



**Texas House of Representatives Committee on Higher Education
Interim Charge Four, Request for Information
September 1, 2020**

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

1. **Digital Divide:** The biggest barriers to online learning for students and faculty are access to technology devices from which to access (or teach) online courses as well as reliable and affordable Internet access. The East Texas area has significant shortcomings in this area as noted by UT System's Dashboard on technology penetration as well as our own faculty and students' stories related to poor or complete lack of reliable and affordable Internet access.

This past spring, UT Tyler made as many hot spots available as possible to students, faculty, and staff. Even with hot spots, however, students, faculty, and staff who live in areas where cell service is not stable or available at all struggled. The UT Tyler IT department also loaned out laptops when available, and faculty and staff were able to take their office computers and monitors home to work.

2. **Accommodations for Students:** Another barrier to online learning is insufficient resources to ensure that all needed accommodations for students with special needs are met. Many of the instructional strategies or products used in online education do not allow for smooth accommodations for students with special learning needs.
3. **Scalability:** Scalability of the products used in online education is also a problem. This is evident in service outages or slowdowns from external vendors.

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?

In general, online education is not new so there is a strong body of research noting that students who take online courses and earn online degrees perform equally as well as students taking courses and earning degrees primarily in a face-to-face setting.

However, at the state level there has been limited analysis of student success related to online learning at the course or program level. With existing data records and formats, it is challenging to determine which programs are fully/partially/optionally online and which completers/non-completers of those programs took all/some/none online or hybrid courses. We have also not found any publicly available resources regarding short or long-term success in online programs.

UT Tyler, specifically, has a history of students who earned degrees in online programs as being very successful. Examples of students' success in online courses can be evidenced in the numbers of graduate education students earning advanced state certifications (e.g. principal, educational diagnostician, reading specialist, counseling, etc.) and in our online nursing programs (RN to BSN, and all graduate nursing programs), which are always highly ranked and have alumni who have excelled in their careers post-graduation.

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

1. **Need for Online Faculty Development:** Because online instruction is more than professors simply recording themselves and inviting students to review the recording, faculty must ensure that courses allow students to engage with the content, other students, and the instructor. UT Tyler has increased the number of sessions for faculty related to assisting them in moving to online instruction that involves the technical training as well as pedagogical strategies. This has been a challenge as we have a limited Office of Digital Learning staff that can do this in relation to the number of faculty, instructional staff, and students being served. Therefore, if online instruction continues to grow, UT Tyler will need to augment resources in this area.
2. **Disseminating Materials to Students:** Some discipline areas (e.g. UT Tyler Engineering) created kits that were sent to students or available for pickup to allow students to continue with their labs or course activities that required special supplies. Universities across the nation and globe started these kinds of initiatives, but they require additional resources (supplies) as well as funds.
3. **Care of UT Tyler Faculty and Students:** It should also be noted that this move to online education showcased the care that faculty and students have for each other. Both groups worked to extend grace, mercy, and kindness to each other in very challenging situations.

What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations?

1. **Technology and Access to the Internet:** Access to technology and the Internet are significant problems for UT Tyler students and faculty. We worked to get laptops, hot spots, web cams, etc. to students and faculty so they could continue with their activities related to teaching and learning. This past spring, many students had to go to restaurants, schools, and governmental building parking lots to attempt to access Wi-Fi.
2. **Scalability:** Scalability of the products used in online education has created challenges for students and faculty. This is evidenced by slowness or complete outages from external vendors. Although some companies are responsive and work to resolve issues quickly, others are not prepared for the scale of customers they now have.
3. **Another challenge is to provide wrap-around services for students beyond their academic work.** This includes things such as counseling, student engagement (beyond academics), and ways to address issues such as food and housing insecurity. UT Tyler is working to continue to support our students and has increased virtual services for students. However, this area needs continued exploration as we support online students.
4. **There are increased costs for all of the issues noted above.** That is one of the biggest challenges related to ensuring quality and accessibility of online learning.

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

We believe UT Tyler students will seek more options for the delivery of their courses in a post-pandemic society. Even before COVID-19, students were asking for course options that included face-to-face times during the day and evening, hybrid opportunities, and online options. We anticipate that requests for a variety of formats will increase.

Capacity is a more complex issue. One way to explore the notion of capacity is to carefully look at the number of students currently served to determine where there is room for additional students as well as exploring the availability of qualified and credentialed faculty and determining the number of students needed to pay for the cost of instruction for these additional delivery formats for students.

Another way to consider the capacity of programs is to examine this disruption of traditional delivery methods for courses and enable our experience from Spring 2020 to showcase what could be possible. We now have disciplines that never considered online as a method that could be explored. However, for this to happen, universities would need additional experts in online education (having the knowledge related to online teaching as well as practical experiences) collaborating with these disciplines.

Further, online education cannot be delegated to a few staff members who “know technology” to serve as custodians of the Learning Management Systems and complete SARA and US Department of Education reports related to online education. Significant investments would need to happen at many universities as well as shifts to the mindset of what is involved for online teaching and learning to occur in meaningful ways. This disruption has forced many to look at new possibilities to enable us to better meet our students’ needs, potentially even right wrongs in curriculum, policies, and procedures, and create a better “normal” for all of us. Again, this would impact resources and an exploration of capacity in each of the programs.

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

1. Universal wireless access: Wireless access, even in rural areas, is necessary to ensure all users have access to online teaching and learning. Even hot-spots, when we are able to provide them, are dependent on a strong cell signal, which does not exist in many areas of our region. For example, our UT Tyler Palestine campus students regularly communicate that they do not have adequate internet providers and access.
2. Creation of a Reporting Tool: Create a reporting tool/website where Texans can report their location and what internet access challenges they are facing (no high-speed internet available, frequent outages with no resolution from provider, high cost/poor service due to lack of competition in an area, etc.).

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

UT Tyler’s online curriculum is delivered using our learning management system, Canvas. Accessing this content (assignments, videos, discussions, activities, etc.) is restricted by requiring one account per person, which requires a user name and password. FERPA guidelines cover Canvas, and online course access is restricted to people with an educational reason to participate (instructors, teaching assistants, students, etc.).

UT Tyler uses Zoom and Microsoft Teams for synchronous online meetings, which have varying degrees of privacy depending on the purpose. Student Government Association and Faculty Senate meetings are more open and public, while class meetings scheduled through Canvas have limited access. Lecture recordings are stored in Canvas or on YouTube, with appropriate selections for sharing and/or viewing the content. Recordings that include student participation (for example, a face-to-face class recording captured for viewing at a later date) would only be shared with students in that class, for that semester.

UT Tyler utilizes Proctor U for online proctoring, and access to the recordings (audio, video, and screen capture) that are generated are restricted in the same way that Canvas access is restricted.

The UT Tyler Office of Digital Learning has the ability to create permission sets for specific needs. For example, the Student Accessibility and Resources office needed access to the videos in some courses in order to generate captions for student accommodations. With the professors' permission, the Office of Digital Learning was able to grant that access while restricting access to assessments and other activities in the course.

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

The OER legislation is helping to increase faculty awareness of the cost of textbooks for students. This is beneficial because while OER reduce the cost of courses for students, it does not ensure that the quality of a course in terms of content, instructional strategies, assessment provided, or interaction with faculty or students improves. Ideally, faculty would work to customize the OER textbook to support the instruction taking place in their course.

UT Tyler, in particular, has taken the lead on creating and providing OER. Earlier this year, we debuted two of a series of three textbooks that we have made available for free to all university and dual credit students across Texas. These textbooks, written by UT Tyler political science faculty, were funded in part by a grant from UT System in conjunction with the Open Educational Resources initiative.