

House Committee on Higher Education RFIs
Interim Charge 4

Organization/Entity Name: Alamo Colleges District (Alamo Colleges)
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Interim Charge 4:

Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and 2 degrees versus more traditional programs.

The Alamo Colleges District and its family of five colleges – Northeast Lakeview College, Northwest Vista College, Palo Alto College, St. Philip’s College, and San Antonio College - provide a robust collection of over 70+ fully online Associate of Applied Sciences Degrees, Level 1 and Level 2 Certificates, Fields of Study, and Occupational Skills Award (OSA). Fully online programs do not require any face-to-face components. A list of these programs can be viewed online at <https://www.alamo.edu/siteassets/district/departments/alamoonline/pdf/alamoonline-fullyonlineofferings.pdf>. The information on online programs and populations served by online courses and programs can be viewed at alamo.edu/online

Q1. What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers?

- **Student Barriers**

- Access to Hardware. While we were able to secure over 6,000 laptops for student distribution enabling students to stay connected to our systems and services there continues to be a need for additional devices. Many students continue to either share devices with other members of their household or rely on their smartphones to complete coursework which is not feasible in the long-term.
- Internet Bandwidth. Access to reliable high-speed internet is a challenge for many of our students. At the start of the pandemic, we secured over 2,200 hot spots for student use. We know and understand that connectivity equates to productivity. The lack of high-speed internet connectivity disproportionately affects our most underserved and under-resourced families. This has been and will continue to be a long-term priority for our institution.

- Training with Tools. The Alamo Colleges has worked to minimize the software tools that are required by faculty and students to use (Zoom, Canvas (LMS), Banner (ERP)). Even with this focus on a limited solution set, initial and reminder navigational and functional training does provide a barrier to student/staff access and productivity. Providing an appropriate balance between a high-tech and high-touch technology environment is an ongoing challenge.
- **Actions Taken to Help Students**
 - A Remote Ready Boot Camp for Students was created to assist students with utilization of new online tools necessary for instruction. All currently enrolled students were enrolled in a section of the Boot Camp in Spring 2020 and the colleges could opt-in for Summer and Fall 2020.
 - The Alamo Colleges provided laptops and hot spots for students based on need.
 - A “Park and Learn” (WiFi) environment was established at each college so students would have access to high-speed internet connectivity.
- **Faculty Barriers**
 - Training with Tools/Learning Management Systems. The quick transition to a remote teaching/learning environment required faculty who may not have used Zoom or Canvas to learn the tools and implement them quickly and with confidence.
 - Internet Bandwidth. Faculty, like students, may not have had the bandwidth to fully manage a lot of software programs at once. The District provided a monthly supplement to faculty and staff to assist with upgrading personal Internet and/or phone services.
 - Academic Integrity/Privacy Issues. Solutions to ensure the academic integrity of student work is in much higher demand in the new teaching/learning environment (proctoring, biometric authentication, browser lockdown solutions, etc.)
- **Actions Taken to Support Faculty**
 - The Vice Presidents of Academic Success at the five colleges adopted a Continuity of Instruction plan - <https://www.alamo.edu/online/keep-teaching/plan/>.
 - Faculty were required to complete a Remote Ready Boot Camp that taught them the baseline expectations for using Zoom and Canvas.
 - On-Demand Support was provided for faculty and staff.
 - Faculty were surveyed after the shift to distance learning. The results were used to provide additional training with any instructional gaps identified (i.e., remote instruction, proctoring, assessments, exams, tutoring, and general student support services).
 - These infographics provide evidence of all the work done to support faculty:
 - <https://www.alamo.edu/link/765b52d889d84ed9a904518afdaa737a.aspx>
 - <https://www.alamo.edu/link/21d5c271e29d4e83a4d85a2212592ae2.aspx>

Q2. What information and data is available regarding long-term student success for those taking courses primarily online -- both in general and specific to Texas institutions?

The Alamo Colleges tracks the course completion and success rates of distance learning courses compared to hybrid courses and face-to-face courses. A complete report can be viewed at this [LINK](#).

Course Completions. In Fall 2019, there were 37,850 course completions of fully distance learning courses reflecting a 90.52% completion rate.

Productive Grade Rates. The Productive Grade Rate (PGR) at the Alamo Colleges District counts all As, Bs, and Cs earned in a course. In Fall 2019, 74.72% of course completions (31,244) received an A, B, or C.

Q3. With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?

- **Keep it simple.** - Our guiding principle: Continue instruction and allow students to finish the semester.
- **Prepare and Support Faculty.** The Alamo Colleges had a solid plan to prepare and support faculty by providing training through Remote Ready Boot Camps, providing easy course layouts for use in Canvas – our learning management system, and delivering training in synchronous and asynchronous formats.
- **Clear Communication to Students.** Clearly communicate to students and provide a mechanism to answer questions. Our students have been incredibly resilient and partners with us during these unprecedented times. Our commitment to them is to continue to always communicate where we are at and what they should expect in and outside the classroom.
- **Leverage existing infrastructure.** The Alamo Colleges increased licenses of existing tools (Zoom, Canvas, and Microsoft 365) rather than purchasing new software. This allowed us to move quickly and transition students, faculty and staff to remote learning/teaching/working in the Spring 2020 semester.

Q4. What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations? The Committee is seeking the perspectives of college/university administration, faculty and students.

Faculty have expressed concerns of increased possibilities of academic dishonesty by students. Several Deans have reported higher cases of academic dishonesty reported and arbitrated by the Colleges. There are also increasing calls for more advanced proctoring services. Funding for adaptive and simulation technology is an issue as is funding for technology training and support (for students, staff and faculty). Finally, faculty continue to have concerns about student engagement and success with online-exclusive programs.

Q5. Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?

Yes! Enrollment in fully online courses increased by over 1,000 from the prior year (pre-pandemic). Because online learning is flexible, we anticipate an increased demand especially since many students and staff have gained both experience and confidence in this modality.

The total number of fully distance education sections scheduled in Fall 2020 increased by 25.4% over Fall 2019 from 1,942 sections to 2,436 sections of fully distance education courses.

Q6. How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?

There are several ways the legislature can assist in this area to include:

- Assist educational institutions with funding to support more sustainable long-term solutions to the digital divide and bandwidth divide issues. Provide start-up funding to establish private/public LTE service to students is one way to accomplish this. Once this infrastructure is set-up, individual colleges and universities could be held responsible for the maintenance and support of this solution. In the long-run, this would be much more sustainable (affordable) than paying for WiFi / MiFi devices.
- Lift restrictions on cities and other local jurisdictions to fully maximize their dark fiber to drive down costs for the most digitally disenfranchised enabling them to access high-speed Internet.

Q9. Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet?

Legislation enabling the expansion of OER has been positive but also filled with some challenges. Adoption of OER by faculty and departments at any college campus is a labor-intensive process which requires the entire ecosystem to: 1) adopt; 2) integrate; and 3) measure the impact OER on student success and quality of online learning.

Following the passage of SB810 in 2017, the Alamo Colleges saw an immediate impact. The codification of OER designation in course catalog, schedules and registration systems assisted in our growth across the system. Now students are enabled to search and find OER or the Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) course offerings throughout the Alamo Colleges system.

Providing a clear definition in Section 51.451 gave legitimacy to early adopters that might have received objections to using and pursuing OER in their classes. The Alamo Colleges also amended their Instructional Materials Guidelines (IMG) in November of 2017 to reflect the addition of OER as an approved option.

The creation and recent launch of a state-branded repository/portal, [OERTX](#), will further this work and foster an environment of collaboration and sharing of resources within the Alamo Colleges

and across the State of Texas. This launch will provide more consistency in the ability to engage faculty who are interested in providing submissions on OERTX.

One area that could benefit from further legislation is the domain of dual credit agreements. House Bill 3650 (86th Legislature) added the requirement that dual credit course agreements between Independent School Districts (ISDs) and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) should consider using open education resources in each course offered. The use of the word “consider” is very subjective and not impactful. Challenges exist with current purchasing practices of ISDs while also educating ISDs on OER, the usage of OER, and other cost saving strategies in the classroom.

At the Alamo Colleges, we continue to explore various ways to reduce costs for our institutions and our students. Discussions regarding the statewide use of Inclusive Access (IA) have begun and are another cost saving strategy the Alamo Colleges have been utilizing for the past 5 years through Instructional Materials (IM) Direct. This approach has been highly successful and beneficial to our students.