



Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute

Comments to the House Committee on Higher Education

September 1, 2020

Regarding the Committee 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.

Online courses and degrees in higher education are ubiquitous and have been for many years. Decisions made to take entire semesters online in response to the current pandemic has only expanded what institutions of higher education were already doing. Unlike some public K-12 educational institutions, institutions of higher education were prepared and had the infrastructure for online education in place. As the Committee's charge highlights, several relevant questions are worth exploring at this time. The Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute (TCCRI) supports educational choices, including online degrees, and would like to take this opportunity to weigh in on some of those questions. As the charge is directed primarily at institutions of higher education with respect to their current experiences and observations, TCCRI will limit its testimony to some of the broader issues in the charge.

The Prevalence of Online Degrees in Higher Education

Online degrees in higher education is not a novel concept. A 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education looked at trends and growth in utilization of online education and found that in 2017, more than 3 million (15.4% of all students) students in higher education were enrolled *exclusively* in online courses, which was up from 2.97 million (14.7%) in 2016.¹ Among students enrolled in fully online degree plans, roughly 29 percent are working toward an associate's degree, 42 percent are working toward a bachelor's degree, 27 percent are working toward a master's degree, and three percent are working towards a doctorate.²

Aside from students who are fully and exclusively studying online, the general utilization of online courses in higher education has been consistently growing for more than a decade. Even pre-coronavirus pandemic, more than one-in-four students took at least one course online.³ Given that this rapid expansion had already begun before many of today's higher education students were even born,

higher education was more than prepared to shift fully online. As a result, with respect to one of the charge’s sub-questions (“Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?”), the “recent shift” to online courses was an acceleration of an ongoing trend, and one that schools are well-equipped to accommodate.

How Are Institutions Providing Online Courses Accredited?

Accreditation, while not required, is meant to help “ensure that a school and degree program meet certain standards of quality and rigor.”⁴ Accreditation is issued by agencies officially authorized as accreditors by the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.⁵ Aside from reputation and credibility, accreditation means that students attending those schools can receive federal financial aid.⁶

In order to become accredited, a school must conduct a self-review, and provide evidence that they satisfy standards with respect to faculty, administrators, and content.⁷ Once accredited, the schools are supposed to be monitored fairly continuously and must be re-accredited every few years.⁸

Most importantly for the purposes of the committee’s charge, standards for accreditation are not lower for online schools. However, because of the lesser frequency of direct student-teacher interaction, accreditors may pay closer attention to student services provided by online schools.⁹ The U.S. Department of Education maintains a database of accredited schools.¹⁰

Student Success – Western Governors University as a Model for Expanded Online Education

The data on success of online coursework is context dependent. A 2015 report by researchers at the University of California, Davis compared online courses to in-person courses at the community colleges.¹¹ Their results in that comparison showed that the online courses were “ineffective,” generally speaking. The results were mixed though. For example, first semester students exclusively online outperformed students enrolled in the same face-to-face settings.¹² What this suggests—like most educational settings—is that students get out of it what they put in.

Take, for example, Western Governor’s University (WGU), an exclusively online college that caters to working adults and people seeking additional levels of education. WGU uses a competency-based model, which means that students learn as they go, at their own pace. A 2017 Forbes article called WGU “The Best Kept Secret in Online Colleges.”¹³ The reasons cited by the piece are notable, and relevant to the committee’s charge:

- WGU graduates are more likely to get jobs, according to a 2016 Gallup-Purdue Index poll commissioned by the school: WGU’s employment rate after graduation is 81%, compared to the national average of 74%.
- Graduates have netted top jobs at places like Aetna, JPMorgan, Chase, American Express, Toyota, and Delta airline, according to Education Next.

- Nearly three-quarters of WGU students (73%) say their education was worth the cost, compared to 38% nationally.

Directly relevant to the committee's charge are WGU's employment-after-graduation rate, which beats the national average by a considerable margin of 7 percent. Indeed, WGU touts that it has graduated more than 90,000 students since it began 20 years ago, and 87% of those graduates are working in their chosen field.¹⁴ WGU's 2019 Annual Report claims that 95% of surveyed graduates report having jobs. 97% of surveyed employers say they would hire another WGU graduate. Those are only a few positive metrics cited in the report.¹⁵

Conclusion

While worthy of being a model for other online schools, it should be noted that WGU was designed as an online school from its inception, which differentiates it from traditional institutions of higher education that offer online courses, and which operate exclusively online for the foreseeable future as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than try to specifically model WGU, traditional institutions of higher education should look to it to understand that 1) online education can and does work, 2) the goals of the school and students must specifically align, and 3) students will get out of online coursework what they put in. Most students at traditional institutions of higher education did not intend to enroll in an exclusively online school, so those institutions must take special care to ensure that faculty and student services are available. Take the lessons learned from online courses that traditional institutions have long offered and apply those more broadly to students taking full semesters of coursework. Institutions of higher education are equipped to properly educate students online and success should be expected.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, *National Center for Education Statistics* (2019), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019021REV.pdf>.

² “Online College Students by the Numbers,” *Center for Online Education* <https://www.onlinecolleges.net/for-students/online-college-students-by-the-numbers/>

³ “2015 Online Report Card – Tracking Online Education in the United States,” *Online Learning Consortium*, <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-report-card-tracking-online-education-united-states-2015/>

⁴ Jordan Friedman, “Accreditation of Online Degree Programs: Frequently Asked Questions,” *U.S. News & World Report* (Nov. 11, 2016), <https://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2016-11-11/accreditation-of-online-degree-programs-frequently-asked-questions>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs (DAPIP),” *U.S. Department of Education*, <https://ope.ed.gov/dapip/#/home>

¹¹ “How Successful Are Students in Online College Courses Compared to Students Taking Face-to-Face Classes?,” *Best Colleges*, <https://www.bestcollegesonline.org/faq/how-successful-are-students-in-online-college-courses-compared-to-students-taking-face-to-face-classes/>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Diana Hembree, “Western Governors University: The Best-Kept Secret in Online Colleges,” *Forbes* (Aug. 10, 2017), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dianahembree/2017/08/10/western-governors-university-the-best-kept-secret-in-online-colleges/#5221d8136b48>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “WGU 2019 Annual Report,” *Western Governors University*, <https://www.wgu.edu/content/dam/western-governors/documents/annual-report/annual-report-2019.pdf>.