

Poor management hurts college completion rates

Low faculty productivity hurts students, taxpayers

By RONALD L. TROWBRIDGE
TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION
Aug. 16, 2011, 7:57PM

Share

- Del.icio.us
- Twitter
- StumbleUpon
- Digg
- Facebook
- Email

Recommend Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

Later this month, more than 100,000 students will set foot for the first time on Texas public university campuses. Unfortunately, if current trends hold, a great many of them will never finish their degrees — or even return for their sophomore years.

The graduation rate of college students in Texas is dismal. Approximately 57 percent of college entrants graduate - and this only after six years. Graduation rates, after six years, at the University of Texas-Austin and Texas A&M University, are 77.5 percent and 78.4 percent respectively.

At many other Texas schools, however, the graduation rate is pathetically low. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, for example, reports that "only 1 of 8 freshmen who started at the University of Houston's downtown campus in 2002 had earned a diploma six years later."

And Gov. Rick Perry reported this May that "four-year graduation rates at Texas institutions of higher education currently average just 28.6 percent."

Such dropouts nationwide cost students and taxpayers billions of dollars. Associated Press education writer Eric Gorski reports that "states appropriated almost \$6.2 billion for four-year colleges and universities between 2003 and 2008 to help pay for the education of students who did not return for year two." And he adds, "The federal government spent \$1.5 billion and states spent \$1.4 billion on grants for students who didn't start their sophomore years."

Note the crucial crossroads at the end of the freshman year.

Having taught college for 27 years and presently teaching college freshmen, I can report from long experience that the freshman year is the most critical turning point for new students. They are impressionable, vulnerable and often afraid. Yet university administrators and professors pay little or no attention to them.

A parent asked then-Dartmouth President John Kemeny what the most important question was that parents should ask in determining where to send their kids. He responded, "Ask them who teaches the freshmen."

At most universities, it is not professors.

A few years ago, the Texas Public Policy Foundation found that during the spring 2006 semester at Texas A&M University, 25 out of 28 sections of Composition and Rhetoric (English 104) were taught by young, inexperienced graduate students.

No doubt some of these young graduate students were good teachers. But Derek Bok, former president of Harvard for 20 years, reports: "Most graduate students lack the experience to deal with the challenges of a basic composition course." Therefore, he concludes, "freshmen in the writing course lose out."

To be sure, there are many reasons students drop out of school, but neglect is surely one of them.

So what should administrators do about this? They should assign freshman courses to far more professors.

Two recent major studies reveal that most professors at the University of Texas-Austin have very light teaching loads. The Center for College Affordability and Productivity's study in May and Rick O'Donnell's just released study together reveal that some 70 percent of professors teach fewer than 100 students a year. That is a very light teaching load by any measure, and it is an exorbitant luxury that must be paid for by students and taxpayers. Such alarming cost is another reason students drop out.

The faculty productivity data at Texas A&M is quite similar, as I'm sure it would be at a broad swath of public research universities if such data were publicly available.

The signature courses recently implemented at UT-Austin are a first step in the right direction. Even so, it would not be unreasonable to assign more freshman courses to professors with light teaching loads.

Many professors would fight such an assignment tooth and nail. Which takes me to the observation that Adam Smith made in the 18th century: "The discipline of colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters." Texas students and taxpayers can no longer afford such an arrangement.

Trowbridge is a resident of The Woodlands and a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin. Trowbridge formerly served as vice president of Hillsdale College in Michigan.



The Best Buy Seal is a registered trademark of Consumers Digest Communications, LLC, used under license.

- Vietnamese immigrant, a 'hired killer,' guilty in Bellaire plot
- Spring mom killed, 3 kids injured in wreck with SUV
- Houston has water fines on tap
- Police want to talk to Kobe about alleged confrontation
- Perry's Texas: Transportation needs trail behind

- Considering the options(165)
- Fans will be watching closely when McLane hands keys to Crane(84)
- Houston has water fines on tap(62)
- Houston mayor 'rolls dice' on red-light cameras(42)
- No apologies from Perry for Texas-style tough talk(41)

- Poor management hurts college completion rates
- Defying recession, Indian Culture Center is thriving
- Letters: Water conversations
- Thomas Friedman: Technology, globalization fueling widespread unrest
- Paul Krugman: Texas job-growth miracle is a myth
- Letters to the editor
- Provide students food for learning



More from Chron.com:

Powered by one spot





FBI: Missing Calif. toddler, father found dead



Facebook posts offer clues to despair that left children dead



Experimental 13,000-mph glider lost shortly after launch



Teen trying to cool off drowns in Brazos River



Dr Pepper vs. Dr Pepper in Court
The Wall Street Journal.

SPONSORED

More from Around the Web:

Police: Girl, 16, faces 3 capital murder charges
8/13/2011 ? News Louisiana Heds

Japanese woman swept over Niagara Falls in Canada
8/15/2011 ? San Francisco Bay Area and California World News ? ? SFGate

Joy Behar and Boyfriend Marry After 29 Years
8/13/2011 ? seattlepi.com: Arts & Entertainment

Willie Nelson's plea bargain rejected by judge
7/6/2011 ? MySA

Man fired for washing himself with own urine
8/11/2011 ? San Francisco Bay Area and California Business News ? ? SFGate

Hamilton says he could hear boy screaming
7/8/2011 ? Sports Baseball Heds



Banks Forced to Forgive Credit Card Debt
Find Out How Much of Your Debt Can Be Settled!



New Issue Alert - OBJE
Hot Stock Obscene Jeans Inc. Explosive Investment Potential



Secrets for Wrinkle Freedom
Look 10 years younger in less than 10 days. Local Mom shares the...

ADVERTISEMENT



Add Your Comment

New to the site?

To use commenting, you need to sign up.

Sign up

Already a member?

Please log in.

[Forgot Password?](#)

Email

Password

Remember Me

Most Popular Comments



GWBII 4:57 AM on August 17, 2011

The purpose of a good college is to weed out the poor student, quit trying to make the Universities like our "great" public schools such a path will dumb down the product. If a student does not have the motivation and or desire he or she should not be cuddled.

REPLY (11) POPULARITY: 10 [Report Abuse]

3 replies



miguel62 6:24 AM on August 17, 2011

"A few years ago, the Texas Public Policy Foundation found that during the spring 2006 semester at Texas A&M University, 25 out of 28 sections of Composition and Rhetoric (English 104) were taught by young, inexperienced graduate students."

I highly doubt this is true. The TPPF is also responsible for O'Donnell's crackpot, discredited research papers. They likely discovered that English 104 had TA sections....led by TA's. In any case, is there any proof that these TA's performed their jobs horribly? It is ironic that Trollbridge criticizes professors for being poor professors, then he criticizes a situation in which young graduate students are given the opportunity to develop teaching skills. Has Troll forgotten that a solid graduate education involves teacher training?

Even if this TPPF "research" were true in this case, is it true for all other courses at A&M or UT? One isolated example says nothing about the rest of the university, yet Trollbinger makes these wild, grand, delusional conclusions about the entire situation in higher ed. The Troll needs to get a life and stop writing bad research papers for the TPPF.

REPLY (7) POPULARITY: 6 [Report Abuse]



Pickapeppa 6:48 AM on August 17, 2011

The article states that tu and A&M both have good graduation rates but then goes on to suggest changes at tu and A&M. Many kids who start college have no business going to college because many of them are not very smart and a lot more of them are not really interested in attending classes and studying.

REPLY (6) POPULARITY: 5 [Report Abuse]

2 replies

View Comments (11)

Texas Hill Country

1-2 Acre Homesites Available. Buy Now and
www.CopperRidgeTX.com

houston homes for sale

Search For New Homes.
www.SummerWoodTX.com/homes

Luxury Home Investing

Register Today For Marco's Free Real
www.MarcoKozlowski.com

Ask an Estate Lawyer Now
 12 Lawyers Are Online. Ask a Question,
JustAnswer.com/Law/Estate

Ads by Yahoo!

<p>CHRON</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home Houston & Texas Nation Business Sports Entertainment Life Travel Corrections Blogs <p>TOPICS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weather Chron Commons Traffic Small Business PetsHouston MomHouston HoustonBelief Gardening 29-95 	<p>NEIGHBORHOODS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aldine Alief Baytown Bellaire Clear Lake Conroe Cy-Fair East End Fort Bend Heights Katy Kingwood Lake Houston Magnolia Memorial Montrose Pasadena Pearland Spring Tomball West U The Woodlands 	<p>MARKETPLACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find Houston jobs Homes Cars Classifieds Place a classified ad Contests 	<p>SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help Business directory Legal notices Contact us Send us tips About the company Employment opportunities Place a Retail Ad Advertising Services 	<p>MEMBERSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sign up Log in <p>OTHER EDITIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home delivery Mobile RSS feeds Chronicle in Education e-Edition Breaking news alerts
<p>LOCAL SERVICES</p> <p>Houston Attorneys Houston Salons Houston HVAC Contractors</p>			 Find Us	 Follow Us

[Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of service](#) | [About Our Ads](#)
 Copyright © 2011 The Houston Chronicle

