



Testimony

Interim Charge 4 *Texas House Higher Education Committee*

by Thomas K. Lindsay, PhD

Chair Turner and Members of the Committee:

My name is Tom Lindsay, and I am a distinguished senior fellow of higher education and constitutional studies at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide information for Interim Charge #4.

Interim Charge 4 reads:

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 2 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?

Response:

The Foundation has published [research](#) addressing this topic in detail. Our bottom-line finding is that the regulatory barriers to the full flourishing of online learning come primarily from Washington, D.C., not Austin.

That said, there has been movement over the past 3½ years by the U.S. Department of Education to remove these barriers. Texas can capitalize now on these accommodations, the need for which has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 1, 2020, [Secretary DeVos stated](#), “This current [pandemic] crisis has made crystal clear the need for more innovation. ... Fortunately, we started work last year to develop a new set of standards that are responsive to current realities, that embrace new technology ... and that expand access for students to the flexible, relevant education opportunities they need.”

The U.S. Department of Education’s friendliness to education innovation, coupled with the sense of urgency produced by the pandemic, should lead Texas to seriously study whether to petition Education Department Secretary DeVos for a 2-year waiver to allow the state itself to grant accreditation to new programs within its borders that feature both online courses and competency-based criteria.

The Department of Education’s newfound appreciation for innovation in education generally, and in online learning in particular, appears to be an open invitation to states to press for more discretion as we seek to deal with the current and future effects of the pandemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this information. I look forward to future discussions.

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