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Push now is on to make 4-year colleges just that

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If churning out college diplomas is the measure of a healthy return on investment in public higher education, then taxpayers aren't getting much bang for their buck in the University of Texas System.

Only 6.1 percent of students at the University of Texas at San Antonio graduate in four years, rivaling the University of Texas at El Paso's 4.5 percent graduation rate for the worst in the nine-institution system, according to figures compiled by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and released recently by the UT System.

The rates increase significantly after six years -- to 26 percent at El Paso, 28 percent at UTSA -- but straggling students burden crowded campuses and their own checkbooks, officials said.

"Those rates are unacceptable to the board," Chairman James Huffines said. "The members have a big responsibility to parents, the students, the public taxpayers to make sure our students are having the opportunity to graduate in a timely fashion."

After years of talking about the problem, the system's Board of Regents passed a resolution Thursday to improve rates statewide, deeming it one of the highest priorities over the next decade.

Gov. Rick Perry applauded the renewed emphasis on increasing graduation rates, but also said Texas colleges and universities should "provide continuous enrollment for students."

"I strongly urge all Texas higher education institutions to take similar steps to improve graduation rates and reduce the time it takes for students to complete their degrees," Perry said.

University officials said getting students into college is crucial, but it's equally important to get them out with diplomas in hand.

Since 1990, Texas has slipped from ranking 23rd in the nation for adults with college diplomas to 35th, according to the state's demographer, UTSA Professor Steve Murdock.

Murdock repeatedly has warned that the consequence of not getting kids through college is a poorer and less competitive Texas.

Chancellor Mark Yudof said each university president must come back to the board in April with targeted increases and a plan of attack. If progress is not made, Yudof hinted that presidents' jobs could be on the line.

"I'm not going to lay out the nuclear option today," Yudof said. But "when we assess how well a president is doing, this will be front and center."

UTSA President Ricardo Romo said he gets the message. His campus already is digging for creative solutions, he said.

"When the regents say this is one of the top priorities of the next decade, what else can you read into it?" Romo said. "This is absolutely one of the most important things to do."

Nationwide, 52 percent of full-time public university students who enrolled in 1996 graduated

in six years, officials said. In the UT System, five institutions recorded six-year graduation rates below 37 percent for the same period.

The University of Texas at Austin has been working on the problem for a couple of years and has the highest graduation rates in the system. About 37 percent of students who enrolled in 1997 graduated in four years and 70 percent graduated within six years.

But it's not fair to compare the flagship in Austin to El Paso, San Antonio and Pan American in Edinburg, which tout open access and serve different populations, officials said.

"The easiest way to increase your graduation rates is to raise the admissions standards," said Rosalie Ambrosino, interim provost at UTSA. "But we are about access and opportunity. We don't want to turn all those students way."

Ambrosino said the university is working hard to improve its graduation rates by stepping up mentorship and advising, grouping students in learning communities, spreading the word about financial aid and placing calls to students who fail to register for the next semester. Rates have gone up by 6 percent since 2000, she said.

But explosive growth has hampered the university's efforts, she said. UTSA ballooned by 56 percent from 2000 to 2004, at least 17 percent more than its fastest-growing peer institutions in Texas and the nation. Like El Paso and Pan American, UTSA also serves a large number of low-income, Hispanic students who are the first in their family to attend college.

Often, those students have a harder time staying in school, Ambrosino said. They come less prepared for the rigors of college coursework, they juggle school with work to support parents or siblings, and they are hesitant to borrow money, she said.

The targets set by university presidents will take those greater challenges into account, said Vice Chairwoman Cyndi Taylor Krier of San Antonio. But that doesn't mean they're off the hook.

"All of those are factors, they are not excuses," Krier said.

Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, cheered the regents' resolution. He said he has been concerned about UTEP's graduation rates for years.

"A four-year grad rate of 4.5 percent at UTEP means that taxpayers paid so that only 110 of the 2,461 students that enrolled at UTEP in 2002 will graduate this year," Shapleigh said. "Taxpayers want a better return on investment."

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