

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
NOTICE OF FORMAL REQUEST FOR INFORMATION**

COMMITTEE: Higher Education  
Interim Charge 4

TIME & DATE: N/A

Monday, August 3, 2020

PLACE: N/A

CHAIR: Rep. Chris Turner

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**Request for Information, Interim Charge Four**

Due to the ongoing pandemic and the uncertainty as to scheduling interim hearings, the Committee is conducting necessary oversight functions through an information-gathering process under Section 301.014, Government Code.

**For this charge, the Committee requests written submissions from public university systems, public universities and health related institutions, and public community, technical and state colleges, pertinent agencies with jurisdiction over the following charges and other relevant associations in regards to the assigned Interim Charge and additional questions as outlined below. All submissions are due on September 1, 2020, by 5 pm (CST).**

**Submissions should be delivered via email to the committee clerk, Julie Young, at [Julie.Young\\_hc@house.texas.gov](mailto:Julie.Young_hc@house.texas.gov) and shall be in word format.** Submissions shall include the submitter name, organization or entity (if applicable and an authorized representative), mailing address, email, and telephone number.

All submissions will be circulated to each Member of the Committee after the September 1, 2020 deadline. A copy of all received comments will be made available to the public by the Committee and the public will have the opportunity to submit comments to the Committee in response to information received from designated parties.

**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?**

Two technology barriers are having the computers and wi-fi connectivity available for faculty and students to conduct online learning. There are also access issues with library materials for faculty and

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students and ensuring that these materials are ADA compliant. The rapid expansion of online learning also required additional support staff for instructional design and the delivery of technology needed for online learning. There are still courses that require in-person instruction because of accreditation, licensing and workforce requirements. Faculty development in online design & pedagogy takes time. Lone Star College already had the foundational training and resources available with a significant percentage of faculty adept in online teaching. Advance training requirements for online teaching proficiency helps alleviate rapid modality shifts as we experienced.

**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?**

Lone Star College success and retention rates for the 2020 spring semester were a 1% improvement from the 2019 spring semester, with fewer students withdrawing from classes in comparison to the previous 2019 spring semester. And overall, the total number of degrees/certificates awarded increased 5% from Spring 2019 to Spring 2020. These trends will be monitored for the 2020 fall semester. However, there are student success gaps by student race/ethnicity and gender in each modality at the course level. For LSC's largest programs, the AA and AS, students have been able to move fluidly between online and on campus offerings for degree completion for many years.

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

The use of technology for online learning and online student support serve as a foundation for Lone Star College. Computer availability and wi-fi connectivity need improvement with Lone Star College addressing both for students and faculty. Professional learning for faculty and student orientation and support have increased regarding online learning. Operations are also changed using video conferencing platforms which has allowed Lone Star College to maintain learning and business continuity.

**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 primary challenge is to ensure all students, irrespective of income, have the technology needed to succeed in the online environment. Accessibility to computers and Wi-Fi connectivity are basic requirements of online learning, yet these requirements are not available to some students. Also, the delivery of online learning requires expansion of support services for faculty, students, and families in communities where computers and wi-fi connectivity are not easily accessible. Attention to ADA compliance in the materials provided to students is also a challenge.

The digital divide is something which can adversely affect both rural and urban students who lack the resources to take courses remotely. Faculty and staff are susceptible to the deleterious effects of the same. Access to Wi-Fi and computers are infrastructure imperatives for effective online learning and course delivery.

Students tend to exhibit lower engagement levels in online course delivery. This can lead to lower retention and success rates. The wrap around services and support functions from the college must be more proactive to maintain high success rates. Increasing engagement with students will require more advanced tracking software, hiring additional support staff and tutors, improved training and

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certification for student-facing employees working remotely, and a digitization of all documents including policies and procedures. Students and instructors must also have access to online books with an ease of acquisition process to ensure students have the learning materials they need.

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

Lone Star College delivered instruction to more than 70,000 students online in Spring 2020. During Summer 2020 and Fall 2020 half of our students will be fully online (approximately 45,000 students) and an additional 25% will be enrolled in hybrid courses (approximately 22,000 students). This has placed an additional strain on our online delivery systems as well as on our support functions.

Students and instructors have expressed a preference for online instruction options which means we need to expand our online course offerings. This means additional training for instructors and revamping our advising and student services functions as students who want to enroll online will expect online advising and support as well. Additional training for all student-facing roles will be necessary as well as increasing staffing needs in some functions.

Students will also need more support to insure the same level of quality course delivery and probability of success. To accomplish this, we will need to add counselors, advisors, and tutors to proactively engage with students.

As more students take online courses there is additional need for remote assistance for those students and employees experiencing technical difficulties. This means increasing staffing of call centers, email monitoring, and improving chat functionality for self-help options.

Even prior to the pandemic, over the past three years, Lone Star College has needed to continue its learning and business operations through Hurricane Harvey and the COVID-19 pandemic using online learning. The availability and use of online courses is now an educational pillar for the College.

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

The legislature needs to ensure that computer technology and Wi-Fi connectivity are available to all throughout Texas irrespective of income. If you consider how Texas would operate without the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, the legislature needs to establish internet access as part of the economic and educational foundation of the state.

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

State nursing licensing and nursing accreditation standards make in-person clinicals a requirement for the RN licensure. Where appropriate, clinical instruction has migrated to online or simulation and is intended to complement in-person clinical instruction. Lone Star College intends to include online and in-person instruction to provide health care employers high quality employees that meet their expectations. Both the ADN and the RN-BSN include in person clinicals or internships as well as face to face or hybrid courses.

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

Lone Star College considers student privacy when purchasing online curriculum packages. Our vendors are required to provide verification that student information is secure prior to the purchase.

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

Lone Star College faculty have adopted OER at their discretion, but LSC is in its bookstore contract with Barnes and Noble and is exploring multiple ways to make low cost course materials available to students.

**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**

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