May 30, 2013

Mr. Xavier Johnson  
Chair, Student Advisory Council  
The University of Texas System  
c/o Office of Academic Affairs  
601 Colorado Street  
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Xavier:

I write to express my gratitude to you and the members of the Student Advisory Council for your thoughtful recommendations and legislative resolutions presented to the Board of Regents at their May meeting. The opportunity to receive your feedback and recommendations is greatly valued by our board and system leadership.

The recommendations of the Student Advisory Council have received very careful consideration and review by me and members of my executive team and I share the following responses:

**Recommendation 1: Academic Affairs Committee**  
**A Recommendation for Mentoring Programs**

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that the Board of Regents enhance and/or implement formalized and well-supported peer, alumni and professional mentoring programs across the institutions of The University of Texas System. The professional and personal development of our students is critical in their transition periods. Current mentoring programs on some of our campuses are already showing impressive evidence of building students’ skill sets and confidence levels as they prepare to face their next academic or professional challenges. We encourage the Board of Regents to build on this momentum and help create a rich culture of mentoring on all of our campuses.

The addition and enhancement of peer mentoring programs in our schools will benefit entry-level students by having a positive influence on their adjustment to college life, their career choices, and their perseverance in achieving educational goals¹ (Ferrari 2004). These programs also have the potential to positively benefit retention rates. A college student mentor is both a friend and a role model who supports and encourages a younger partner in his or her academic and personal growth, leading to an enhancement of his or her

college experience. The upper-level student mentor becomes a guide to entry-level students in their transition period from high school to college and their adaptation to student life. There are benefits for both mentors and mentees to participate in such programs, including a great sense of belonging and community. In addition, the mentoring culture promoted in our schools can also involve more alumni and professional help with upper-level students transitioning to post-graduate life, whether that includes graduate or professional school or the beginning of their careers.

The importance of mentors in a student’s academic experience cannot be overemphasized. While mentors come in many forms, alumni and professionals can offer a unique perspective on changes in job outlook, what employers are looking for, and how to make a resume more competitive for entry into a desired field. In addition, for students unsure of what they want to pursue in the future, the opportunity to interact with alumni who graduated in their discipline can be invaluable. This is especially relevant today with a still-recovering economy and more students entering professional fields unrelated to their degrees. Many of the schools in the UT System have mentoring programs associated with specific schools within the university. For example, UT Austin has well developed mentoring programs for pre-health profession students, women in engineering, and for students in the School of Law. UT Arlington has an arrangement with the AT&T legal department to guide their pre-law students, and UT El Paso has recently launched a new program called the Career Mentoring Program, an alumni and professional mentoring initiative. Health institutions such as UT Health Science Center Houston and UT Medical Branch have also implemented programs that allow students to network with graduate school alumni either in person, at specific career fair days or online. This access allows graduate students to look at a range of potential careers outside of academia.

While these are great programs, they are not inclusive of the diverse range of disciplines for which degrees are conferred by the UT System institutions. Currently UT Dallas, UT Permian Basin, and UT San Antonio all offer comprehensive career mentor networks utilizing both area professionals and alumni. With all the areas of study represented students are better able to make an informed decision about their career goals. The programs in place at these institutions could serve as models for the other institutions to improve upon already existing mentoring services. Mentoring, whether done through peers, faculty, staff, alumni or members of the professional community, is an essential part of the college and graduate school experience. It builds networking and communication skills, opens doors of opportunity and helps prepare our students in meeting their next personal, academic or professional challenge. By supporting a culture of mentoring at all UT institutions, the Board of Regents could make a meaningful impact on our students’ experience and enhance the top quality education they are already receiving in the classroom.
Response:

I could not agree more with the Council about the importance of mentoring programs on our campuses and their ability to enhance academic, professional, and personal development. I would first like to recognize the work that our institutions have already done in creating appropriate mentoring initiatives as a component of increasing persistence and graduation rates and of providing career advising and networking opportunities. These programs have repeatedly proven to be effective in helping us accomplish our student success goals in the Framework for Excellence. In fact, mentoring programs are frequently cited as best practices in increasing overall student success.

I will encourage each of the UT System institution presidents to further develop robust peer mentoring and career mentoring programs on campus that can help further the culture of mentoring that the Council recommends. I will also strongly encourage institutional leadership to continue to listen to the needs and recommendations of each unique student body to determine the types of programs that are most impactful and beneficial to each campus. As the diversity of our students and institutions continues to expand, I will ask campus officials to look toward more innovative ways of providing mentoring opportunities such as mentoring programs for distance education and online students as well as enhancing public and private partnerships to increase professional and career networking opportunities.

Recommendation 2: Financial and Legislative Affairs Committee
A Recommendation for Referendum Responses

Student referenda are an important part of student self-governance and provide a meaningful way for student to provide input regarding issues affecting them and rectify needs on their campuses. Student referenda have been used to fund sustainability programs, student unions, activity and fitness centers, and to amend student government constitutions for various institutions in the UT System.

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recognizes that the Board of Regents holds ultimate authority over the outcome of such referenda. However, the status of referenda once they have left the hands of the students is often unclear. Past failure to clearly approve or reject student referenda has led to uncertainty and a lack of transparency between the Board of Regents and students. Therefore, in order to ensure that student referenda remain an impactful and substantial mechanism for student self-governance, the Council strongly recommends the Board of Regents formally respond to student referenda in a timely and reasonable manner with an official written declaration of its decision. Additionally, we ask that the Board of Regents notify the leaders of the institution’s student government, or respective body, regarding the Board’s decision and announce the decision as a matter of record. If a referendum is rejected by the Board of Regents, we also request that an explanation of the decision be put forth.
Response:

Student referenda are certainly an important mechanism for formally providing student input to key institutional and system-level decision makers. I have a great respect for the democratic processes that are the foundation of the referendum. Most certainly, I pay careful attention to input from both individual students and the student body as a whole.

Based on your recommendation, I have asked the Office of Academic Affairs to work with our institutions to create a more formal process for communicating about student referenda among student government leadership, campus administrators, UT System staff and the Board of Regents.

Student referenda are held for a variety of reasons, some of which can have significant impact on campus infrastructure and costs to students. Certainly, some referenda are related only to campus-based decisions and processes and these should be governed by individual institutional guidelines. The UT System referendum process currently under development will apply to referenda that potentially impact student fees and capital improvement projects.

There are many factors which impact the decision about whether the campus and/or the system officials support a student referendum initiative. It is my expectation that during the process, significant dialog should take place with students at the campus about the initiative, the process, and the possible outcomes. While I hope that those conversations are already occurring on each campus, the UT System wants to create a process that facilitates the same type of conversations between the university and system leadership. This process will foster better communication and understanding of the purpose and impact of a referendum before the voting process occurs on each campus by offering campus leaders an opportunity to bring potential referenda ideas before the Board of Regents. For initiatives that require action by the Board of Regents, this process can ensure that timely feedback occurs and so that a student referendum initiative is not held that does not have a viable plan attached.

Once the process is developed, the Office of Academic Affairs will be in contact with your campus leaders to ensure that the process is an effective mechanism that strikes an appropriate balance between implementing the recommendations of student bodies and continuing to keep the cost of education low for our students. In addition, we encourage open dialogue between institutional officials and student government leaders that can help provide context and an explanation regarding the decisions of campus leadership, UT System Administration, and the Board of Regents on matters of concern to students. For this reason, I would like to encourage the Student Advisory Council to extend an invitation to members of the UT System Board of Regents to participate, from time to time, in a SAC meeting. Many of the board members have expressed interest in fostering an environment of open dialogue and communication with SAC and I am in full support.
Recommendation 3: Health and Graduate Affairs Committee
A Recommendation for Changes to the Milestones Agreement Form for Graduate Degree Programs

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council would like to acknowledge the University of Texas System Milestones Agreement Form template as an important step to provide structure for graduate degree programs. However, the Student Advisory Council feels that this structure would be further improved by a document that functions as an agreement of mutual understanding between the student, the academic advisors, the supervising professor, and the graduate studies committee. The current agreement between the student and academic advisor is insufficient because the supervising professor and graduate studies committee also play an important role in the progress of the student. The institution’s Milestones Agreement Form should be drafted with involvement from students and should clearly outline the responsibilities of each party as determined by individual programs.

The Milestones Agreement Form currently outlines consequences for the student should they not reach their milestones. Recognizing the importance of providing a supportive environment for students, we recommend that this be extended to any party that fails to meet their obligation of responsibilities as outlined in the agreement. Acknowledging that the success of an individual’s course of study is fully contingent upon the student’s relationship with their mentoring professor and laboratory, the Milestones Agreement Form should include a mechanism for effective third party consequence resolution between the advisor, student, and mentoring professor.

It would further be beneficial to implement a system by which all students have the option of exploring relationships with different supervising professors and the individual cultures of laboratories available before committing to a program and its associated research. This measure would maximize efficient time in the laboratory and better ensure productive, successful relationships during the tenure of the student’s program. These measures are already in place at some campuses, and have been demonstrated to be effective at addressing these concerns. This is especially important to international students, whose study time is constrained by a visa, requiring graduation within the expected time.

These suggestions would further the goals of Focus Seven of the Framework for Advancing Excellence throughout The University of Texas System: Action Plan. Under point B “mentor and advise Ph.D. students” it would “improve Ph.D. student advising to shorten time to degree” by mandating clear and mutually accepted requirements for advancement. More than the current Milestones Agreement Form, it would further point C “incentivize shortened time to complete Ph.D.” to “set clear criteria and expectations in an agreement, between student and department regarding time-to-completion including incentives, deadlines, and consequences for failing to meet expectations,” by including consequences for all involved parties that fail to meet expectations -- not just students. These inclusions will result in a more
comprehensive, balanced, and successful Milestones Agreement Form and help fulfill its ultimate goal of improving graduate education.

Response:

In 2012, the Board of Regents voted to approve the adoption of a system-wide standardized Milestone Agreement Form that can be uniquely adapted for each doctoral program's requirements. This template was developed by a committee of graduate deans across the System with a specific goal to help reduce the time to degree for Ph.D. completion; a goal that is outlined in the Framework for Advancing Excellence.

The Milestone Agreement is part of a process designed to outline clear expectations of each graduate student and to allow institutional departments to more frequently and effectively track the progress of students throughout a program. The primary purpose of this form is to provide an estimated timeline and academic milestones students must meet in the course of a graduate program. As part of this understanding, the institutions have committed to provide training for advisors and departments on graduate student advising and the use of Milestone Agreements. The implementation of Milestone Agreements is quite new, and we would expect departments to incorporate valuable feedback from students, advisors, and departmental faculty on potential improvements to the form and process. Student participation in the development of certain responsibilities is valuable, and we will modify the Milestones Agreement Form to include the student in that process. The Milestones Agreement Form currently identifies certain responsibilities of both the advisor and the student regardless of the degree program or institution. Program-specific responsibilities may be added for both parties. In addition, Regents' Rule 4.3011, Section 7, specifies that all Ph.D. students must be provided with an "individualized" Milestone Agreement Form. The intent of this requirement is to ensure that the advisor and the student work together, within the context of institutional policies, to determine a particular student's milestones.

The responsibility of the advisors is to provide the most relevant, accurate, and up-to-date advice on navigating the graduate program and outlining student responsibilities that must be met in order to complete the degree in a timely manner. In order to create a greater sense of accountability for all parties involved in the Milestone Agreement process, campuses will be asked to modify the forms to include additional required approval signatures of other stakeholders which may include departmental chairs, additional advisors, and graduate deans, depending on each unique campus and college organizational structure.

If a student has ongoing concerns or grievances related to the Milestones Agreement, the student should follow the institution’s procedures for academic grievances. The UT System Office of Academic Affairs and Office of Health Affairs will modify the Milestones Agreement Form with language to this effect to ensure that a student’s right to third party consideration of a grievance is made explicit.
In regard to your recommendation that graduate students are given an opportunity to explore research opportunities before committing to a specific program, I agree that this type of early exploration can help students determine the best possible fit for academic and career goals. In turn, student satisfaction can be improved and time to degree may also be reduced. As a result, I will encourage campuses to develop a type of open house or departmental forum in which a professor can offer an overview of his or her research agenda and provide opportunities for students to ask questions and spend time discussing potential research agendas. Campuses can look toward a few models and best practices that may already be in place, specifically at some of the UT System health institutions, which currently allow graduate students enrolled in broader disciplinary areas to find the right fit in terms of specialization, mentorship, and program culture.

Recommendation 4: Health and Graduate Affairs Committee
A Recommendation for the Consideration of a Network of Opportunities for Students

The University of Texas System makes a significant investment in identifying, attracting, matriculating, and educating high quality undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members. It is in the interest of the University to consider a mechanism between the individual institutions to further the return it receives on these investments in human capital. By creating a network that centralizes information concerning opportunities in research and employment, the System would both increase the number of post-graduation opportunities for its students and would increase the number of high quality applicants to fill positions within the system. Such a facilitation of transitions within the UT System as students progress through their career improves the quality of training and expands career opportunities for students. This initiative will provide an opportunity to retain high quality students and further foster pride within the UT System.

To leverage the investment in these students, we therefore recommend the Board of Regents consider the possibility of developing an inter-campus network of students engaged in academic fields. We envision an effective conduit of information to match students with opportunities and opportunities with students. We recommend that this pursuit engage a representative assembly of faculty members, program administrators, and students from representative campuses to outline the goals of such a network and to consider possible mechanisms to deliver upon these aims. The UT System careers network and the MyEdu framework both represent potential mechanisms to deliver these services.

Recognizing that diversity in academic background is critical for the continued success of and pursuit of excellence in our institutions, we neither propose nor intend to create a single point of entry for the institutions but rather to provide an opportunity to streamline the process of transition for parties interested in remaining within the university. We believe that the consideration of a mechanism to promote these transitions strengthens, rather than hinders, the goals of the
university by providing the best opportunities to high quality students within the University of Texas System in accordance with the mission of the University.

Response:

_There is no doubt that the UT System enrolls, graduates, and employs students with tremendous ability and expertise. Certainly, there is value in retaining some of these students in the UT System to teach or conduct research, and we should be communicating those opportunities for students. As you mentioned, our recent investment in MyEdu could also provide a tremendous platform for creating the type of inter-campus network you have recommended._

_I will ask the UT System Office of Academic Affairs to work with MyEdu to explore the potential of MyEdu to develop a career network for graduate students, or at the very least, to provide or facilitate some type of communication about recent UT System career opportunities, especially in graduate research._

_The UT System Office of Employee Services may also be able to provide email updates or dedicated websites specifically for graduate students seeking employment within the UT System. System staff will also consider the feasibility of this option. I believe in the excellence of UT System students and graduates and would like to further leverage the tremendous resources available within our System._

_Recommendation 5: Campus Life Committee_

_Our first campus life recommendation regarding online representation is provided as a response to recommendations from the UT System for SAC to consider representation of online students in campus student governments. Given the complex and varied structures of our student governments across the system, SAC thought it best that online representation be determined at the level of individual institutions. The details and rationale are contained below:_

_Campus Life Recommendation on Online Representation_

_After much deliberation and discussion on the suggestion to reserve a seat for online and distance education students on student governments across the UT System, the Campus Life Committee is not convinced that a Senate seat should be reserved for students enrolled in distance education and online programs. Recognizing the fact that the UT System is composed of 15 diverse institutions with varied populations and demographics, the committee recommends the institutions to increase their outreach to this student group in ways they feel appropriate._

_All 15 institutions have varied student government structures and election systems that do not necessarily co-align with this recommendation. Certainly, the population of distance education and online students varies across the System campuses. In addition, Student Governments across the UT System already have_
programs in place to increase their outreach to students. Furthermore, we believe these students are already represented in their institution's current structure. SAC recommends that the Board of Regents recognize the unique nature of these individual institutions and allow Student Governments to evaluate these issues individually.

Response:

Thank you for considering the question posed by the UT System regarding student government representation for online students; a question, by the way, which originated with students from UT Permian Basin during my campus visit there last year. As our student populations continue to diversify, each campus student government needs to ensure that this growing population of online/distance education students is well-represented. While this may not always require designating a specific student government position, other mechanisms must be in place to give these students a voice.

Recommendation 6: Campus Life Committee
Campus Life Recommendation for an Electronic-Textbook Library

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recommends that the UT System implement an electronic-textbook library service such as Vital Source Bookshelf to be initiated at the discretion of the institutions. These services would be beneficial to both the institution and students, as it would provide textbooks to the students in a cost effective manner. Forbes recently cited a study conducted by Trenton College which reported in 2011 that a college student on average spends $1,168 on books and supplies per year. Additionally, the integration of these services would allow for the use of innovative content delivery systems. Since providing effective online learning resources is central to the mission statement of the Institute for Transformational Learning, we also recommend that these programs be supported by the aforementioned Institute. The decreased financial burden placed on the student would allow more focus to be placed on academics and thereby advance the System’s goal of timely graduation rates.

Response:

When we talk about increasing student access and success, we must be sensitive to any costs that may place a greater financial burden on our students, including the cost of textbooks. The UT System staff and the Board of Regents have a deep interest in reducing costs of textbooks and education in general. Two years ago, we explored this possibility and discovered the technology was not advanced enough to give us the chance to significantly reduce costs in this area; however, technology has made substantial advances that merit further study and action. Last summer a UT System-wide committee began exploring the systems that support digital learning.

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materials and the advantages and disadvantages to students and institutions of different systems. The Office of Academic Affairs, in concert with the Institute for Transformational Learning, will work with the campuses to understand current practices of e-textbook utilization and move forward with a systemic plan for discovery and possible in the coming year.

In addition to these recommendations, I would also like to recognize the UT System Student Advisory Council for the thoughtful and articulate legislative resolutions that were provided to our governmental relations staff earlier this year. Your attention to the issues of higher education and financial aid funding, opportunities for undocumented students and student veterans, the often controversial issue of concealed handguns on campus, and addressing the shortage of residency slots in Texas is well-placed. I am confident that your resolutions were highly regarded among our staff and legislative delegation.

Xavier, please accept my thanks for the Council's presentation of these ideas. The Council's recommendations and my comments will be distributed to the campus presidents and among the UT System offices. I am grateful for your service to higher education and to the state of Texas, and I look forward our continued efforts of excellence with the Student Advisory Committee.

With great respect,

Francisco G. Cigarroa, M.D.
Chancellor

FGC/jbp
cc: Dr. Pedro Reyes
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