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UT, A&M Offer New Way to Graduate — From High School

by [Reeve Hamilton](#) | 5/1/2011 | 8 Comments

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KEYWORDS: [Mike Villarreal](#), [Rob Eissler](#), [Texas Governor Rick Perry](#), [William "Bill" Powers, Jr.](#), [Texas A&M University-College Station](#), [University of Texas-Austin](#)



Enlarge photo by: Jacob Villanueva

William Powers Jr., UT President and R. Bowen Loftin, Texas A&M President at TribLive on April 28, 2011.

To lawmakers — at least those who know about it — the addition tacked onto an omnibus [public education accountability bill](#) in the 2009 legislative session is known as the “Doogie Howser” or the “Let My People Go” amendment.

It laid the groundwork for a new option for high school students eager to head to college before their graduation. If students demonstrate sufficient competency in English, math, science, a social science and a foreign language on tests like the Advanced Placement exam, they can receive a certificate that can

be traded for a diploma at any time.

The kinks in this new system are currently being worked out in 16 districts and the [KIPP charter schools](#), but it is expected to become available statewide this fall.

“Kids who are ready to move on — a lot of times, unfortunately, in the current system, those kids get bored,” said Reece Blincoe, superintendent of the Brownwood ISD “They are bored out of their mind. Sometimes that can even lead them going the wrong direction instead of the right direction.”

What’s striking about this new initiative is the willingness of administrators at Texas’ top public universities to work together. The criteria used to evaluate students who want to leave high school early are controlled by the [University of Texas](#) and Texas A&M University. An early departing student may earn a certificate, which does not guarantee admission to either university, but it verifies that the recipient has met the standards for a top-tier research university.

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Despite shrinking budgets, and a propensity of many flagship universities across the country to separate themselves from the demands of other educational institutions in their state, administrators at UT and A&M say they are actively involved in all aspects of the state’s education problems. But their efforts to engage in and even drive fundamental changes — like the new certificate program — are often overlooked in the state’s ongoing debate about higher education reforms.

“We collaborate with UT and others on these sorts of efforts regularly,” said R. Bowen Loftin, president of Texas A&M.

State Rep. [Mike Villarreal](#), D-San Antonio, who in the last legislative session added the amendment to the bill by state Rep. [Rob Eissler](#), R-The Woodlands, said the involvement of UT

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and A&M was an important piece of the plan.

“That really sets the tone for the program,” Villarreal said. “It’s not about rushing students through high school. It’s really about excellence in education.”

Harrison Keller, the vice provost for higher education policy at UT, who has quietly steered the new certificate initiative, said it was the first program of its kind in the country. “What you don’t have anywhere else is that it’s not just aligned with but it’s governed by the expectations of your two flagship universities,” Keller said.

Three weeks ago, at a meeting of the Association of American Universities, an elite group of research universities, [Bill Powers](#), president of the University of Texas, met with a handful of other presidents to discuss how higher-education leaders around the country could initiate similar efforts to address the faltering education pipeline.

“Education is in the news all the time,” Powers said later. “Leading institutions of higher education — AAU-type universities — ought to be part of the solutions.”

In Austin, the Texas higher education community has been locked in a [debate](#) over how to go about reforming higher education. The focus has largely centered around the [reluctance](#) of the UT system to embrace certain changes in higher education tied to accountability and productivity that have been championed by Gov. [Rick Perry](#) and the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), a conservative research organization.

Powers said that the perception that his institution is in a defensive position when it comes to change is “inaccurate and I’d even say ironic.”

He does take some of the responsibility for that erroneous impression. “If you take it in the aggregate,” Powers said, “the flagship universities have not been successful in projecting that innovation in higher education is taking place at these major public flagship universities.”

David Guenther, a spokesman for the TPPF, said he has recently been encouraged by comments from Powers and Loftin that signal an agreement about the need for reform in higher education.

“We just need to have a discussion about what exactly that looks like and what the objectives ought to be and the path to get there,” Guenther said.

Many of the concerns of Guenther and the TPPF focus more on accountability and transparency than on college readiness, although Guenther said he supported efforts to speed the time to get a degree. Currently, 53 percent of UT freshmen get [a degree in four years](#); the figure at A&M is slightly above 50 percent.

“My view is that ‘we’ve got to thoughtfully change’ has been a hallmark of my administration,” Powers said.

He noted that college readiness efforts increased productivity because the university could do its job at less cost when it had better-prepared students.

UT and A&M are also collaborating with high schools and community colleges to develop curriculum for secondary education that will pair with the new flagship-approved certificate. “We’re saying that if you want to make dramatic progress, we need to work on these issues before the kids get to us,” Keller said.

Blincoe, the Brownwood superintendent, said he is excited about the potential of the early readiness program. “If it catches on, I think it would have far-reaching repercussions,” he said. “You could see us in 10 years moving more toward a competency-based model instead of seat-time.” Its potential, Blincoe said, is enhanced by the participation of the flagship universities.

Still, even though the initiative is barely off the ground, it is feeling the sting of the state’s fiscal woes. As part of the Legislature’s efforts to close the state’s multibillion-dollar budget shortfall, financing for an existing scholarship for students who graduate from high school early through traditional means has been zeroed out for at least the next two years.

A bill by Villarreal to create a similar financial incentive for students who take advantage of the new “Doogie Howser” program — financed by the money school districts save by no longer having to take care of them for a full four-years — also appears stymied by concern over the budget.

Such problems have a way of bringing about new solutions, Villarreal said. “We are experiencing very tight times,” he said, “and so we’re having to question assumptions about how we do business.”

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