

# Editorial: Getting to college is a milestone – and leaving without a degree is a millstone

*The Dallas Morning News*  
(TNS)

Students drop out of college for many reasons, some preventable, some not. One troubling and persistent national statistic caught our attention and should catch yours, too.

About 20 percent of high school students entering college will leave without a degree, according to an analysis by the Hechinger Report, a nonprofit news organization that tracks higher-education trends. This is particularly frustrating and alarming, since the high school graduation rate nationwide is more than 84 percent, an all-time high.

When college students fail to graduate, the setback threatens their long-term success and the economic prospects of communities – especially in states like Texas where the population is increasingly young and Hispanic. Texas has made strides, but it is critical that we figure out what is happening and not waste the contributions bright young minds can make.

Poor high school preparation, expensive tuition and family issues are factors for noncompletion. But Texas colleges and universities also have found they need to intervene early in a student's academic career and remove barriers before those build to the point that students simply quit.

Texas schools tell us the odds of graduating improve if students, especially minority and first-generation college students, can remain enrolled through their sophomore year. The University of Texas at San Antonio, for example, assigns small groups of incoming first-generation students to mentors. The University of Texas at Dallas, among other things, encourages first-generation students to live on campus before other students to ease the adjustment to college life.

However, one of the more innovative approaches comes from the University of Texas in Austin, which uses data from academic transcripts and personal records to identify about 500 entering freshmen who could be at risk of not graduating on time. Those students are put in the University Leadership Network, which pays students \$5,000 a year if they stay on their degree track and maintain at least a 2.0 grade-point average. Students must attend weekly seminars, maintain campus internships and receive peer support from others who were in the program the previous year.

UT-Austin officials say such programs helped about 1,000 more students graduate in 2017 than in 2011, and enabled over 1,000 first-time freshmen to enroll. The school's four-year graduation rate also improved from roughly 51 percent in 2012 to 65.7 percent in 2017, with nearly five percentage points of that gain occurring from 2016 to 2017. UT-Austin's six-year graduation rate is about 86 percent.

Our final thought is that the state can't prosper until more schools improve graduation rates. It is embarrassing that the six-year graduation rates of most Texas public colleges and universities fall below the statewide average of 61 percent and several fall below 50 percent.

Thanks in part to several legislative initiatives, the state has come a long way since the late 1980s, when the six-year graduation rate was just 45 percent. Long term, the state's overall competitiveness depends on continued improvement and smart efforts to help students succeed.

It's a challenge, but one that, as a state, we must win.

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