

September 1, 2020

Delivered via Email

The House Committee on Higher Education
c/o The Honorable Chris Turner
Chair – House Committee on Higher Education
Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768-2910

RE: Interim Charge 1

Dear Chairman Turner and Members of the House Committee on Higher Education:

On August 3, 2020 the House Committee on Higher Education (the “Committee”) requested written submissions from various stakeholders regarding the Committee’s Interim Charge 1: Monitor the agencies and programs under the Committee’s jurisdiction and oversee the implementation of relevant legislation passed by the 86th Legislature.

In response to this request, The University of Texas at Austin (“UT Austin”) would respectfully submit the following:

- **HB 1638 (85R) and issues surrounding dual credit, which relates to statewide goals for dual credit programs.**

UT Austin does not offer dual credit courses. However, UT Austin does offer a dual enrollment educational opportunity to high school students through our OnRamps program. We serve tens of thousands of high school students and teachers, in partnership with school districts and higher education institutions. In the 2019-2020 academic year OnRamps served more than 33,000 unique students.

When schools began closing in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, OnRamps was uniquely positioned to maintain instructional continuity and support district partners, educators and students because the college portion of the course is delivered through distance learning and the high school portion of the course is provided to teachers and students online. Drawing on our proven expertise and capacity to deliver distance learning for the college courses, we were well-positioned to effectively support our high school instructors in fully transitioning the high school course to a distance learning model.

OnRamps took immediate steps to ensure our students maintained access to quality course experiences by:

- Adjusting remaining college assignments so that students could submit those assignments using a cell phone;
- Providing additional supports to students and teachers on alternate methods for completing and submitting assignments, such as how to create a pdf of a handwritten document using a cell phone;

- Conducting virtual conferences with individual teachers and groups of teachers to support their transition to teaching in a distance learning format; either online or paper-based;
- Distributing additional aides and supports to increase student use of distance learning tools that were unfamiliar;
- Monitoring student logins to courses to identify needs for intervention so that students were encouraged to complete their college courses; and
- Hosting bi-weekly Zoom calls for district and campus leaders in partner districts to ensure instructional continuity beginning on March 19.

Additionally, OnRamps partnered with the Texas Education Agency (“TEA”) to offer five modules from their Distance Learning Catalog to all Texas middle and high school teachers at no charge. These free modules will provide educators online professional development opportunities to equip them with the skills and pedagogical knowledge needed to teach in distance or hybrid-learning environments.

- **With respect to SB 18, which relates to the protection of expressive activities at public institutions of higher education, the Committee has asked what institutions have done to protect the expressive rights of persons while also maintaining an orderly and safe learning environment.**

UT Austin has always supported the open exchange of ideas that is fundamental to a free society and that is protected and guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Shortly after the passage of SB 18, UT Austin informed our community that SB 18 would make outdoor areas at state universities open to the public for speech and expression, and that UT Austin had adopted a new rule in conformance with the new law. UT Austin’s new rule provides a way for the public and the campus community to reserve space in the common outdoor areas (though a reservation is not required). UT Austin also made clear that neither UT Austin community members nor visitors to the campus would be allowed to interfere with those who exercise their First Amendment rights. The new rule includes an ethics hotline for students to report any instances of interference with their speech and expression. Furthermore, UT Austin reiterated that campus buildings, including classrooms, would continue to be used solely by members of the UT community, and that pre-existing policies to that effect would remain in place to support our educational mission.

UT Austin revised its speech rules last summer to conform to the new requirements of SB 18. The new rule was implemented as an interim rule by SB 18’s effective date of September 1, 2019. The rule was then approved by the UT System’s Office of General Counsel on March 5, 2020 and approved by the UT System Board of Regents during the May 6-7 Board meeting.

UT Austin believes that this new rule strikes the proper balance between compliance with the U.S. Constitution and SB 18 and the protection of the campus environment by allowing a wide range of expressive activities while also including reasonable and content-neutral time, manner and place restrictions. The new rule is set out at Chapter 13, Appendix C, of the General Information Catalogue. It includes the following provisions:

- Provides for the discipline of students, student organizations, faculty members and staff who interfere with the free speech activities of others, Sec. 13-1202 (Response to Violations);
- Requires reservations to use amplified sound, Sec. 13-800 (Amplified Sound); and
- Prohibits expressive activities from including the use of sticks or batons or open flames, Sec. 13-105 (Prohibited Items or Actions).

A link to UT Austin’s rule covering expressive activities on campus can be found here: <https://catalog.utexas.edu/general-information/appendices/appendix-c/speech-expression-and-assembly/>.

- **With respect to SB 25, which relates to measures to facilitate the transfer, academic progress and timely graduation of students in public higher education.**

UT Austin has complied with the operative components of SB 25. First, UT Austin allows our students to run their own degree audit at any time, which allows them to monitor their progress toward their degrees. Second, UT Austin has developed at least one recommended course sequence for each undergraduate certificate or degree program offered by UT Austin, as required by SB 25.

Furthermore, UT Austin is working with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (the “Board”) as the Board works through issues involving transfers and meta-majors. UT Austin has also been involved in discussions with the Board’s leadership on issues involving transfer and looks forward to continuing those discussions.

Additionally, in connection with SB 25, the Committee has asked the following two questions:

Question One: In what ways can data collection and sharing between the THECB and the TEA improve and assist institutions with college credit transfer?

Question Two: What role can school counselors and advisors play in the success of transferable credits? Are there ways in which the state can utilize their expertise and student relationships more effectively?

UT Austin, in partnership with nine other institutions and with the support of philanthropy, is building a student-facing online tool called MapMyPath. This tool will make degree pathways and credit applicability more transparent. We have built a database of course equivalencies, leveraging data from the Board and other publicly available data, and we are actively working with institutional partners to collect recommended course sequences (RCS) which will be added to the database. This database will serve as the data infrastructure for the MapMyPath tool. There is an opportunity with the Board’s upcoming collection of RCS to allow for streamlined and efficient use of the RCS by the agencies, institutions, students and advisors.

Leveraging Texas OnCourse’s deep partnerships across the state, we interviewed and tested the design and conceptual elements of the MapMyPath tool with Texas counselors and advisers to understand how it can support effective advising. Currently, accurate and timely

advising on course selection and transfer is challenging given the dynamic, nuanced, and distributed nature of the information. A tool like MapMyPath, will bring course transfer and applicability information together, in one place, so that it is accessible and transparent for students, parents, and educators. As designed, MapMyPath will allow counselors and advisors to deepen relationships and more effectively and efficiently support students and families in high school and college. At present the Texas OnCourse Academy provides access to best practices in transfer advising through online learning experiences for K12 counselors and higher education advisors. Additionally, our District Fellowship program supports district-level adoption of effective strategies to seamlessly transition students from K12 to higher education.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. If you need anything further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Very truly yours,

/s/ Jay Dyer

Jay Dyer

The University of Texas at Austin