



## CASE STUDY:

# With an online degree-planning solution, students chart a clear path to graduation and career

Five years ago, the CIO at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) reviewed some sobering survey responses from students about their degree-completion experience. What was the top reason they claimed they weren't graduating in four years? Gaps in the advising process.

Looking to improve the graduation rate, the CIO created a partnership with the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and Academic Advising to more thoroughly evaluate student advising and to find degree-planning tools that could help keep students engaged and on track for graduation.

"The feedback about advising was really eye-opening," says Vanessa Hammler Kenon, Ed.D., assistant vice provost for IT. "So, the CIO and I went out and met with every advising team on campus. There are more than 100 advisors, with full-time advisors responsible for a minimum of 200 students —and we encountered the staggering amount of hard-copy-only processes that both students and advisors were tasked with keeping track of."

## UTSA

The University of Texas  
at San Antonio™

Public, 4-year institution  
serving 31,000 students

### Challenge

Simplify and improve  
the degree-planning  
and advising system  
for students

### Result

4% increase in the 4-year  
graduation rate, with  
marked improvement of  
the degree-planning and  
student advising process

“We met some advisors who said this was the first time anybody had asked them for their opinion on issues with graduating students on time,” says Kenon.

To address some of the issues causing deficiencies in advising—from the high volume of paper and outdated information-sharing systems to differences in the advising process throughout the university—UTSA implemented Ellucian Degree Works™, an online degree-planning tool.

When the tool was initially launched at UTSA, the campus did not see the desired adoption success. OIT and Academic Advising determined the need for enhanced marketing as a key component for engaging students. Together they developed a marketing strategy that included encouraging students to visit their advisors.

After a year-long relaunch adoption campaign, which featured everything from web prompts, training videos, print advertisements, t-shirts, to posters in campus elevators, the adoption rate rose from 14% after the initial launch to 87%.

“We hear nothing but positive feedback from students, and we’ve been able to integrate Degree Works with the whole redesign of UTSA’s advising system to keep students on track,” says Kenon.

Using the digital system, students and advisors could instantly view degree progress at any time, all in one place, leading to better transparency and more informed degree-planning discussions. More importantly, students felt more connected and empowered with their degree progress.

In concert with changes to campus culture and a host of IT and student experience modernization efforts, UTSA’s four-year graduation rate has increased by 4%. This focus on modernizing the student experience connected to other campus goals too.

## Simplifying the transfer student experience

One of the more complicated degree-planning experiences comes from transfer students. While pursuing affordable and best-fit degrees, transfer students often move between different school systems with little guidance—and it’s not always clear how their credits transfer. When problems arise, degrees take longer and expenses mount.

“What’s most difficult about the whole degree-planning process is associating a degree with a career. With Degree Works, I have everything planned out until I graduate, and I can better focus on what my degree is building toward.”

**EDGAR GUAJARDO**, junior, The University of Texas at San Antonio



"I didn't know what to expect. I feared how expensive it could be, and I had friends who said they lost a whole year of coursework," says Nestor De Hoyos, a senior in the College of Engineering. "I was even more scared because I knew I was transferring from a Texas A&M-affiliated college to the University of Texas system. I was scared that some courses wouldn't transfer."

"Once you transfer, you're in someone else's backyard," says De Hoyos, whose advisor at his previous institution could not provide much advice on his new degree path. "But the transfer process was quick, and technology made it a lot easier than I expected."

In his first UTSA student advisor meeting, before his first semester began, his advisor used the online system to look at all the courses he'd taken and all the courses he needed to take.

"We even dug back into my high school transcripts to find college-credit courses I didn't think would transfer," says De Hoyos. "I discovered I qualified for a minor in Spanish."

"For the people that have to transfer, it's a dilemma of expense. But it helps so much to be able to look at everything all at once with an advisor, to see the whole path and see your progress increase with every semester completed," says De Hoyos. "It eliminates the uncertainty."

## The online planning system transforms advising and empowers students

According to Kenon, the role of advisors at UTSA changed significantly in just a few years' time. The advising centers moved from decentralized and unique within a department, to centralized and streamlined, with all advisors on the same system.

With every student's degree plan visible to advisors and administrators doing course scheduling each semester, administrators were able to do a better job of matching scheduled courses to the volume of students that needed to take them, at the times they needed most. Better efficiency with course scheduling led to an improved college experience.

"I hear from students all the time who found out they qualify for a second degree, a double major, or a minor," says Kenon. "And they can also see the urgency of taking a class now when it won't be offered for another year or more."

When advisors and students have easy, instant access to every step and every variable of the degree path, their conversations can go deeper.



“Coming into UTSA, all I knew was I wanted to work with computers,” says Edgar Guajardo, a junior in the College of Business. “I was looking at paths in the Colleges of Science, Engineering, and Business, and had no idea what I wanted to do. So, I applied to the College of Business as I felt more drawn toward the management aspect of IT.”

When Guajardo met with his advisor for the first time, she asked if he was interested in cyber security. He was, and she asked him to consider a double major.

“I played around with the ‘What if’ feature and found out I could complete a double major with only four more classes, one extra semester,” says Guajardo.

Guajardo’s experience speaks to another benefit of improved advising: increased student engagement. Since that initial meeting, Guajardo reflected that his meetings became more and more focused on the real-life aspects of the degree he’s pursuing. What jobs should he consider? What other experiences can he gain that will prepare him for the workforce? Who should he meet along the way?

“Perhaps the deepest benefit of improving the degree-planning and advising processes for students,” says Kenon, “is that students become so much more self-directed. They don’t want to talk about just their upcoming semester, they want to look years into their future.”

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**VANESSA HAMMLER KENON, Ed.D.**,  
assistant vice provost of IT, The University of  
Texas at San Antonio

In 2017–2018, UTSA saw its largest enrollment ever, approximately 31,000 students, including 7,898 new students. How enrollment growth and retention efforts ultimately lead to a greater rise in graduation rates depends on having the right tools and technology, and leaders who take into account the needs of today’s students.

“Our students come to campus very tech savvy. We just need to give them the opportunity and the technology to navigate solutions,” says Kenon. “Administrators should not be the only driving force of change. We need to connect, listen, and respond to students as much as we can. Students are behind their own best experiences in higher education.”



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