

# **The University of Texas at Austin**

## **Response to House Higher Education Committee**

### **Formal Request for Information**

#### **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 degrees versus more traditional programs.**

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

Initially, one of the largest barriers to all-online learning for students was access to the proper technology and fast internet service. Through a Student Emergency Services fund, UT Austin provided aid to over 3,600 students in the form of 629 laptops, \$962,000 in funds for webcams, internet setup, routers, cellular hot spots, and other technology support, as well as \$1.8 million in funds for basic needs such as urgent rent support, groceries, and utilities after students lost their jobs in March.

Many types of critical experiential learning, such as laboratory or performance-based classes, studios, hands-on clinical experiences or internships, etc. cannot be replicated well remotely. These types of classes have remained in-person and on-campus (while the campus has been open). Special care has been taken to make sure social distancing and other pandemic-related precautions are followed. For the Fall 2020 semester, only 5% of classes are in a fully in-person format.

Delivering high quality online education requires rethinking an entire class to take advantage of what technology can enable, rather than trying to give the same lecture via Zoom. As part of the overall comprehensive academic preparation for the fall semester, an Online Education Task Force was convened and met weekly through the summer months, comprised of faculty and staff chosen from across campus because they represented UT's best experts in online teaching and learning. The Task Force provided extensive information in the form of a Canvas course with numerous useful modules for faculty. This widely used resource (used by well over 1,000 faculty members and counting) brings together all of the relevant information about online education best practices from across campus and nationally, and provides detailed guidance and instruction on how to create a fantastic online class. The Faculty Innovation Center facilitated a series of summer Zoom meetups and held a virtual two-day event in response to UT Austin's instructors' expressed interest to learn from their colleagues about how they are teaching online, and talk with each other about teaching successes and struggles. The university has also built a number of remote simulcast studios to be used by faculty teaching all large classes, which provides a higher quality alternative to Zoom for large classes, and assists those faculty with limited access to proper technology at home.

There are also some additional barriers for students with disabilities that came up when transitioning to all online classes, but regardless of class format, UT Austin is committed to maintaining accessibility and providing appropriate accommodations for students. Different barriers exist in different type of class formats, and instructors who need assistance in adapting their courses are able to [utilize the resources](#) created by the University.

Lastly, Texas One Stop for Enrollment Services worked collaboratively across campus to collect resources for students to support student success. The prominently-advertised [Keep Learning](#) website provides students with helpful tools and resources they need to be successful in an online learning environment and keep their degree plan on track. [Longhorns Online](#) was created with the intention to connect students who would be taking all or most courses online for fall 2020 to critical academic support, financial support, and connections on campus. This collaborative effort brings together a broader campaign for students to utilize the many resources that are on campus both physically and remotely. Our first-time-in-college students will have a completely different experience at the University and we are working hard to provide them resources, online and in-person, to create an engaging and welcoming campus.

**2. 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?**

UT Austin has been offering classes online to our students for the last several years and has done so with positive results. In terms of the long term impact of online classes being offered at this scale, we defer to those with more experience in this area.

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

Most instruction in Spring 2020 post-campus closure occurred by Zoom, no matter the size of the class. Given the sudden nature of the transition, most often, in-person course designs were transferred to the Zoom platform whether they were a good pedagogical fit or not. In general, smaller seminar or discussion-based classes worked very well using Zoom. In particular, student communication was greatly facilitated in the virtual environment using breakout rooms and other technological collaboration platforms. Additionally, Zoom classes could be recorded, allowing students to review what was being covered. For many students, such video lecture review was more effective than simply reviewing notes for an in-person class that is not recorded.

Large enrollment classes not designed from the beginning for the online format were generally considered to be less effective over Zoom compared to meeting in-person. Classical style lectures are often much less compelling online over Zoom compared to an in-person classroom experience because it is harder to keep student attention for an entire class period when they are remotely looking at a device screen. To be most successful, large classes taken remotely by students need to be retooled, reimaged, and reconfigured to specifically take advantage of what technology has to offer.

High stakes exams in large classes were especially challenging in the technical fields, as there are many opportunities for students to communicate or find answers online in real-time during the exam period. Programs such as Proctorio, Gradescope and others have been incorporated into UT Austin Canvas for use by faculty. In addition, the Online Education Task Force provided useful information on these and other options as well as guidance for redesigning exams and other assessments for the virtual classroom.

Additionally, well-placed support for innovation and continued investment in technical infrastructure should be a high priority. Recognizing and recruiting highly effective and experienced hybrid/online instructors at the institutional level will help to sustain interest in new teaching modalities, and allow for the facilitation of forward-thinking professional development and leadership opportunities.

**4. 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.**

The sudden shift to all online courses in March 2020 presented myriad challenges for both faculty and students. Some topics do not lend themselves well to online teaching, and while in part this will be resolved with experience, training, and creative new approaches, many experiences better provided in person were initially lost to the computer screen, especially in science labs and performing arts. There have been extensive investments in technology over recent months, and while the adoption of new tools is essential to offering quality online/hybrid learning experiences, it takes substantial time and resources to integrate and launch tools, and to train users. Fast transitions to new course modalities can lead to instructors adopting technologies they feel will allow them to replicate teaching practices from their in-person courses instead of rethinking course design to implement thoughtful online/hybrid learning, an issue which may resolve itself over time.

University faculty teach high-quality courses as a matter of practice, and are equally able to teach rigorous courses online most easily when methods and tools can meet them ‘where they are’, capitalizing on the aspects of live teaching that are familiar to faculty and students. Though notably, many faculty also report that they feel better able to connect with students and assess gains in knowledge when in face-to-face settings.

Many students, who are of the “digital native” generation, adapted easily to the technology platforms used to deliver lectures and course materials. We did receive feedback from some of our students expressing concerns about the limited interaction/communication they had with other students and faculty, as well as other challenges associated with learning from and adapting to an online format. However, our largest concern remains about our low-income students who may have experienced greater difficulty transitioning to online instruction, for a variety of reasons. For example, these students may not have access to technology or the internet, quiet work spaces, or have competing demands to assist their families. To help assist these students with some of these needs, over \$15 million of CARES Act funding was distributed to almost 9,500 students in spring and summer of 2020 in response to the pandemic. Funding was for categories including food, housing, technology, course materials, healthcare, childcare, and others. Additionally, \$962,000 was provided from a Student Emergency Services fund to students for needed technology and internet

connection. Going forward, a more proactive, coordinated effort around equitable access to technology and the internet for students who are on or off-campus may be warranted.

Lastly, secure ID verification and testing, especially for synchronous testing situations, as well as hand-written responses submitted online, is a developing facet of online education, and continued advancement and support in this area is a priority. Investment in developing technical infrastructure, staff support, and policy changes to deliver large numbers of high-enrollment, high-quality synchronous interactive courses will enable continued excellence and innovation in teaching.

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

The recent exposure to online courses may lead to strategic increased use of them, but at this time, UT Austin does not anticipate a substantial long-term shift in delivery mode of classes. At a research university, student-faculty interaction is an expected and integral part of the educational experience, and while there may be some logistical benefits to online course offerings, this may not translate into fully online courses. As instructors become more adept at using digital technologies, more opportunities may be presented to enhance student learning that would include more “hybrid” class models with both in-person and online components. Post-pandemic, we expect to see course offerings reach an equilibrium in which each student will have one or maybe two online courses per long semester. The University will continue to monitor and assess student demand, and determine how capacity and course offerings may change in the future.

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

When classes were moved online during the latter part of the Spring 2020 semester, it became clear that the availability of a fast and reliable internet connection in their homes was impacting the ability of a number of students to complete their courses. As such, through a Student Emergency Services fund, UT Austin provided \$962,000 for webcams, internet setup, routers, cellular hot spots, and other technology support for students in need. A framework for partnerships between universities and local public school districts to provide internet hot spots throughout Texas could help address some of these issues, should the state expect a lengthy mostly-virtual learning environment.

**7. What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component vs. those that do have one or are done in person?**

All accredited nursing programs are required to have a clinical component, regardless of delivery mode (online or in-person). The UT Austin School of Nursing, consistently highly [ranked](#) among public schools of nursing for quality of instruction and value, is a traditional in-person program. Due to COVID-19, there have been some temporary modifications to support more online

classes and lectures with simulated virtual clinical experiences, especially last spring when there was a shortage in personal protective equipment. For the Fall 2020 semester, we continue to provide more online courses for lectures, but are able to return to clinical settings and skills labs following all CDC guidelines for personal protection. Despite the challenging circumstances, our students will be amply prepared to enter the workforce and provide excellent care to patients.

**8. What sort of privacy exists for students utilizing some of the more popular online curriculum packages?**

N/A.

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

UT Austin is supportive of expanding the availability of Open Educational Resources, and has a dedicated librarian to help UT faculty navigate this space. To this point, we have not seen significant changes due to recent legislation.

**10. Do small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to switch to online, as well as in-person, classes, degrees, etc.?**

N/A.

**11. How does the impact of COVID-19 affect the small and rural community college's ability to offer online classes and make other changes to adapt to the pandemic?**

N/A.