



Response to House Higher Education Committee September 1, 2020

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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 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?

First, one of the most significant barriers is meeting and complying with regulations from state to state concerning degree offerings and physical presence. As an example, we offer online degree programs that are fully accredited by regional, and in some instances, discipline-specific accreditors. While not an "in-state" issue, this compliance requirement adds significantly to the logistical and financial burden of offering online education. Secondly, the availability of broadband internet statewide is a significant barrier for many. As we try to deliver online instruction to rural areas of Texas, the lack of accessibility creates a barrier that we can do little to address. Finally, the pedagogy of online learning is different than face-to-face instruction. Students and faculty alike must develop a different skill set to thrive in an online environment.

To address these barriers, we have a staff member spending much of her time on compliance through the NC-SARA agreement and working discipline by discipline on others. To address infrastructure needs, state action is required. To enhance online

teaching and learning, we have created and provide significant educational materials to support faculty who teach online and students learning online.

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

The debate about online education has been going on for a long time and has mixed literature about its efficacy. Some studies show it to be better, and some show it to be worse. A meta-analysis of the literature indicated that overall there is no statistical difference between the two (Bernard et al., 2004). More recent studies have also examined factors influencing learners' success, such as the delivery method, goal orientation, and the quality and type of program that is being offered (Hart, 2012). MSU Texas has many successful online programs, but the majority are at the graduate level. Comparative data with face-to-face is limited because most online programs are online only and do not have face-to-face offerings. Also, due to program differences, it is difficult to extrapolate a comparison between our online programs (graduate-level health sciences & education) and the traditional face-to-face undergraduate programs. As for data, MSU has historical data about online course success, retention, and graduation rates for programs. Some programs collect employer surveys about MSU graduates, but not all. Overall, our online programs remain strong, with very good completion and success rates.

Bernard, R. M., Abrami, P. C., Lou, Y., Borokhovski, E., Wade, A., Wozney, L., ... Huang, B. (2004). How Does Distance Education Compare With Classroom Instruction? A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 379–439. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074003379>

Hart, C. (2012). Factors Associated With Student Persistence in an Online Program of Study: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11(1).

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

First, there is a significant need statewide for broadband internet access. There seemed to be a public assumption that shifting to online-only would be a straightforward proposition. We found quickly that many students did not have internet access off-campus. Others lacked webcams and software needed to operate in this environment. There are access barriers that we continue to help students overcome.

Some virtual meeting platforms were found to be sorely lacking when it came to a large group or complex meeting interactions. Some of those are being addressed but proved difficult initially.

We did find creative ways to deliver subjects that were previously thought to not lend themselves well to online instruction. Technology in many areas has improved and allowed us to broaden some course offerings.

Some subjects require in-person interaction and specialized equipment that cannot be achieved any other way at present. Some examples include high fidelity simulation, radiology laboratories, dental hygiene clinics, engineering labs, and advanced chemistry, biology, and physics labs. In those instances, detailed and careful plans were developed that were successful but very time consuming, resource demand heavy, and cumbersome to execute.

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.

At the beginning of April 2020, the MSU Texas Office of Institutional Effectiveness sent out a COVID-19 Impact Survey developed by the department to assess the needs of students, staff, and faculty. One of the areas addressed through these surveys was technology use and accessibility when the university had to transition everything to online and remote. The results are indicated below to provide the perspectives requested.

Students

The survey was sent to 5,552 students, 542 students responded, and two responses were deemed to be invalid. Of those who responded, 511 were undergraduate students. It was found that technology impacted one's college education during the COVID-19 outbreak for 37.6% of respondents. The majority of students reported accessing the internet through WiFi at home or off-campus, and most were using personal computers/laptops. However, 22 respondents reported having inadequate devices or internet, and 32 respondents reporting having no internet or no computer/laptop. Some students also reported having to rely on their cell phone's data plan for access to the internet.

When asked what resources students would need during remote learning, many students reported wanting to be able to have video/audio lectures and to see their professors' faces, rather than just having notes, assignments, and PowerPoints posted online. Students also reported needing access to technology resources they had on campus that they no longer could access from home, which included access to a printer, reliable WiFi, specialized software, library resources, The Writing Center, tutoring services, Microsoft Office, and a reliable device.

Staff

The survey was sent to 412 staff members, 145 responses were received, and one response was deemed to be invalid. Some staff members reported not having a computer at home or being given a device that was inadequate to perform their job well while

working remotely. Of those who needed to request other materials to work successfully while remote, many wanted more information regarding a streamlined process for requesting technology materials and getting them purchased. Staff members also requested training to be given on Office 365, as well as platforms that could be used to better connect with colleagues virtually outside of email.

Faculty

The survey was sent to 364 faculty members, 141 responses were received, and two responses were deemed to be invalid. When it came to disability support, 57.6% of faculty members reported having students with disabilities who required support services. For those accommodations regarding technology, respondents reported needing to be able to put voice into PowerPoint, using larger print, using specific colors, and being able to put videos onto a CD. Students who were hard of hearing were also in need of closed captioning, a court reporter, and a sign language interpreter for virtual classrooms.

Some faculty members reported wanting training opportunities regarding teaching remotely, as well as on using the different resources available for teaching remotely. Respondents also reported needing various devices to teach successfully online, such as headsets and webcams, as well as subscriptions to various programs that allowed them to interact with their students while teaching, such as Zoom or Skype. This led to some faculty members not having adequate devices to deliver material effectively, as well as not being able to teach online the way they wanted. Lastly, some faculty members had concerns over students having to pay for test proctoring, as well as concerns over D2L as the platform of choice to deliver material to students best.

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

It may well lead to expanded demand as institutions and students discover that more courses and degrees may be successfully delivered in this way. The barriers to this will be the broadband accessibility for students, particularly in rural areas of Texas, as well as the availability of technology and software for all economic groups.

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

Rural locations continue to suffer from connectivity and access to reliable and affordable Internet service. This impacts a small portion of MSU's students, which then hinders their ability to pursue aspirations of a college education and degree. Readily accessible subsidies for emergency use of broadband from available carriers would be a possible solution as well as possibly subsidizing LTE (Long-Term Evolution or telecommunications) hotspots to make the process of moving online easier for our

underserved populations. During the pandemic, Internet access proved to be a substantially larger issue than the prevalence of personally owned computer technology.

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

With the advances in high fidelity mannequins and simulation, many skills may be practiced and perfected in that environment. These advances also present an opportunity to revisit the allowable percentage of competencies that may be simulated. That said, it is our position that the absence of a significant clinical component will result in an unacceptable decline in quality. Patients are not "standardized" and there is a limit to the ability to program variation into a simulation environment. Further, quality nursing and healthcare rely heavily on communication skills, cultural sensitivity, and general care delivery skills that may only be developed with direct patient contact.

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

We cannot speak to the exact nature of these as we do not use proprietary online curriculum packages. That said, we deliver our online curricula through our learning management system, Desire 2 Learn (D2L), which provides the privacy and security of student information we require.

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

While the quality of an online course is certainly affected by the quality of the resource material used to support it, our understanding of the intent of open educational resources was to mitigate the cost to the student. In that respect, the adoption of open educational resources continues but at a slow rate, and the impact is modest from our perspective. The identification and availability of such materials contribute to the slow pace. As more grants are offered to incentivize the development and adoption of such materials, that will certainly improve adoption rates and increase the impact of this legislation.

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

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? NA