

# Powers: How to measure the learning experience at the University of Texas

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With more than 52,000 students and many nationally ranked academic programs, the University of Texas is one of the most productive universities in the United States. But you wouldn't know it by reading the Center for College Affordability and Productivity's recently published report, which suggests that if the 80 percent of our faculty that have the lowest teaching load taught half as much as the top 20 percent, tuition could be reduced by half.

The most obvious flaw in this analysis is that the measure of faculty productivity is limited solely to semester credit hours. There is no attempt to measure the quality, and therefore the true productivity, of the learning experience.

At UT, we could easily increase the appearance of efficiency by doing all of our teaching in classes of 300 students. According to the CCAP metric, our university would then be far more productive. But what is the goal of a university? At UT, our goal is to provide the most effective learning experience for our undergraduates and graduate students. In addition, we expect our faculty to conduct research to expand knowledge and benefit society.

Let me give one example. As a part of our curriculum reform at UT, we require all freshmen to complete what we call a first-year signature course. In these courses, taught by senior faculty, students concentrate on writing and speaking, critical thinking and research. These courses are often taught in small seminars, such as the one that I teach.

The CCAP analysis would penalize a faculty member for teaching any small class. Yet exposing our freshmen to a rich learning experience with our best faculty is central to our mission and increases our overall educational productivity.

By the CCAP's measure, a faculty member teaching a class of 300 is 16 times more "productive" than one teaching an 18-student seminar. Our small freshman seminars are labor intensive, but we value the student-faculty interaction, and students tell us they value it, too. The same point could be made regarding upper-division and graduate seminars, which are small and relatively expensive. But we believe that providing high-quality graduate education is important for training the next generation of researchers, scholars and leaders.

At UT we offer a few classes that are large, some with more than 500 students. But we offer many more small classes: 34 percent have fewer than 20 students, and another 41 percent have between 20 and 49 students. Universities need a healthy balance of class sizes to be efficient while maintaining the quality of our teaching. Therefore it comes as no surprise that a minority of UT instructors teaches a majority of semester credit hours, and there is nothing problematic about this.

Furthermore, our faculty devotes large amounts of time to student advising, research, scholarly publications, administrative responsibilities, participation and leadership in national and international organizations and public service. None of this is measured in the CCAP analysis. Overall productivity is important; the mix of individual contributions to productivity is a tactic to achieve it.

At UT, we are very serious about increasing productivity in teaching, research, business operations and commercialization of intellectual property. Indeed, among the nation's 120 leading research universities,

we are the 10th most efficient when measuring the amount of tuition and state money we spend to achieve our six-year graduation rate. And we spend less state money and tuition per faculty member than all but one other research university in America.

We welcome all productivity analysis that measures quality — because outstanding teaching and research are our goals. With our state's largest enrollment, highest-ranked programs and highest four-year graduation rate, we are very productive. And we do this with tuition of less than \$10,000 per year while receiving only 14 percent of our budget from state appropriations. However, we're still not satisfied, and we are implementing multiple initiatives to further improve our efficiency.

For the residents of Texas, we are a very good investment. Last year, our faculty attracted \$648 million in research grants, more than double our current state appropriation of \$318 million. When combined with other revenue from tuition, philanthropy and auxiliary enterprises, taxpayers received the benefit of \$5.8 billion in economic activity. All of this comes at an annual cost of about \$13 per Texas resident.

It's curious that advocates for productivity should take aim at one of the most productive universities in the nation. In any event, at UT, we welcome productivity analysis that includes measures of academic quality, and we will continue to strive for even greater efficiency and effectiveness.

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