

# THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE CHATTANOOGA

## Provost's Page

*March 12, 2010*

In the December, 2009 edition of the Provost's Page, I laid out some goals that I felt we should specifically address at UTC. Since then, we have witnessed a special session of the State General Assembly and the passage of legislation designed to significantly change higher education in Tennessee. Interestingly, with the exception of developmental courses, nothing on that list of goals from December has radically changed. We have known for sometime what we need to do and have been about the job of trying to achieve those goals wherever possible.

In the past few days, I have discussed Tennessee's new directive for more college graduates with the Deans and the Faculty Senate Executive Committee. Shortly, I will be naming a sufficiently representative task force of faculty and staff to help us lay out a strategic plan for meeting the State's new set of expectations. Some of the areas to be fully explored are listed below.

### Overall Goals

- Improve First Year Retention to 80%
- Improve 6-Year Graduation Rate to 60%
- Continue to Grow Total Enrollment Primarily Through Improved Retention and Increased Transfer and Graduate Student Populations
- Appropriately Balance Educational Access with Student Success

### Blueprint for Improved Graduation Rate

- Create Campus Culture of Student Success (Everyone's Job!)
- Raise Freshman Admission Standards (Increase HS GPA?)
- Modify General Education Curriculum in Math and English
- Expand "Step Ahead" Math Opportunities
- Create Computer Math Lab (MOCS Learning Center)
- Expand Center for Advisement and Student Success
- Refocus Orientation/Transition Programs
- Create Honors College to Expand Honors Opportunities
- Increase Summer School, On-Line, and Alternative Course Delivery Options

Despite the legislative changes along with the anticipated modifications to our funding formula, many questions remain as to exactly what all this means to UTC and how we do our business of serving students. We have approximately two years to find those answers and recalculate our trajectory as an institution. I cannot overstate the importance of these efforts and encourage us all to be involved in creating the solutions.

For those of you who are interested in learning more about the issues with increasing the number of college graduates, I recommend *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* by Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson. Also, for those who missed the recent editorial I submitted for the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, I have attached it below.

As always, please feel free to contact me directly at [phil-oldham@utc.edu](mailto:phil-oldham@utc.edu) with any suggestions, questions, and/or concerns you may have regarding any university-related issues.

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### **Response to Change**

Change is said to be the only constant in life. On a personal level, I am reminded of that fact almost daily. Recent legislation resulting in the Higher Education Reform Act of Tennessee will change higher education as we know it at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and other higher education institutions in our state. However, as Chattanooga's University changes, it will continue to contribute positively to this city, state, and region as it has done for almost 125 years.

Change is nothing new to UTC. Like any healthy institution, UTC has undergone significant positive changes in recent years and is clearly not the same institution it was even a few short years ago. Unfortunately, a number of old myths about UTC seem to persist in the minds of some. With a current enrollment of more than 10,500 students, our freshmen class has doubled in the last ten years. We are no longer a commuter campus. In fact, 34% of our undergraduates live in campus housing as compared to UT-Knoxville's 26% and MTSU's 12%. UTC also now serves a very traditional student population with an average age of 23 years old and decreasing. No longer are most of our students from Hamilton County. More than half of UTC students come from outside the immediate Chattanooga area with all but two of Tennessee's 95 counties represented this year.

Amidst all this change, UTC has continued to produce outstanding students who perform at the highest levels in our community, state, and nation. During the past two years, for example, UTC has had a Truman Scholar, a National Security Educational Exchange Scholar, and six Gilman Scholars.

These successes reflect UTC's continued commitment to the community, the state, the region and, above all, our students. About 95% of UTC graduates say that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their UTC experience. Over 90% of these alumni indicate they will recommend UTC to others.

Included among these alumni are many satisfied transfers who, contrary to some recent inferences, find that finishing their degree at UTC is readily achievable. The data indicate that, of the 700 students transferring to UTC each year, these transfers ultimately graduate with slightly fewer total credit hours (137.7) than the state average (137.9). On average, transfer students complete their degrees having to take only one course more than students who start as freshmen at UTC.

It is also noteworthy that UTC has become the school of choice for more students with approximately one-third of UTC freshmen listing it as their first choice on their ACT report form. In addition to growth in numbers of students, the overall quality of the student body continues to improve with the average ACT score of entering freshmen last year reaching a new high.

However, like most public institutions across the country and particularly in Tennessee, UTC is confronting many challenges, especially the need to increase the number of college graduates. The recently passed Higher Education Reform Bill places significantly higher expectations on us. To meet the higher performance expectations would be difficult under ideal circumstances, but with state funding for UTC being reduced by over 30% the challenge will be considerably tougher. UTC remains fully committed to success, however, seeking new and better ways to meet the higher expectations.

So, what is the strategy to achieve goals of increased educational attainment for more Tennesseans, in less time, and at reduced costs? Fortunately, UTC anticipated the higher expectations and got a head start in working to meet them. UTC has made substantial progress toward improved overall student success as measured by retention rates, graduation rates, total number of graduates, overall academic performance, and all other measures commonly employed. At UTC we are aggressively exploring how to coordinate our curricula more efficiently, how to improve student advising, how to provide more effective academic support to students, how to partner more fully with nearby campuses, and how to adjust our admission requirements to match student potential with our capability to ensure degree completion.

I am pleased that Governor Bredesen and our legislative leaders are challenging us to reach higher. UTC is accepting the challenge and is developing strategies to meet the legislature's mandate. One cautionary note, however, as we continue to measure and collect data to reflect our progress. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

I am frequently reminded of this Einstein admonition when current and former students tell me about a special faculty mentor or staff member who went the extra mile to help ensure the student's academic success. The emotion in the students' voices and the successful lives that they lead are all as strong a testimony to our success as a higher education institution as the data we collect.

Although I don't know how to tabulate the personal stories of these individual students neatly into an annual report, I recognize their importance and appreciate them as being the very heart of our institution. Ultimately, the only way to measure our real success is simply one student at a time. Regardless of all the changes at UTC—new initiatives and new expectations—we will not lose sight of the uniqueness and importance of each individual student and will do whatever is possible to help each one achieve his or her potential.

As we approach our 125<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga is unquestionably a better university now than ever. However, it is not nearly as good yet as it can be and will be. UTC will continue to change. It will continue to improve, and it will continue to work to meet the needs of the people of Tennessee. I am extremely proud to be a part of UTC and its service to our community as we continue to build on the proud tradition as a premier undergraduate institution offering outstanding graduate programs in selected areas in direct response to community needs.