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. Increased revenue was directed back to instruction, with a particular focus on increasing instructional capacity in “bottleneck” courses.

Bottlenecks Block: Instruction Fund

During the recession of 2008, UT experienced significant reduction in state revenue and 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 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.





Students on Success

"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."

Milestone Markers: Tracking Progress

While all majors on campus already had guides that outlined specific requirements for degree completion, many 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: Communication Strategy

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. 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 began. 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 the tassel 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. 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.





Students on Success

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

SUPPORTING SUCCESS: IMPROVING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

In addition to the big-four strategies outlined above, many other action items in the strategic plan supported four-year graduation. Those are presented here 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. Tutoring centers in both the Student Success Center and Multicultural Student Life have 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.



Students on Success

“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).”

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 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 had 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-achieving students, the honors programs were expanded and made more rigorous. The Volunteer Scholarship was created to recognize students with exemplary academic records.



Students on Success

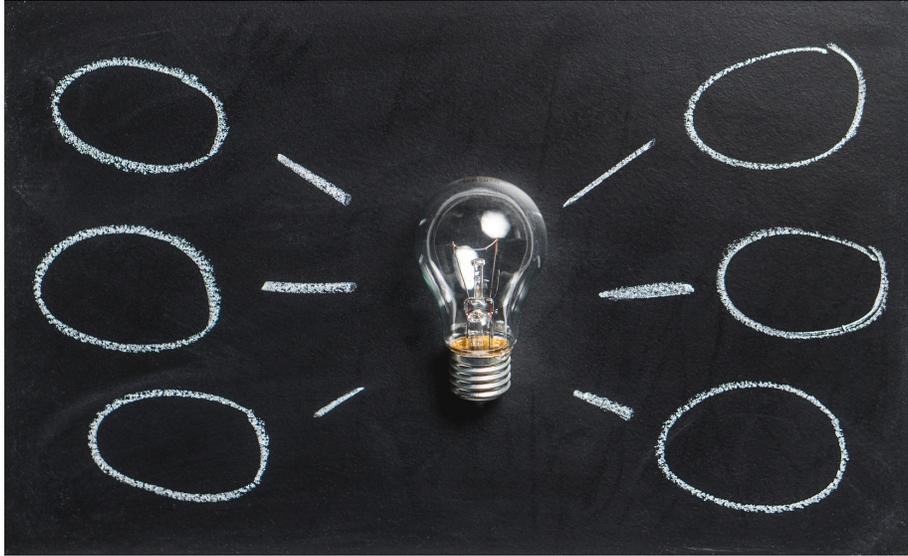
“The scholarship that I received and encountering teachers and professors that show they care and want you to actually learn.”

“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.”

For students with financial need, existing scholarship programs were expanded to cover more students with more aid for tuition, fees, books, and living expenses. Additionally, UT ensured that high-need students could access high-impact programs. For example, when “Math Camp” was created to serve students who were interested in STEM majors but lacked preparation in mathematics, funding was identified to make that experience free for students from low-income families.

Applying statistical models to data on student retention, a faculty team examined relationships between student characteristics and first-year retention. UT was able to better target programs to meet needs of specific students. UT also conducted survey and focus group research among students who left and those who stayed 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 in this case that highlight “secrets to success” from seniors who completed the stayer’s 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 Office of the Provost 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 were 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.

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.

TORCHSTAR EDUCATION CASE STUDY

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 graph 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 the messaging clearly supported the importance of on-time degree completion. By 2017, the four-year rate had reached 53%, a 22 percentage point above the baseline. Today, the graduation rate continues to improve, reaching 55% in 2019.

This case study illustrates that UT was able to focus on and implement key action items targeted at improving four-year graduation rates. The improvement in on-time graduation took a village and did not happen immediately. But change happened. The majority of students at UT now graduate in four-years.

CONTRIBUTORS



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- Students
- Parents and Families

Strategy and Roadmap Development

- Retention and Graduation
- Student Experience
- Parent and Family Engagement
- Strategic Planning (University, Division, Unit)

Organizational Design

Communication Strategy

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