

Addressing Systemic Barriers to Timely Degree Completion through the Establishment of a Graduation Help Desk. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report details a large, four-year, public, research 1 (very high research activity), Hispanic Serving Institution's (HSI) approach to tackling barriers to timely graduation through the implementation of a virtual support center, the Graduation Help Desk (GHD). The GHD, established in late 2017, operates at the level of the provost's office and tackles graduation obstacles through individual referral cases, proactive outreach, and institutional policy review. By collaborating with academic departments, colleges, and support services, the GHD ensures solutions align with degree integrity and institutional standards of excellence. Its organizational position allows it to quickly elevate institution-wide issues and make recommendations for systemic changes. The GHD's impact, specifically the number of referral cases, students served, institutional policies changed, cost savings to students, and increased graduation rates is provided. As a successful, cost-effective, virtual service model, the GHD is instrumental in supporting undergraduate students, specifically at-risk and difficult-to-reach student populations, preventing graduation delays and lowering student costs. GHDs are a scalable intervention with a high return on investment for both students and institutions through improved operations and student success outcomes.

Keywords: Degree completion; Hispanic-serving; student support service.

Introduction

Undergraduate students often encounter roadblocks to timely graduation, and sometimes these barriers are the result of institutional and administrative structures, practices, procedures, and policies. Such barriers include course availability and sequencing, access and scheduling issues, administrative processes, and deadlines, and outdated or no-longer relevant



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institutional policies. Although academic advisors are the most knowledgeable resources for students regarding degree requirements and degree progression policies, advisors are often not positioned or empowered to recommend changes to ingrained policies and procedures that present roadblocks, nor do they have the authority to elevate students' concerns and situational challenges beyond their office or department.

In fall¹ 2017, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) established the Graduation Help Desk (GHD), a virtual, one-stop, student support center, to supplement and confront the limitations of traditional advising roles. The GHD functions as a centralized office with senior-administrative level support within UTSA's Academic Affairs' Division of Student Success and works with department and college administrative leadership across the institution to address individual student referral cases as well as identify policies and structures that are impacting multiple students' time to degree. GHD's complementary role to existing services is a critical part of its function. Academic advising has long been a students' first resort, and students at UTSA are encouraged to seek assistance from academic advising and other support services initially. However, when conventional processes fall short, cases are referred to the GHD, which can provide a panoramic view of both the issue and potential solutions. Moreover, its organizational position means that the GHD can quickly bring issues and trends to the attention of senior administrators and recommend structural solutions.

UTSA modeled the GHD on a program created in 2014 at the University of Texas at Austin and quickly adapted it to suit our unique context—expanding services and approaches to support a large first-generation, high financial need, and historically underrepresented undergraduate student population. The Graduation Help Desk at UTSA has become an innovative and pivotal virtual support center with dramatic and demonstrable results. The University has found the GHD to be a low-cost way to remove barriers and improve student graduation rates.

The literature on retention and persistence has uncovered some of the barriers students face to graduation and the interventions that can help students stay in school and complete their degrees. The latter has shed light on the factors that shape student motivation (Tinto, 2017), the effectiveness of academic advising and coaching (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Tippetts et al., 2022), and the necessity of integrating support services (Hoyt, 2023). In a recent article, Tippetts et al. (2022) noted that “researchers have typically hypothesized that social and academic integration in college matters, because it reduces informational complexity, simplifies decision making, and creates a sense of belonging at the institutions” (p. 530). While they suggest that academic advising is one way to achieve such integration, the present article argues that graduation help desks may be a complementary and distinctive path forward. Staffed by individuals who have received cross-training in academic advising across departments as well as registrar and financial aid functions, GHDs are uniquely suited to break down the silos that emerge when advisors are assigned to only work with students in specific colleges or majors.

As a novel intervention, graduation help desks have not been systematically studied. Data from the University of Texas at Austin suggests that their graduation help desk, when combined with peer mentoring and other student success strategies, has increased persistence and graduation rates (Smith, 2017). One-stop-shops, which operate on a model like the GHD, to integrate services, have only recently begun to receive scholarly attention (Power, et al., 2020). Universities have found that one-stop-shops offer a centralized approach to student services and are an effective, student-centered, and low-cost strategy to streamline the enrollment process (Walters, 2003), particularly for historically marginalized groups (Perry, 2023). One-stop-shops desilo the university bureaucracy, increase a sense of belonging and create a “community of care” (Perry, 2023, p. 66). Surveys also suggest a positive link between one-stop offices and student satisfaction (Ezarik, 2022). UTSA's experience with the GHD shows that the one-stop-shop model can be just as beneficial at the end of a student's career as it is at the beginning.

Setting

The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) is a large, public, research 1 (very high research activity), Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in the seventh largest city and the largest Latino-majority city (64%) in the United States. UTSA serves nearly 35,000 students, of which 85% are undergraduates. Approximately 60% of students are Hispanic/Latino and 65% identify as underrepresented minorities. Just under half of students are first-generation (44%) and high financial need (43% Pell Eligible). Over 40% of students are transfers, 14% are military-affiliated, and nearly 80% are employed at least part-time. The University offers 181-degree programs in the colleges of Sciences; Business; Liberal & Fine Arts; Engineering & Integrated Design; Education & Human Development; Health, Community & Policy; and University College.

¹ In the United States and the rest of the Northern Hemisphere, the months of Fall typically include September, October, and November.

UTSA has experienced dramatic increases in student success over the last decade. Since 2013, UTSA has increased first-year retention by 16 percentage points (ppt), four- and six-year graduation rates by 10 and 11 ppt, respectively, and undergraduate degrees awarded by 41 ppt, while simultaneously reducing the average time to degree from 5.3 years to 4.3 years. Since its establishment in 2017, UTSA's Graduation Help Desk has significantly contributed to these continuously improving student success outcomes.

Method/Program Design and Development

In summer 2017, the University of Texas (UT) System allocated US\$10 million dollars to support innovative and bold student success initiatives designed to help students succeed and complete their degrees in a timely manner. The UT System Quantum Leap (Q-Leap) Student Success Grants were founded on three pillars integral to student success: Advising; Belonging; and Finances. Through the Q-Leap grant process, UT System institutions applied for funding to support institution-specific projects and evidence-based keystone projects. Keystone projects were initiatives with clear evidence shown to promote success outcomes. Keystone projects were envisioned as scalable and as leading to institutionalization.

Implemented at the University of Texas at Austin in 2014, the Graduation Help Desk was a low-tech, low-cost intervention with proven results to remove administrative barriers and improve degree progress and timely graduation. Its distinct focus on barriers to graduation and its position in the provost's office meant the GHD was efficient at resolving issues preventing students from graduating on time. Thus, the UT System identified the GHD as a keystone project and awarded US\$1.66 million for its implementation across eight UT System academic institutions. UTSA received US\$222,456 across three years (2017-2020) to support staffing, software/supplies, start-up equipment and marketing costs (Table 1). Institutions accepted the grant funds with the expectation that they would identify institutional funds to support their GHDs once the grant period ended and all eight have fully functioning GHDs to this day.

Table 1

UTSA Graduation Help Desk Budget (USD)

Expense	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Staffing	\$70,656	\$72,422	\$74,233
Equipment	\$1,000	--	--
Website/Marketing	\$2,000	--	--
Supplies/Software	\$715	\$715	\$715
Yearly Total	\$74,371	\$73,137	\$74,948
Grant Total			\$222,456

In 2019, anticipating the Q-Leap grant's conclusion, UTSA included the funding for GHD staffing and supplies (approximately US\$80,000 annually) into its mandatory academic advising fee increase proposal. The proposal was supported by UTSA students and approved by UT System. Since 2020, the GHD has been funded through UTSA's mandatory advising fee.

A critical factor in the success of the keystone project was the customized implementation and adaptation of the GHD at each institution, allowing for the promotion of an institution-wide culture of student success. Local control allowed for changing practice when needed and putting student need and success at the center of the academic, student support, administrative, and infrastructure decision-making. UTSA's GHD was grounded in the work initiated at the University of Texas at Austin to address individual student cases and identify institutional barriers; however, its role has grown beyond that of the original keystone project proposal. This is best seen through the addition of proactive outreach campaigns for enrolled and non-enrolled students, registration-related activities, and institutional system-wide policy development.

At UTSA, as at many American universities, students are assigned an advisor based on their chosen major or college. While this structure provides students with degree specific expertise, in practice, it can obscure a bird's eye view of institution-wide issues. To address this limitation on traditional advising structures, the GHD functions as a centralized office that works campus-wide and enjoys ready access to university leadership. In the original model, conceived at University of Texas at

Austin, the GHD had three main tasks: (1) Identifying issues that otherwise might be invisible or classified as isolated cases within colleges or departments, (2) Provide efficient solutions for students facing roadblocks to timely graduation, and (3) Elevating previously unrecognized barriers to responsible departments, units and administrative staff, faculty and leadership.

Initially, the GHD's structure at UTSA resembled the original model. With UT System funding, UTSA's Division of Student Success hired an employee with academic advising experience to run the GHD. In the weeks before the GHD opened, he met with academic advisors, deans, department chairs, and other potential partners across campus to advertise the new service. Once the program launched, email referrals from faculty and staff started coming in. A few students also emailed directly for support. Most issues could be resolved over email, phone, or videoconference, but over the years a handful of students opted to meet in person. Early on, staff found that ticketing software was not useful for analyzing data. It was easier to keep track of cases using a spreadsheet, which allowed them to automate assessment practices.

UTSA's GHD purview quickly evolved from exclusively case management to include advocacy and outreach. Tasked with identifying policies and practices that were preventing multiple students from graduating, staff realized that institutional change would take time. Moreover, the referral system limited the number of students that could be helped. A proactive outreach campaign, however, could help more students facing the same problem. Working closely with the Institutional Research Office and technology department, staff could quickly identify students facing the same barrier (e.g., students who had not applied to graduate but were eligible) and then reach out proactively. This method, as shown below, proved enormously impactful and soon constituted one of the GHD's key practices.

A year into its operation, the GHD expanded its scope to assist with registration issues. By this point, staff had developed broad expertise in academic policies, institutional cross-collaboration, and data tracking. The Division of Student Success recognized that the GHD was uniquely positioned to help with other data-driven student success efforts and tasked staff with registration-related outreach campaigns, such as following up on students who had attended orientations but still needed to register for classes. The GHD has coordinated these activities and assisted with other registration issues on an ad hoc basis.

Impact/Data

Referral and Proactive Outreach Cases

GHD's centralized position and panoramic viewpoint facilitated the resolution of 8,218 cases and assistance to 6,168 unique students by the end of summer 2023. Nearly 75% of students served by the GHD identified as an underrepresented group (defined as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander, or 2 or more races). Likewise, 54% were female (3,318) and 46% were male (2,837) (13 students with unknown gender). Similarly, just over 45% (2,794) identified as first-generation college students (Table 2).

Table 2*GHD Students Served by Ethnicity: Fall 2017-Summer 2023*

Race/Ethnicity	# of unique students	% of unique students
American Indian or Alaskan Native	9	0.1%
Asian	311	5%
Black or African American	662	10.7%
Hispanic/Latino	3,610	58.5%
International	95	1.5%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	12	0.2%
White	1,178	19.1%
2 or more	229	3.7%
Unknown	62	1%
Total	6,168	99.8%*

*Due to rounding, percent total does not calculate to 100%

Of the 8,218 cases, just over 28% (2,323) were student referral cases. Significantly, 4,695 cases (57%) came from proactive outreach, promoting timely progress toward graduation. Registration-related cases, numbering 1,200 (15%), also showcase the GHD's commitment to supporting students' degree progression and timely completion. Through referrals and proactive efforts, the GHD aided 3,477 students graduating from Fall 2017 to Summer 2023, with 711 graduating within four years and an additional 714 within six years.

Nationally and locally, education costs are a major concern, and the GHD's institution-wide perspective has efficiently worked to reduce student's financial burden. Proactive campaigns focused on preventing students from taking unnecessary coursework, and the GHD's activities have saved students an estimated US\$4.36 million in tuition and fees. Estimated savings are calculated based on different situational factors including whether a student is currently enrolled in a course not needed for their degree and whether credit for a particular course must be earned from UTSA or could have been earned through alternative means, such as a CLEP² exam. The cost of a UTSA course is based on the tuition and fee schedule in effect at the time a student is served whereas the cost of a CLEP exam is based on the current price of a CLEP exam according to the College Board. As part of this work, the GHD, for example, would identify students signed up for duplicate credits and send an outreach email. The GHD has also corrected numerous inaccuracies within the degree auditing system that caused students to take unnecessary coursework. Many students benefited from these changes, but the corresponding savings are not included in the GHD's totals if they were not associated with specific GHD cases.

Institutional Changes (Policy, Process, and System Changes)

The GHD is uniquely well-positioned to observe patterns in the roadblocks to timely graduation and alert administrators so that structural solutions may be found. Whereas an academic advisor assisting one student to address a challenge to timely graduation often only works to address the immediate issue at hand in singularity, the GHD assists, tracks, and monitors trends to identify systemic barriers and create solutions at scale to better serve the entire student population more efficiently. In this way, the GHD also provides return on investment for UTSA and the UT System by improving university operations, contributing to tuition and fee revenue, and increasing graduation rates and the number of degrees awarded. To date, the GHD at UTSA has been involved with over 340 changes to institutional policies, procedures, and systems. Many changes have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of university operations, but they also aim to improve graduation rates. For instance, improving the automation and accuracy of the degree auditing system prevents staff from needing to make manual adjustments

² The CLEP (College Level Examination Program) is administered across United States and many other world locations to earn college credit.

to students' degree plans and helps students save time and money by preventing them from taking coursework not required for graduation (Table 3).

Table 3

Examples of Institutional Changes Initiated by the Graduation Help Desk

Institutional change	Example of change
Policy	Aligned Gen Ed Curriculum policies for UTSA courses with those of transfer courses. Courses approved for Gen Ed under older catalogs now apply to a newer catalog's Gen Ed Curriculum if they were taken during a semester when the courses were part of the Gen Ed core.
Process	Modified the process for determining course equivalencies for study abroad courses. The changes reduced the time needed to complete the process, addressed the needs of multiple campus services, converted the verification form into an electronic process, and ensured that credits would be awarded in a timely manner to prevent negative impacts on graduation or financial aid eligibility for future terms.
Degree Audit System	Automation of a common Gen Ed Curriculum substitution eliminating the need for staff to make several thousand manual adjustments per semester and helping prevent more students from taking a course not needed based on their admission type.

Survey Results (Quantitative and Qualitative)

Student experiences suggest that the GHD, as an additional and unique layer of support, increased their sense of belonging and membership in what Perry calls a "community of care" (2023, p. 66). Overall, students have been very satisfied with the service and results of the GHD. Over 98% of survey respondents agreed that they were satisfied with the services provided, with over 95% strongly agreeing. Additionally, 99% of respondents agreed that the "staff member was courteous, welcoming, and professional" and that the "staff member had sufficient knowledge to assist me." Their positive experience with the GHD was also evident with 98% agreeing that they would utilize the GHD's services again if needed or recommend the GHD to their peers. In their comments, students most often cited the GHD's timely communication, caring attitude, and ability to fully address each situation holistically. As one student stated:

In this large system, where it is easy for students to feel like just another ID number and tuition payment, the Graduation Help Desk has made me feel like there is actually someone in one of these offices who really cares whether I graduate or not." Another mentioned that staff "made me feel like my request was as important to him as it was for me.

Students frequently mentioned how staff "went above and beyond to get my needs taken care of" and highlighted how the GHD's unique approach is "essential for students like me who might not be your typical college student and need additional resources." The impact of the GHD's service on student retention and completion were also evident in comments such as, "I was in the process of transferring out to another University System in the spring but have decided to hang tight due to the personable positive experience received" and "I truly appreciated services like this because my graduation was able to happen with ease, despite obstacles previously in my way."

Discussion

While the GHD has proven to be a low-cost initiative with a strong return on investment, challenges related to its implementation do exist and are primarily associated with its broad scope. The GHD may need to simultaneously tackle a wide range of barriers to graduation. To prevent staff from being pulled in too many directions at once, their efforts should focus on addressing the top barriers to graduation. Deciding which issues to prioritize involves examining several factors for each barrier, including the severity of its impact on students, the number of students affected, and the ease with which the issue could be addressed. Obtaining data for some items can be difficult, if not impossible, using existing systems, so being

able to fulfill the GHD's charge of addressing systemic barriers to graduation often meant developing new reports or processes to collect the information needed.

The GHD's broad charge also presents challenges when deciding how best to serve students. As a centralized resource, the GHD might serve any of UTSA's 30,000+ undergraduate students. The challenge is finding the right balance of being accessible to students while not overwhelming the GHD's staff with too many cases that would compromise the quality of service. Providing timely and accurate service is a hallmark of the GHD. As such, it is critical that the GHD does not serve as a first point of contact. At UTSA, the GHD, thus, marketed itself not as a replacement for existing campus services but as an extra layer of support for difficult situations not addressed by other offices. Another challenge is the inability to fully predict how many student cases will be received at a given point in time. Responding to student referrals is a primary component of the GHD, so an unexpected influx of referrals can limit the time available for proactive outreach campaigns or for addressing systemic barriers.

Because the GHD often receives unique and challenging student cases, its work can be quite time intensive. The first few attempts to address a new barrier may require a significant amount of time to identify a creative solution. Even seemingly minor issues can take longer to resolve than normal due to the GHD's intensive, hands-on approach to managing student cases. A traditional service model may involve identifying a solution or providing information while leaving it up to a student or another campus service to address the situation fully. At UTSA, however, the GHD, sees cases through to their resolution. Other offices may still need to be involved, so the GHD's role may include monitoring actions taken by other areas to ensure a situation is fully addressed.

Conclusion

Graduation Help Desks offer universities a low-cost strategy to reduce student barriers to graduation, and they can be successfully implemented at a variety of higher education institutions. Adapting the GHD to UTSA's specific context has been a critical part of the program's success, and institutions interested in launching a similar initiative should carefully consider the GHD's location in their organizational structure to ensure that staff are empowered to seek solutions for individual students, alert leadership to roadblocks, and propose institutional changes. Additionally, it is strongly suggested that GHD staff be recruited from within the university, as basic knowledge of academic systems, practices, and policies is critical for the program's efficacy. Finally, GHD staff work closely with the offices of institutional research and technology, and it is recommended that those connections be established at the outset. UTSA's experience strongly suggests that Graduation Help Desks are a scalable intervention with a high return on investment for both students and institutions.

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