

UT MARTIN ASSESSMENT NEWSLETTER OCTOBER/NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

Our most important job is to help our students succeed!

***NOTE:** The October Assessment Newsletter was delayed in order to include a report from the UT Academic Affairs, Research, and Student Success Summit held in Nashville on November 2-3, 2023. We have combined October's newsletter with the usual November/December newsletter to provide a comprehensive overview of several related past and upcoming initiatives related to refreshing our online Catalog.*

To begin this refresh project, we want to focus on the way our academic programs are being described and represented in the Catalog. We begin with a quick summary of how the current academic program descriptions in the Catalog came to be, follow with a brief description of recent activity, and end with a "call for action" that describes how you can contribute to refreshing our Catalog and making it more transparent and user-friendly.

Academic Program Descriptions – The Past

In the past 30 or so years, the number of programs offered by UT Martin has grown significantly. During that time, we have also been mandated by state laws and other regulations to refine general education, accept general education completions from other Tennessee public institutions, and cut our programs to 120 hours except when mandated by program accreditation. Each time, we have done what was necessary to meet the mandate.

As we went through these processes, our print Catalogs grew—this picture shows the size of our Catalogs from 1992-93 on the left through 2017-18 on the right; the

Catalogs for subsequent years were slightly wider.



Eventually we were forced to begin limiting how we described our programs because our printed Catalogs were limited by the number of pages we could include. That led to abbreviating our program descriptions by eliminating duplications of text and shortening the descriptions of program requirements.

Recently, we converted from a print Catalog to an online Catalog. In the interest of getting the conversion completed as quickly as possible, we simply took the language from the printed Catalog and converted it to an electronic format. This process was further complicated because the conversion occurred about the same time we were experiencing a world-wide pandemic. Our faculty and staff were busy taking care of our students and ensuring they continued to receive the best service and support we could offer; we did not have the time to properly review our curriculum as we converted to an online format for the Catalog.

As we have progressed through these curricular and program changes, our students have also changed. Many of our older programs were designed for the traditional student—fresh out of high school and with no earned college credit, coming directly to UTM. However, the academic preparation profile of our students has changed since these programs were first

developed. For Fall 2023, almost 60% of our new first-time, full-time freshmen came to UT Martin with some kind of college credit (dual enrollment, advanced placement, etc.), and the vast majority of those earned credits were not earned at UTM. Further, the average number of college-level academic credit hours brought in by our fall cohort of first-time college students (including those who did not bring in any credit hours) has risen from 7.59 credit hours in Fall 2019 to 8.14 credit hours in Fall 2023—and we expect those numbers to continue increasing.

During the same time period, the average number of credits brought to UT Martin by undergraduate transfer students has been approximately 60 credit hours, with very little fluctuation from one year to the next.

Complicating these issues is the rise of “micro-credentials,” such as certificates, that allow students to accrue credentials that will either affirm that the student has additional knowledge and skills valuable to a career or that can be “stacked” towards degree programs. To date, UT Martin offers very few certificate programs on the undergraduate level, so this opens an opportunity for exploration by our faculty.

In sum, to date we have been *reacting* to changing mandates and expectations without taking the time to *proactively* examine our program structures and presentations for clarity, transparency, relevancy, and opportunity.

Academic Program Descriptions – The Present

Recent events have focused our scrutiny on the way we present our programs, both in the Catalog and in Flight Plan. In recent years, UT Martin has gone through the Strategic Planning process, the Strategic Enrollment Management process, the Foundations of Excellence (FOE) process, and the SACSCOC reaffirmation process, which included the development of a QEP (quality enhancement plan) with a goal of preparing the institution for students and

preparing students for the institution, thus increasing student retention, progression, and graduation rates. Further, UT Martin just received a Title III grant that will provide funding to expand support for students, faculty, and staff as we work towards achieving the goals established in the FOE process and the QEP.

Outside of UT Martin, Tennessee higher education leaders are also examining student access and success initiatives. At the end of September, THEC hosted a Transfer Initiatives Convening, inviting representatives from Tennessee TCATs, community colleges, and four-year institutions to participate in conversations around the current state of students’ transfer of credit from one institution to another, including successes, roadblocks, and questions for further discussion and investigation. Among the latter were questions related to how institutions currently “count” transfer credit, how transfer students are supported from recruitment to graduation, and whether transfer students are receiving support comparable to the support provided to first-time, first-year students.

At the beginning of November, the UT System hosted the Academic Affairs, Research, and Student Success Summit, and the focus of this year’s Summit was “Academic and Student Success.” Discussions were centered on student access and engagement, with sessions addressing topics ranging from legislative viewpoints to comparisons of System- and institution-level student access and success data with data from peer and aspirational institutions to institutional approaches and initiatives addressing student access and success.

Collectively these related processes and discussions have focused our attention on academic advising and student support by raising questions related to how students come to UT Martin, how well they are supported in their transition to UTM (regardless of their origin), how quickly they are progressing through their selected

program of study, and how well we support them as they progress towards graduation.

Academic Programs – The Future

If we want to “move the needle” on student access and success—for ALL of our students—we need to examine the policies and processes we use to recruit, admit, support, advise, retain, progress, and graduate students. Policies and processes related to these areas exist across all parts of our campus, but our University Catalog is a repository of many of these policies and processes, especially those related to program requirements for graduation. The way we present our programs’ requirements to students can affect recruitment, admission, and advising as well as retention, progression and graduation rates.

The presentation of our programs in the online Catalog is fundamental to student success—they need to know everything they are expected to do to earn a degree. Recent communications with students and faculty related to CPoS (Course Program of Study) has brought to light the need for UT Martin to examine how our programs are currently presented in the electronic Catalog and identify places in their program descriptions that need clarification. Current and potential students should be able to access our Catalog, look at the program that interests them, and see in one place all requirements they must complete in order to graduate—not just the course requirements for the major or concentration. We are no longer bound by the page limits of the printed Catalog; it is time to take advantage of that freedom to be as transparent as possible about our programs.

Academic Affairs will be working with program faculty throughout the Spring semester 2024 to transform the way that program requirements are presented in the Catalog, with the expectation that Catalog changes will go through the Faculty Senate approval process in April 2024. Academic Affairs leadership will be meeting with each

department to share information and resources and to answer questions early in the process, then will have scheduled opportunities later in the process for faculty to ask follow-up questions or to dedicate time to focused discussions.

Along the way, faculty will be asked to examine the language describing their program requirements through the lens of first-time full-time students, part-time students, transfer students, advisors, parents, and potential students. Do the words they use to describe their programs make the requirements clear? Can a student with little or no experience with higher education understand what they need to do to earn a degree? Are there any roadblocks to a student’s path to graduation created by program requirements if the student transfers credits to UT Martin?

We expect that this in-depth examination will likely uncover some ways to streamline program requirements, remove some outdated requirements, or add fresh opportunities such as increasing coursework options to address student interests or offering certificates for the completion of certain minors, and we welcome those changes. At the end of this process, all academic programs will be presented in a transparent way in our Catalog, and students, faculty, staff, advisors, and parents will know exactly what requirements a student must meet to graduate.

Why are we pushing to have this completed by the end of the Spring semester? Again CPoS is a catalyst—federal programs are examining CPoS more closely, and institutions that fail to administer federal aid in accordance with CPoS guidelines have been fined millions of dollars. State financial aid regulations are mirroring federal CPoS guidelines, and state auditors have fewer institutions to examine that federal auditors. It is imperative that we make sure our requirements are as transparent as possible so that it is clear we are following CPoS guidelines.

How Can Other Units Contribute?

Almost every unit on campus has some language in the Catalog dedicated to their particular area of focus. We ask that you look at your parts of the Catalog through the lens of those same student populations and consider:

- Are your policies and procedures up-to-date?
- Is the language you use to describe your policies and procedures clear?
- Are you missing anything that students need to know?
- Is there a particular recurring issue in your area that needs to be addressed in some way? Do you need an additional policy or procedure to address this issue?
- Do your policies and procedures apply equally to students with no transfer credits and students with some (or many) transfer credits? Do transfer students have access to the same types of opportunities as non-transfer students?
- Are faculty, staff, and students aware of your policies and procedures that affect them? If not, how can you increase their awareness?

If you have any questions about the Catalog language as it relates to your area, please don't hesitate to contact Stephanie Kolitsch (skolitsc@utm.edu, 881-7477, EPS 120) or Anderson Starling (astarlin@utm.edu, 881-7854, EPS 125) for help.

Resources

If you have not recently looked at the Catalog descriptions of our programs, please take some time and peruse the listings. You'll see inconsistencies in how our programs are presented within the Catalog, and you'll begin to get some ideas of how we can change things for the better.

Undergraduate and Graduate Catalogs: <https://catalog.utm.edu/>

If you are interested in statistics related to graduation rates or other student-centered data, please visit our Institutional Research webpage.

Statistical Reports:
<https://www.utm.edu/offices-and-services/office-of-institutional-research/statistical-reports.php>

Recent data trends are available through our Interactive Dashboards, also developed by our Institutional Research team. You will need to use your NetID and password to access these.

Interactive Dashboards:
<https://www.utm.edu/offices-and-services/office-of-institutional-research/interactive-dashboards.php>

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission is tracking information related to the transfer process.

THEC transfer information:
<https://www.tn.gov/theac/bureaus/academic-affairs/articulation-and-transfer.html>

UT System data is available for all campuses. Additional dashboards are in development that will provide ever more in-depth data about our student success and access.

UT Data: <https://data.tennessee.edu/>