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# Strategic Directions for Online Education

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U. T. SYSTEM | OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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## Background and Purpose

The University of Texas (UT) System views blended and online education as a vital component of higher education as institutions strive to meet the workforce needs of the State of Texas and the needs of 21st century learners while improving key student success outcomes such as four- and six-year graduation rates. While there are varying degrees to which UT academic institutions are involved with online education, all are committed to building capacity to continue to grow and develop in this area. Due in part to this coalescence, the UT System Office of Academic Affairs convened an Online Education Task Force in fall 2018 charged with exploring opportunities for collaboration and ways that UT System can support institutions as they scale up high-quality online offerings. One of the outcomes of the Task Force meeting was a request for UT System to establish strategic priority areas to help inform system and institutional policies and practices and to guide future growth in this area. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the value of online education as it relates to the unique missions of UT academic institutions, and to identify areas for continued focus, collaboration and support.

## The Role of Online Education in Advancing the Missions of UT Academic Institutions

### State Attainment Goals and Institutional Enrollment Growth Targets

In 2015, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) unveiled its strategic plan for higher education in Texas, 60x30TX, including a bold target for higher education attainment: by 2030, at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a higher education certificate or degree. UT academic institutions play a significant role in contributing to this target, and online education will become an increasingly important strategy as growing enrollment in face to face programs alone will not be sufficient. Additionally, many UT institutions are faced with physical capacity and space constraints that preclude them from growing face-to-face enrollments. Where limited classroom space and instructor availability are issues that limit institutions' ability to meet student demand, blended and online courses offer an effective option for maximizing classroom space, instructor expertise and availability, and cost.

### Meeting the needs of 21st century learners

Online education is a tool for making a UT education attainable for as many qualified students as possible, many of whom represent “non-traditional” populations, such as students working full time, returning to college after a hiatus and/or who reside in a location that makes commuting to a UT institution unrealistic. Whether full-time employment, family commitments and/or geographical location present barriers to accessing a UT education, flexible online courses and degree programs provide important options for accessing high-quality learning without requiring learners to put

their lives on hold. Students can pursue online coursework without sacrificing the time and expense associated with commuting, allowing UT institutions to reach a larger population of qualified learners from diverse and far-reaching areas. As such, online learning plays a critical role in aligning opportunity and talent.

### Improving Timely Graduation and Student Success

Blended and online education delivery models can help institutions of higher education address a variety of student success challenges, as well as help position institutions to be more student centered. Online courses can help to alleviate bottlenecks in high-demand courses, helping students to stay on track with their chosen degree pathway and promoting timely degree completion. For example, online sections can increase access to courses where demand exceeds capacity. Additionally, when an on-campus course section is not offered at a time a student can participate, self-paced online courses offer students the ability to satisfy degree requirements without delaying time to degree.

Tailoring and aligning instruction and supports according to student need, interest and preferences through technology-enhanced personalized learning approaches also provides an opportunity to improve student success. Innovative blended or hybrid education models including flipped classrooms can offer customizable learning experiences that cater to individual students' needs and learning styles. When augmented with face-to-face discussion, group projects, internships and other engagement activities, self-paced and personalized learning strategies can provide a rich and inclusive educational environment. However, it is important that expectations of faculty are realistic, keeping in mind the time, effort and resources needed to develop and maintain innovative, high-quality virtual and blended learning environments.

### Strategic Focus Areas

As UT academic institutions continue to build capacity to grow and develop their online learning offerings, the UT System is committed to supporting the continuation and scaling-up of high-quality institutional efforts. The Office of Academic Affairs and the UT System Online Education Task Force have identified four strategic priority areas for continued focus and collaboration:

1. strategic planning;
2. strategic investments and cost savings;
3. attention to quality; and
4. monitoring of student success and equity outcomes.

## Strategic Planning

As the college-going population in Texas becomes increasingly diverse, including students with significant work and family obligations, institutions must respond swiftly to the flexibility needed by these students, including the expansion of blended and online courses and programs, in addition to accelerated, weekend and evening options. Failure to do so will result in institutions severely limiting their reach and missing out on opportunities to serve students with valuable assets, such as industry experience and bilingualism.

UT academic institutions are encouraged to codify in their strategic plans how blended and online education fits within the larger mission and vision for the university, including how blended and online offerings are being utilized as a tool to expand access, improve completion rates, and respond to regional and state workforce needs. Additionally, institutions should clearly state their intentions related to the strategic growth and management of the online student population relative to the face to face population, as this will help to establish a shared understanding of the future online education landscape in Texas, and to identify areas for potential collaborations and sharing of best practices.

In support of UT institutions' goals related to the growth and development of blended and online education, the UT System Office of Academic Affairs is going to enhance its data collection and analysis of programs and courses offered in hybrid/blended, fully-online and 100% formats, as well as enrollments in those courses. Doing so will better position the System to communicate the unique value delivered by blended and online courses and to make informed recommendations related to state and national policies and initiatives. Further, these data are necessary to evaluate institutions' progress toward enrollment targets.

Finally, Finish@UT (formerly known as the UT Online Consortium), through which currently-enrolled UT students may enroll in an online course offered at another UT institution, presents another opportunity to meet the educational needs of students across Texas. In addition to supporting collaborative degree-completion programs, Finish@UT's online courses allow students to stay on track when a required course is unavailable at their home institution, supporting timely graduation. Additionally, Finish@UT offers students the ability to take courses of interest that are not available at their home institution. With input from institutional stakeholders, further strategies will be identified to ensure that Finish@UT is enhancing the goals of UT institutions as they relate to student access and success.

## Strategic Investments and Cost Savings

The infrastructure needed for the delivery of high-quality online courses and programs represents a significant investment, both up front and long term. A study conducted by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's Cooperative for Educational

Technologies suggests that the production of online courses costs more than face-to-face courses, despite the popular misconception that online courses are cheaper. Factors such as faculty development, instructional design and student assessment can cost more in online than in face-to-face courses, due to the increased need for training and reliance on software and other technology resources. To ensure that these added expenses do not unnecessarily drive up the costs of online education, it is critical for institutions to continually explore avenues for savings and to focus on investments that produce a positive return from a financial and student success standpoint.

One way to facilitate cost savings is to pursue economies of scale through negotiating systemwide contracts with high-quality third-party vendors at competitive rates. Currently, the Office of Academic Affairs is working with institutional online leaders to secure vendor contracts for exam proctoring and plagiarism prevention services. UT System is committed to supporting institutions as new needs related to blended and online learning arise and coordinating on behalf of institutions to identify shared and competing interests and potential solutions. Additionally, as content development can be a financial obstacle to developing a high-quality course, and because some institutions already have in place an impressive inventory of material, systemwide sharing of educational resources, including recorded lectures, simulations, infographics, videos, etc., should be explored.

As engagement with blended and online learning expands, UT academic institutions are encouraged to focus more attention on developing in-house capabilities and expertise and to reduce reliance on third-party vendors for services such as labor market analyses, recruitment and marketing. Doing so will help to protect the integrity of online programs and will ensure the mission of the university and the success of its students are at the center of all major decisions. UT System is committed to supporting institutions pursue new sources of much-needed revenue to support the maintenance and growth of high-quality blended and online learning endeavors through tuition and fee strategies and requests for Library, Equipment, Repair and Rehabilitation funding. Other opportunities to provide UT System funding for high-quality online endeavors may be explored as needed and appropriate, such as allocations from the Permanent University Fund, for capital-related and infrastructure improvements. Additionally, the Online Education Task Force will continue to facilitate the sharing of best practices related to strategic investments.

### Attention to Quality

While scaling blended and online offerings is important for institutions to enhance their access mission, this must not be accomplished at the expense of quality. As quality in online education can be somewhat opaque, it is incumbent upon UT academic institutions to make the case for their online courses and programs through thorough vetting of new courses and programs and assessment that demonstrates comparable academic standards and learning outcomes as to face-to-face offerings.

Regarding the development of new courses and programs, it is strongly encouraged for institutions to require the use of peer review and vetted rubrics for evaluating content, such as The Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric or the Online Learning Consortium's Quality Scorecard. Additionally, university and/or department procedures should be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect industry best practices related to course design.

The online learning environment provides a rich platform for data collection and assessment, which institutions should leverage to evaluate course learning outcomes and student experiences. Whenever possible, contracts with third-party vendors should include requirements to supply user data and analytics, enabling institutions to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their services. Additionally, institutions should be providing strong assessment support to ensure that new online courses and programs in particular are producing positive outcomes and that faculty have access to professional development, and other supports to continually improve their courses.

The Office of Academic Affairs, in collaboration with the Online Education Task Force, is going to explore advanced methods of evaluating online course quality, including propensity score matching, to determine the effect of online course delivery as it relates to course grade and performance in subsequent courses. Controlling for student-level characteristics, such as first-generation and income status, is important because students who self-select into online courses often possess more risk factors and therefore may not be expected to perform as high as students enrolled in face-to-face courses. This work will help to provide a robust depiction of the effects of online delivery methods on student learning and success and to inform the development of assessment strategies that factor in student-level characteristics.

### Monitoring of Student Success and Equity Outcomes

Student Success is core to the mission of The University of Texas System and all UT institutions are heavily focused on helping more students complete their degrees in a timely manner and accomplish their educational and career goals. While online degree programs play an important role in providing access to higher education for non-traditional students, the student success outcomes are not always clear. Increased attention to examining student readiness and suitability for online learning is critical to ensure that institutions are positioning a diverse student body for success in college and beyond. The Online Education Task Force should identify tools and practices to help students determine whether they are a good candidate for online education, ensuring that students who lack critical competencies, such as time management, are referred to relevant resources and supports.

As UT academic institutions continue to provide education in equitable ways through online and hybrid programs, institutions should habitually compare the retention and graduation outcomes of students enrolled in fully online programs to those in face-to-face programs. Additionally, in support of UT academic institutions' commitment to

identifying and eliminating achievement gaps for low-income and underrepresented minority students, outcome data should be disaggregated among different populations to unearth inequities so that barriers resulting in disparate outcomes can be identified and resolved. This is particularly important within the context of online education where low-income, first-generation and students of color may be disproportionately impacted by unreliable broadband and technology access.

## Conclusion

Online education presents a tremendous opportunity to enhance access to a high-quality UT education. UT System and its institutions are committed to being leaders in this arena, recognizing that doing so will require significant effort, investment and collaboration. The establishment of strategic directions will help to ensure that growth in online education is disciplined and intentional, resulting in high-quality courses and programs that meet the needs of the State of Texas while advancing institutions and student success.