

BILL ANALYSIS

S.B. 1521
By: Zaffirini
Higher Education
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

There have been calls for a comprehensive study to evaluate the general capacities of Texas colleges and universities to provide mental health services to students, including the ability of these institutions to meet specific needs of students at higher risk for mental health crises. S.B. 1521 seeks to heed these calls by providing for the creation of a mental health task force to research the capacity of institutions of higher education in Texas to identify and address the mental health needs of students, identify barriers that directly impact student mental health and well-being, and explore innovative and effective approaches to meeting student mental health needs.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

S.B. 1521 amends the Education Code to establish the Collaborative Task Force on Higher Education Mental Health Services to study and evaluate mental health services provided at public institutions of higher education directly to students enrolled at the institution. The bill provides for the composition, administration, and operation of the task force, including meetings, exempts the task force from Government Code provisions governing state agency advisory committees, and establishes that task force members are not entitled to compensation or reimbursement for their service.

S.B. 1521 requires the task force to do the following:

- research the capacity of institutions of higher education to identify and address the mental health needs of students, including specified analysis, data, information, and assessment for each institution;
- identify institutional, environmental, and social barriers that directly impact student mental health and well-being; and
- explore innovative and effective approaches to meeting the mental health needs of students, with specific focus on first generation college students, students of color, economically disadvantaged students, students who are parents, students of various sexual orientations, survivors of sexual assault, students who are immigrants, students who are or were previously in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services, and students from rural communities.

The bill lists specified approaches to be explored.

S.B. 1521 requires the commissioner of higher education to do the following:

- designate one institution of higher education with experience in evaluating mental health services to serve as the lead institution for the task force that must provide faculty, staff, and administrative support services to the task force as determined necessary by the task force;
- designate two institutions of higher education with experience in evaluating mental health services to assist the task force and the lead institution; and
- in making these designations, to give preference to at least one predominately black institution, as defined by federal law.

S.B. 1521 requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to maintain the data collected by the task force and the work product of the task force. The bill requires the task force to ensure that data gathered, information studied, and evaluations conducted are collected and maintained in compliance with federal law regarding confidentiality of student medical or educational information, including HIPAA, and any state law relating to the privacy of student or health information. The bill requires the task force to ensure that the data, information, and evaluations may not be shared with a federal agency or state agency, except as otherwise provided by law.

S.B. 1521 authorizes the THECB to accept gifts, grants, or donations on behalf of the task force to carry out the task force's duties. The bill requires the task force, not later than December 1, 2024, to submit to the governor, the lieutenant governor, the speaker of the house of representatives, and the THECB a report of the results of the task force's activities and any recommendations for legislative or other action. The bill abolishes the task force and sets the bill's provisions to expire on September 1, 2025.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2021.