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When Your College Has Your Back

David L. Kirp MARCH 2, 2018

The University of Texas had a problem — its undergraduates liked bright-lights, biggish-city Austin so much they didn't want to leave. Or that's the optimistic take on it. Many students were simply struggling to finish their degrees. Barely half of each class was graduating in four years.

Most universities are in the same boat. Today just 40 percent of college students earn a degree in four years. This phenomenon is so common that educators now use six years, by which time 59 percent of undergraduates receive their diplomas, as the new normal.

That's bad news. The extra time slows many students' progress toward an advanced degree or a good job. When students stay for an additional year, it costs them or their parents as much as \$40,000, and at public institutions, taxpayers foot part of the tab. And with undergraduates lingering, there is also less room for other students to enroll. Most important, the longer it takes students to graduate, the more likely they are to drop out.

David Laude, a former senior vice provost in charge of student success at U.T.,

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against the president at the time, William Powers, a deal emerged in 2013. The Texas Board of Regents approved a tuition increase, gave the university \$12 million and agreed to invest in programs to help students succeed. The university had already begun drawing up plans to graduate more students on schedule, but Mr. Powers raised the stakes by pledging that 70 percent of the Class of 2017 would graduate in four years.

It was a wildly ambitious goal, but the university came close to reaching it. Last year it raised the on-time graduation rate to 66 percent from 61 percent. This year, the school is forecasting it will hit the 70 percent mark, helping to make room for more than 1,000 additional freshmen. Even more impressive, the gap between the campus-wide four-year graduation rate and the rate for low-income, black, Latino and first-generation students has been cut in half.

Wayne State University, in Detroit, suffered from a far bigger headache than Texas did — too few of its students were graduating, period. In 2014, only a third of the undergraduates who had arrived six years earlier earned a bachelor's degree. That's about 40 percent lower than at Georgia State University, where the undergraduates have comparable backgrounds. For African-American students, the graduation figure was hall-of-shame-low 13 percent. A black student who went to Georgia State was more than four times likelier to graduate than if he or she had gone to Wayne State.

The fault lies with the university. Focused on raising tuition revenue, Wayne State relaxed its admission requirements to add 20 percent more freshmen. Although the newly admitted students needed tons of help to have a prayer of graduating, they mostly got the sink-or-swim treatment. The graduation rate plummeted and the racial divide worsened. For several years, only a handful of black male students graduated within four years.

But there has been a turnaround at Wayne State in the past three years. In 2017, 47 percent of the students graduated within six years, making the university one of the nation's fastest improvers. Still, only 20 percent of black students and 29 percent of Latinos received a diploma. "The goal for 2020 is that the achievement gap will be

wiped out,” said Wayne State’s president, Roy Wilson, who was recruited in 2014 to clean up the mess. “It’s a moral imperative.”

The gains at Wayne State and the University of Texas don’t depend on rocket-science-difficult strategies. Both schools simply started paying more attention to helping those who need it most.

Using what’s called predictive analytics, U.T. analyzes mountains of data from former students’ records to identify those current students, many from low-income families, whose odds against graduating are greatest. It then lavishes them with support. Wayne State focuses on students with weak high school grades and SAT scores.

Instead of waiting for struggling students to acknowledge they’re in trouble, these schools provide them with concierge service from the moment they arrive on campus. Advisers and counselors reach out, upperclassmen are hired as tutors, and “learning communities” of like-minded students offer a haven in the sometimes overwhelming big-campus environment. Bureaucracies that turned seemingly mundane activities like registering for classes into Kafkaesque experiences — “getting Wayned,” students at Wayne State used to call it — are being streamlined.

At U.T., students with the weakest academic backgrounds are placed in paid internships linked to their academic interests. Traditional sage-on-the-stage lecture classes (which studies have found that students are one and a half times likelier to fail than classes that actively engage them) are being replaced by innovations like “flipped” courses, in which students work on projects during class time. Wayne State gives its most vulnerable freshmen an early taste of college with a summer program combining remedial math and reading with college-survival skills like time management.

Initiatives like these build a “we have your back” community. They enable vulnerable undergraduates to realize that they’re not impostors, an all-too-common belief, and that they can handle the obstacles they’ll predictably encounter. These are wise moves, as psychologists have demonstrated that students’ chances of graduating increase substantially when they believe that they belong at the university and that, with effort, they can do the work.

Why doesn't every university make the same type of effort to help students succeed? "The force of inertia is strong, and other presidents cannot believe this is possible to fix," William Moses, the managing director of the Kresge Foundation's Education Program, told me. "This goes to the core of who they are and how they see their jobs. How can we take \$40,000 from a student, knowing that he's likely to fail? Are we like for-profit colleges that don't care about the outcomes, only the revenue?"

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