

## **House Committee on Higher Education - Formal Requests for Information**

### **Texas Association of Community 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 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?**

Early during the transition to remote instruction, access to devices was a barrier to students. That has largely been resolved, but access to broadband internet has not been resolved. Institutions of higher education (IHE) and independent school districts (ISD) have devised creative solutions like parking a bus with wifi in a neighborhood with little access to broadband or little ability to afford broadband, but that is not a sustainable solution for the long term. For students, other barriers include adapting to a less structured school day without set times for classes, finding a quiet place to study at home, and, for adult students with children, helping their children with online school at the same time they're completing online college courses and, in many cases, working remotely. Another barrier has been software compatibility with the variety of devices students use, and in some cases, technology provided by the college such as Chromebooks.

Many faculty had never taught online previously and had a steep learning curve. Colleges provided professional development to faculty to ensure they had fundamental skills in online instruction. Faculty teaching labs and career and technical education courses were especially challenged to develop activities to help students learn the more hands-on components of courses. However, faculty adapted and many found creative solutions to meet student learning needs. For courses with components for which remote learning was not possible, institutions developed procedures for health screenings and distancing to allow some students to come back to campus.

The Digital Higher Education Consortium of Texas (DigiTex) assists Texas community colleges in providing learners an education without barriers through high quality digital educational opportunities, resources, and services that help students succeed, ensuring equity through collaboration. DigiTex operates under the auspices of the Texas Association of Community Colleges and serves all 50 public community college districts in Texas. DigiTex is based at Austin Community College, which acts as its fiscal agent.

For institutions facing challenges with access, inter-institutional course sharing, facilitated by DigiTex, can alleviate and even eliminate these barriers. Through this process, a student enrolls in the local community college (Home Institution) to take a course that is taught by an instructor located at another college, the Teaching Institution. Benefits to students include

- access to distance learning courses statewide;
- support with high-quality, locally-delivered -- by their home institution -- services; and
- credits earned at their local college rather than having to enroll in multiple colleges throughout Texas and transfer the credits to their local institutions. Courses are transcribed as courses from their Home Institution.

For Teaching Institutions, course sharing can be used to fill empty seats in courses, offer unique courses and programs across the state and beyond, and generate revenue. Home Institutions can fill in gaps in guided pathways and other curricula, bring back “stop outs,” and increase retention and completion, leading to economies of scale that allow the colleges to redirect often limited resources. Since March, enrollments through DigiTex’s course sharing consortium have increased nearly 150 percent.

## **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?**

DigiTex recently began conducting research on online learning, beginning with [Digital Higher Education in Texas: A Meta-Analysis of Data and Research](#). This paper gives an overview and analysis of national data and research available on digital higher education; examines existing sources of data and research focused on Texas, suggesting which categories may be missing from the body of state data and research; and suggests directions for future research, including on student outcomes, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the state of digital higher education in Texas.

As mentioned in the paper, even before COVID-19, distance education enrollments at Texas public college and universities have been trending upward, increasing nearly two percent from fall 2018 to fall 2019. In fall of 2019 at Texas community and technical colleges, statewide distance education enrollments totaled 800,223 (42% of total SCH), compared to 531,617 (22% of total SCH) at universities (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board data). Clearly online education plays an important role at community colleges.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a hurried, nearly 100% transition to remote learning across the state (and nationally) in the spring and summer of 2020, making the need to study and understand digital education in all its manifestations even more urgent. At the same time, digital education produces large amounts of data about teaching and learning, including student outcomes, heretofore previously difficult to capture at any scale in face-to-face courses and programs, and these data need to be harnessed effectively to better understand digital education.

Research on online learning student outcomes does exist and provides models for Texas. Although some preliminary research has suggested negative outcomes, more recent studies are more

positive. For example, *Making Digital Learning Work: Success Strategies from Six Leading Universities and Community Colleges* includes case studies on the impact of distance learning on enrollment, outcome, and ROI at campuses across six institutions. At the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, for example, which consists of sixteen independently accredited colleges, nearly three-quarters of the over 100,000 students take at least one class online in any given semester. Graduation rates are 25 percentage points higher for students who take 21% to 40% of their courses online than for those who take all of their classes face-to-face (37% versus 12%) (p. 44). The data collected across the system provide an opportunity to understand what it takes to effectively implement digital learning on a large scale within a public state system.

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

Students and faculty are resilient and will adapt to challenging, changing circumstances. Students and faculty need to be supported to learn how to use online tools, and faculty benefit from professional development about engaging students remotely. The old adage “necessity is the mother of invention” holds true for institutions. Faculty and staff have creatively addressed challenges and in some cases have adopted pandemic practices, like online scheduling of advising appointments, into standard operating procedures.

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

As referenced above in Question 2, distance enrollment was trending upward prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, survey data, such as that compiled by Strada Education Network, indicates working adults considering going back to college would prefer online education. Some students are eager to return to in-person instruction, while others see benefits in learning remotely, particularly due to safety concerns.

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

DigiTex recently conducted the first statewide survey on OER programs, policies, and practices at two- and four-year public and private, non-profit institutions in Texas. Conducted in partnership with the national [Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education](#) and the [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board](#), the survey painted a picture of a growing commitment to OER. The responses, from 100 institutions, also revealed insights into specific priorities, practices, and perceptions surrounding OER across the Texas higher education landscape, including but not limited to:

- Affordability and access are key drivers of OER, though teaching and learning benefits also play a role;
- The development of faculty OER training and incentive programs are key priorities for institutions;
- OER-based courses are prevalent across Texas and likely to scale, and the development of full, OER-based programs are also underway, primarily at the state’s two-year institutions;

- OER discourse is limited and non-standardized within and across institutions, and the majority of institutions do not have a written definition of OER;
- Data collection on the pedagogical and financial impacts of OER is nascent, yet promising; and
- Institutions view lack of faculty awareness and conflicts with existing priorities as principal barriers to OER adoption.

The report concludes that, among other activities, those leading the way in OER across the state are collecting data on the extent and impact of OER use. Enabling further expansion of these efforts necessitates institution, system, and state level support as colleges and universities work to more effectively utilize their resources to increase instructor and student use of OER. A copy of the final survey report can be downloaded [here](#). DigiTex plans to use these data as a baseline for future, bi-annual statewide OER surveys, to eventually include data on impact and outcomes.

## **Online Education at Small & Rural Colleges**

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

***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?***

DigiTex leverages its funding to help ensure that small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to capitalize on online learning as needed and appropriate through inter-institutional course sharing. In fact, a large focus of course sharing has been on supporting participation by the smaller, rural colleges, making it a priority to subsidize the cost of participation for these colleges.

As mentioned above, enrollments through DigiTex's course sharing consortium have increased nearly 150 percent since March, with four rural colleges -- Frank Phillips College, Howard College, Angelina College, and Ranger College -- among the top five in enrollments (Lee College is the fifth). Additionally, Western Texas College is one of our top Teaching Institutions (TI), offering seats in 51 course sections for the consortium for fall 2020; they also have engaged in 20 course sharing arrangements outside our consortium, enabling them to offer courses to their own students that otherwise might not fill, and to generate revenue as well. Ranger and Howard Colleges participate as TIs as well, with Howard College/the SouthWest College for the Deaf offering unique courses in American Sign Language.

Ranger College, for example, is depending on course sharing to deliver pathways programs that enhance transferability and employment; otherwise, students might not have access to needed courses. Frank Phillips College provides robust offerings at branch campuses and in remote areas through the DigiTex/Acadeum partnership. The advantages of participation in course sharing to the rural colleges include capitalizing on courses across the state previously unavailable to their students, helping the students localize the courses to their rural community context as well as complete credentials sooner than what otherwise may have been possible. With a total of 16

colleges currently participating in course sharing, DigiTex projects an increase of at least nine additional participating colleges by spring 2021, many of them rural.