Response to Request for Information regarding House Higher Education Committee 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.

Existing barriers to online learning and actions taken to alleviate and eliminate these barriers

Two common barriers to online learning for students and faculty are access and support.

While around 50% of our students have taken at least one online course, many students are still getting comfortable in the space and how to best navigate the technology. UNT created learnanywhere.unt.edu that offers tips and training for how to be a successful online student, how to access remote software, tips for using the learning management system and more. Faculty can access teachanywhere.unt.edu which covers foundational areas such as 10 tips for how to engage online students, teaching with tech in the socially distant classroom, making your class accessible and more. Both students and faculty can instantly access support via our (online) helpdesks.

In order for online learning to be most effective, courses have to be designed to encourage collaboration, minimize isolation and offer opportunities to learn in a multimodal fashion. At UNT, in our Division of Digital Strategy we have a Center for Learning Experimentation, Application and Research (CLEAR) that provides numerous services to ensure world-class course design.

Information and data available regarding long-term student success for students taking online courses

There has been extensive research on the quality of online learning, the most cited of which is the Department of Education's 2009 Meta-Analysis. We are also conducting cutting-edge studies in this area in our UNT Digital Research Center. At UNT Dallas, specifically, we have found that our adult students request the online option because it fits better into their lifestyle, after working full-time during the day, making it easier for them to complete their degrees.

Lessons learned after shifting instruction to online-only instruction in Spring 2020

Fortunately for the University of North Texas, we had extensive infrastructure for online education prior to the pandemic. For example, we were able to move 7,700 courses online over the course of one week in March thanks to our online course-in-a-box training and templates.

Lessons learned include keeping things as simple as possible. While many students reported that their instructors adapted well during the quick transition, the #1 request from our students

was to simply ensure that assignment due dates and notifications were readily available. In response our team has continued to emphasize these essentials for the Fall semester. Additionally, we learned the power of contingency planning, the need for updated, innovative technology, the importance of being flexible, and the commitment of our faculty, students, and staff.

Challenges related to technology, quality, and accessibility

In remote learning situations some faculty and students do not have the connectivity and equipment necessary to effectively learn at a distance. We offer our students and faculty the opportunity to checkout (or be sent) laptops, digital cameras and internet hot spots to ensure no one is left behind.

Students with disabilities can be assured that they will be able to learn without interruption due to our proactive approach to accessibility and ADA/508 compliance across all digital content and materials.

Online course demand and capacity post-pandemic

Even before the pandemic, part of UNT's strategic plan included growth in innovative, digital and online learning in order to reach new and underserved audiences. The pandemic expedited the number of courses being converted to online formats. Post-pandemic, we expect to offer more blended/hybrid options for students in an effort to meet their preferences for flexibility while assuring the high quality expected of a Carnegie research tier-one university.

Addressing gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet

Funding programs, particularly for low-SES and underrepresented students, that support public higher education's efforts to ensure all students have an equitable experience is paramount. At UNT Dallas, we have seen firsthand that many of our students lack access to or cannot afford basic broadband internet access. Providing more funding for technology and hotspots to institutions serving low-income families and under resourced students would help address this issue, as well as working with internet providers to provide expanded free hotspots in low economic areas.

Privacy protection for UNT students using online curriculum packages

UNT works closely with our Office of General Counsel and IT security office to ensure technology utilized by our programs include all appropriate privacy measures such as HIPAA and FERPA.

Impact of Open Educational Resources on quality of online education at UNT

Some of our faculty utilize open educational resources to enhance and augment content in their courses. Many also create original content with our Digital Strategy and Innovation CLEAR team and yet others work closely with publishers to use pre-packaged foundational material. Because these resources are relatively new, it's difficult to say what the impact on OER has been. But we are constantly working to utilize all available resources to improve the quality of online education for our students.