

September 1, 2020

Texas House Higher Education Committee
Texas House of Representatives
1100 Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701

Sent via Email: Julie Young (julie.young_hc@house.texas.gov)

Dear Chairman Turner and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comment on Interim Charge 3: Review progress toward the goals of the 60X30TX plan.

[Good Reason Houston](#) champions a bold, community-wide vision that every child, in every neighborhood, excels in a world-class public school and thrives in the Houston of tomorrow. Our work starts with our youngest students, focusing on pre-K enrollment, and continues beyond high school as we increase access for students to college and careers of their choice by helping districts remove financial barriers for all students through [Harris County Promise](#).

It is through our Harris County Promise work that we have had an opportunity to bear witness first-hand to some of the challenges facing students, primarily low socio-economic students, in their transition to post-secondary success. Through that lens, we submit the following responses to the questions:

- What improvements could be made to alleviate “summer melt” and to facilitate streamlined student advising?
- What changes, if any, are needed to align data collection between the THECB, TWC, and TEA in order to collect consistent metrics?

Recommendations to Alleviate Summer Melt & Streamline Student Advising

Recommendation 1: Create an incentive program that facilitates collaborative partnerships between institutions of higher education (“IHE”) and k-12 school districts and/or nonprofits to

create a “summer bridge” program that will keep college bound students on track.

Through our work we have learned that during this summer season there is a breakdown in who communicates with students after they graduate from high school – no one takes “ownership” over the student during the summer. For the high school, the student a graduate – their responsibility is complete. On the IHE side, there is not one person at the IHE designated to support the student before they begin classes in the fall. Creating postsecondary partnerships to develop summer bridge programs would offer logistical and emotional support during the transitional summer season before college, a crucial time particularly for low socio-economic students.

Recommendation 2: Facilitate partnerships between IHE and k-12 to build strong dual credit programs.

Students who participate in dual credit programs while enrolled in k-12 have a greater likelihood of postsecondary success. We recommend the Committee explore how to facilitate and incentivize these partnerships.

Recommendation 3: Create an incentive program for IHEs meeting certain thresholds for persistence and completion rates with educationally disadvantage students.

The Texas Legislature has precedent for such a program, the College, Career, and Military Readiness Bonus implemented through House Bill 3, passed by the 86th Texas Legislature. Further, we recommend the Committee explore the creation of a commission, similar to the 2018 School Finance Commission that studied k-12 financing, that would look at the state’s funding of IHEs and how IHE’s are performing and serving students. This study could also identify strategic methods of funding that would drive equitable student outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Simplify the process to apply and enroll in community college.

The process is such that it is often that students have to make multiple trips to enroll. For example, community colleges should organize the college orientation, attending an advising session, and registering for classes all on one day. The more times a student is required to go

back to enroll, the greater the risk increases that the student will not go back to complete the enrollment process.

Recommendation 5: Streamline the financial aid application process.

There are several factors that would streamline this process for students:

- Process financial applications sooner in the spring. Private colleges send admission offers and financial aid awards in late March. While there are federal limits on disbursing aid to students, there are none on putting together and sending the packages. If students know sooner that they will have financial support for college, there is a greater likelihood of a successful transition.
- Require a standard awarding letter that explains all of the awards, what they will cover, and if students will receive a refund. Currently, the portal is confusing, students do not know how to interpret it, nor do they understand the steps needed to “accept” an award. While colleges have college-specific information, the state could require a standard letter as some of the financial aid awarded is state aid.
- College applications should be required to ask if the student would like financial aid. If the student indicates “yes”, the college should be required to communicate with that student and provide support.
- ApplyTexas should require a student to “opt-out” of providing a social security number instead of a universal “opt-in”. The site does not provide any notice indicating that if the student does not provide a social security number, they are unlikely to receive financial aid. Also, if colleges are unable to match the FAFSA application with the social security number, the college will not match that student’s financial aid record without a social security number. This places the student’s application in a “suspense” file, possibly without the student’s realization.

Recommendation 6: Meningitis testing.

Require colleges to offer meningitis testing as opposed to dropping students from enrollment

when the student has not completed it on his own. While this is more in the k-12 domain, we think it necessary to state that if the student completes the meningitis testing in the 11th grade of high school as recommended, it should be noted on the high school transcript as opposed to requiring the student to submit proof that it was done.

Recommendation 6: Provide greater, affordable digital access.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for access to technology in many aspects of life. Many speak of the significant gap in access for student in k-12, but not enough is said about this gap as it exists in the postsecondary world. The same gap that impacted the student in k-12 will follow the student into their postsecondary career. Once a student graduates from high school and leaves the school building, they lose the access to technology to complete many of their college admission and enrollment requirements as well as the financial aid application process. These challenges are all before they can even begin taking classes, that given the current state is mostly online.

Recommended Changes to Align THECB, TWC, and TEA Data Collection to Collect Consistent Metrics

Recommendation 7: Create a standard FERPA waiver used across all of IHE and k-12.

Such a waiver would simplify data sharing agreements between institutions. Currently, there are several iterations of this waiver, making data relationships clumsy and difficult to streamline data needs.

Recommendation 8: Assign one student-identifying number.

In order to align data collection between agencies and institutions, there is a great need to create one student-identifying number that follows the student from k-12 through their institution of higher education. Doing so would streamline the significant data transfer that must happen between k-12 and the IHE. The Legislature created precedent for such a move when it passed HB 680 during the 2019 Legislative Session. This new law requires TWC to provide a PEIMS number for each child receiving subsidized child care that follows the student

when they enroll in k-12.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit our responses to Interim Charge 3. We would be more than happy to discuss our recommendations further with you. Please contact me directly with any questions.

Sincerely,

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