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## UT plans to lift rate, number of graduates; Each campus is working to beat national trends at state's urging

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All nine University of Texas campuses will graduate students at a higher rate than their national peers, the university system's regents promised Thursday in response to legislative pressure from both political parties.

The regents issued an April 15 deadline for each campus to submit plans to increase the percentage of students who graduate in four, five and six years, as well as goals for the next decade. The universities will be measured against schools of similar stature and demographics.

"It's time for us to get serious about it," board chairman James Huffines said after the regents' two-day meeting in Austin.

Lawmakers applauded the regents' action, even though the new policy lacked specifics, such as the sanctions for any university that might fall short of its goals. The percentage of students who graduate in less than six years is widely considered the top performance measure among those who control the state's purse strings.

"This is a step in the right direction," said Geanie Morrison, a Victoria Republican who chairs the state House Higher Education Committee.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, praised the regents' push, but said the focus should be on the four-year rate.

"We know how to graduate students on time," he said. "We just need to make it a priority."

With limited resources, university leaders and lawmakers want undergraduates to complete their coursework on time rather than taking space at crowded campuses, like the 50,000-student Austin flagship, where about 45 percent of students graduate in four years and 70 percent in six years.

Nationally, less than 40 percent of undergraduates earn a bachelor's degree in four years, and about 60 percent finish in six years, according to the Education Trust.

There is no single reason why students do not graduate in a timely fashion. Some leave school to work, while others attend part-time or change majors.

At UT-El Paso, which enrolls many first-generation and low-income students, 4 percent of freshmen students graduate in four years and about 27 percent in six years.

Diana Natalicio, UTEP's president, said she wants the six-year rate to reach 50 percent over the next decade. Among other initiatives, the university is working with neighboring high schools to add rigor to the senior year, so more students are prepared for college-level work.

"We are setting targets that we think are both aggressive and realistic," Natalicio said.

In other business Thursday, William Powers Jr., the new president at UT-Austin, will earn \$525,000 annually under a contract approved by the regents.

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