An Evaluation of CSU's Cross-Campus Online Education Program

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Summary

Online Education Can Make Coursework More Accessible to Students. Online education refers to courses and programs in which students and faculty communicate using the Internet and are not in physical proximity to each other. Faculty deliver online instruction through a technology platform known as a learning management system (LMS). Online education can offer a number of potential benefits to students, including providing opportunities for students attending one campus to find and get credit for courses at other campuses—thereby potentially speeding their time to graduation.

Chapter 363 Includes a Number of Requirements for California State University (CSU) Online Programs. CSU offers online instruction at virtually all of its 23 campuses. Chapter 363 of 2013 (AB 386, Levine) requires CSU to improve students' access to online coursework and transparency of its online programs by (1) adopting a systemwide definition of online education, (2) developing an "easily accessible" database of fully online courses offered by campuses, (3) implementing a streamlined process for students to enroll in and get credit for online courses offered at other CSU campuses (known as "cross-campus online enrollment"), (4) reporting biennially on certain enrollment and performance data related to online education, and (5) reporting on the feasibility of developing an online bachelor's degree completion program for students who started college but never obtained a degree. Chapter 82 of 2016 (AB 2908, Committee on Higher Education) requires our office to assess CSU's implementation of these requirements and report to the Legislature by January 1, 2018. This report fulfills that statutory requirement.

Several Opportunities for CSU to Improve Compliance With Chapter 363. Our review finds that CSU has implemented some of Chapter 363's requirements but has much more work to do to comply fully—particularly by developing a more student-friendly database of online courses. Due in large part to CSU's problematic database and certain factors identified by the Chancellor's Office, to date very few students have enrolled in online courses at other CSU campuses—an average of just two full-time equivalent students per campus in fall 2015. We also find that CSU uses various LMS platforms, which can present challenges for students who cross-enroll at other campuses. In addition, the Legislature currently lacks some key information on CSU's online programs and plans.

Recommend Follow-Up Legislation to Improve Online Access, Cost Efficiencies, and Transparency. Given our findings, we recommend the Legislature enact legislation requiring CSU to report on four issues—(1) planned actions to boost cross-campus online enrollment, including a requirement for CSU to revamp its database by a specified date; (2) opportunities to adopt a common systemwide LMS using existing funding; (3) additional data on enrollment and outcomes pertaining to online students; and (4) more information on its current programs and future plans to serve former students who started college but never earned a bachelor's degree.

INTRODUCTION

Statute Requires the California State University (CSU) to Streamline and Report on Online Education. Virtually all CSU campuses offer online courses. Chapter 363 of 2013 (AB 386, Levine) requires CSU to improve students' access to online courses by creating a streamlined process whereby students can find, enroll in, and get credit for online coursework offered by any CSU campus. Chapter 363 also requires CSU to (1) adopt a systemwide definition of online education, (2) report biennially on certain enrollment and performance data related to online education, and (3) report on the feasibility of developing

an online bachelor's degree completion program for students who started college but never obtained a degree. Chapter 82 of 2016 (AB 2908, Committee on Higher Education) requires our office to assess CSU's implementation of these requirements and report to the Legislature by January 1, 2018. This report fulfills that statutory requirement. The report has four main sections—(1) background on online education, (2) findings regarding CSU's implementation of Chapter 363, (3) an assessment of CSU's implementation, and (4) recommendations to improve implementation moving forward.

BACKGROUND

Below, we provide information about online education at CSU and highlight key aspects of Chapter 363.

No Standard Definition of Online Education. Online education generally refers to courses and programs in which students and faculty communicate using the Internet and are not in physical proximity to each other. Higher education institutions have various definitions of exactly what constitutes an online course, with no standard definition used by all institutions. Some institutions, for example, classify a course as online if at least half of its content is delivered online (with the other half delivered via face-to-face instruction), whereas other institutions would classify this as a "hybrid" or "blended" course. Though institutions vary in their definitions, most institutions set a threshold (such as 75 percent) for how much instruction must be delivered online for them to classify it as an online course.

Online Instruction Is Delivered Via a Learning Management System (LMS). An LMS is a technology system that allows faculty to post information about a course (including its syllabus), instructional content (such as video presentations and text-based lectures), assignments, and other material. Students use an LMS to perform functions such as submitting their assignments, taking tests, and participating in online discussions with classmates. Several vendors create and sell these systems.

Many CSU Students Take Online Courses. According to the Chancellor's Office, CSU began offering state-supported online courses in the late 1990s. (Around the same time, CSU also began offering online courses through its fully fee-supported extension programs.) Systemwide online enrollment data are not available prior to 2015-16, however, as the Chancellor's Office did not collect this information from campuses. Moreover, CSU campuses did not use a standard definition of what constituted an online course. According to the Chancellor's Office, CSU served a total of 22,250 full-time equivalent (FTE) students in 2015-16 via online education, representing 5.5 percent of all FTE students served that year. For purposes of tracking enrollment, CSU defined a course as online only if 100 percent of its content was delivered online, with no in-person class attendance required for students. On a headcount basis, the number and percent of online students is much higher. In fall 2015, about 80,000 undergraduate students (19 percent) and 6,600 graduate students (12 percent) took at least one fully online course.

Online Courses Are Offered Across CSU System. With the exception of the Maritime Academy, every CSU campus offers online courses. Online courses are particularly prevalent at the Dominguez Hills, East Bay, and Fullerton campuses, where 10 percent or more of total FTE students were served via online instruction in 2015-16. Most of CSU's online students

are undergraduates who take one or more online courses as part of their bachelor's degree requirements. CSU does not offer any state-supported bachelor's degree programs, however, that can be obtained via solely online courses. Though not offering fully online state-supported undergraduate degree programs, CSU campuses offer a total of 13 majors and concentrations in which students can complete all upper-division requirements online. In addition, graduate students can obtain a total of more than 30 degrees online. (CSU's extended education offers 15 fully online bachelor's degree completion programs and more than 50 online master's degree programs.)

CSU Is Using Online Education as a Strategy for Boosting Graduation. Historically, CSU's six-year graduation rates for undergraduate students have been below 50 percent and four-year rates have been below 15 percent. To address its low graduation rates, CSU launched a Graduation Initiative in 2009. CSU has set a goal to increase six- and four-year graduation rates to 70 percent and 40 percent, respectively, by 2025. To achieve these goals, CSU has implemented a variety of strategies in recent years, including encouraging faculty to adopt new instructional methods and expanding advising and tutorial services. CSU also has cited online education—which can make course-taking more convenient for students while minimizing demands on classroom space—as another key strategy for achieving the system's goals.

Challenges to Enrolling in Online Courses and Concerns About Accountability Spurred Passage of Chapter 363. As we discuss in *The Master Plan at 50: Using Distance Education to Increase College Access and Efficiency* (October 2010), online education can offer a number of potential benefits to students, campuses, and the state. In particular, online education can provide increased opportunities for students to access required courses, thereby potentially speeding their time to graduation. Also, by aggregating geographically separated students into online courses, campuses can maximize opportunities to fill courses to capacity, thus improving efficiencies. Despite these potential benefits, the Legislature in 2013-14 noted a few key concerns with CSU's online education programs. While CSU historically has permitted students to enroll in courses at multiple CSU campuses, the process of finding and enrolling in online courses at other CSU campuses was cumbersome

for students and campuses were underutilizing cross-enrollment as an enrollment management strategy. In addition, CSU lacked basic information about its online programs, including enrollment data and performance outcomes of online students. These concerns spurred passage of Chapter 363.

Chapter 363 Included Several Requirements for CSU. These requirements are:

- *Adopt Systemwide Definition.* By January 2015, CSU was to adopt a systemwide definition of online education.

- *Develop Database of Courses.* By January 2015, CSU was to develop an "easily accessible" database of fully online courses offered by campuses and inform students of opportunities to access these courses.

- *Streamline Registration Process.* By the start of the 2015-16 academic year, CSU was to implement a streamlined process allowing eligible students to enroll in online courses offered at multiple campuses, with the courses earning them credit toward their degree requirements.

- *Report Enrollment and Performance Data on Online Education.* Beginning in January 2017, CSU is required to report biennially on specified enrollment and performance data for online and non-online instruction.

- *Study Feasibility of Creating Online Bachelor's Degree Completion Programs.* By January 2015, CSU was to submit a report to the Legislature on the feasibility of creating accelerated online bachelor's degree programs aimed at students who started college but never obtained a degree.

- *Other Requirements.* To be eligible for cross-campus enrollment pursuant to Chapter 363, students must have (1) a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher and (2) no outstanding tuition or fees owed to CSU. Chapter 363 permits the host campus to charge cross-enrolled students a fee to cover any special administrative costs related to cross-enrollment, but campuses may not charge any other additional tuition or fees for these courses. Chapter 363 gives students priority access to register for their own campuses' online courses but states that cross-enrolled students

should "generally have an opportunity to enroll in these online courses any time after the priority enrollment period for continuing students, as determined by each host campus."

FINDINGS

Below, we present our findings regarding CSU's implementation of Chapter 363.

Adopted Standard Definition of Online Education. In response to Chapter 363, CSU adopted a set of standard definitions for online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses. Though our office was unable to confirm with the Chancellor's Office when CSU formally adopted these definitions, CSU now defines a course as "online" if all instruction and assignments (including tests) can be completed online. A course is defined as hybrid if an otherwise online course requires a student to attend any in-person classes or examinations. Finally, a course is considered face-to-face if all instructional content is delivered in-person.

Launched Website of Online Course Offerings and Began Enrolling Students. The Chancellor's Office reports that it launched its website (database) of fully online courses in late 2014. Campuses listed about 1,500 courses on the site for fall 2015 and about 1,500 courses on the site for spring 2016. These courses spanned a wide array of academic disciplines and programs. The Chancellor's Office reports that a total of 228 students (headcount), equating to 45 FTE students, took an online course at another CSU campus in fall 2015. Chancellor's Office staff did not provide enrollment numbers for fall 2016 but indicate that totals were similar to fall 2015.

Chancellor's Office and Campuses Developed Policies on Student Participation and Registration. During 2014, the Chancellor's Office consulted with the CSU Academic Senate and decided that students must successfully complete at least one term at their home CSU campus, earning at least 12 units (with a 2.0 or higher GPA), to cross-enroll in online courses. Chancellor's Office policy limits students to cross-enrolling in one online course per term. The Chancellor's Office indicates that this policy will be revisited once data are reviewed on students' success in these courses. Though statute allows CSU to charge students an administrative fee to register for classes at another campus, the Chancellor's Office reports that it is unaware of any campuses doing so.

CSU Met Enrollment and Performance Reporting Requirement. CSU submitted its first data report in December 2016. CSU is required to submit a second report to the Legislature by January 2019.

CSU Was Late and Incomplete in Addressing Feasibility Study Requirement. CSU submitted material to the Legislature very late. (Having not received the report, we requested and received a copy of it in August 2017, well after the January 2015 deadline.) Moreover, the submitted material consisted of a memo. The memo states that it fulfills the feasibility study requirement for CSU to create online programs aimed at students who started but never completed their bachelor's degree. The memo lists a total of 10 existing fully online state-supported bachelor's degree completion programs and 15 extension completion programs, as well as one state-supported hybrid program. The memo, however, neither assesses the effectiveness of these programs nor examines ways of better targeting former students who left college without earning a degree.

ASSESSMENT

Below, we offer our assessment of CSU's implementation of and compliance with Chapter 363.

To Date, Cross-Campus Enrollment Has Been Negligible. To date, very few students have enrolled in online courses offered at other CSU campuses— an average of just two FTE students per campus in fall 2015. Overwhelmingly, students taking an online course do so at their home campus. In our discussions with the Chancellor's Office, staff cited limited communications and awareness-building efforts

with students as key reasons why cross-campus enrollment has been so low. For those students who did cross-enroll, the impact of taking these courses on their academic progress is unknown. This is because the Chancellor's Office did not provide requested information on whether students completed these courses and the type of credit (such as major or general education) they received.

Finding Online Courses Using CSU's Database Is Difficult. Another reason for low cross-enrollment in online courses likely stems from the website of course listings that the Chancellor's Office designed. In particular, the site's search engine is very awkward and makes finding courses very difficult. The major problem is that the site only provides search results by specific course title or course code. For example, a student who seeks political science classes for spring 2018 and types "political science" in the search box receives a message stating "No items found!" If one instead enters the search term "posc" (an abbreviation for political science), a single course ("Aging and Public Policy" at the Fullerton campus) appears. Additional and varying political science courses appear, however, if a student types other campus-specific abbreviations of political science (such as "pols," "psci," or "plsi"). Since students likely do not know the various course codes across the CSU system, the only way for them to identify all political science courses in one place appears to be to scroll manually through dozens of pages on the site. Similarly, a student entering "U.S. History" in the search box for spring 2018 receives a listing of a total of three courses offered by two campuses (Humboldt and Sacramento). Modifying the search to "US Hist," however, yields three additional U.S. history courses at two other campuses (San Diego and San Marcos). Finally, students interested in limiting their search to online classes at certain campuses are unable to do so—a user entering a campus name in the search box (such as "Sacramento") receives a message stating, "No items found!"

Legislature Generally Unable to Evaluate CSU's Registration Process. To evaluate whether the registration process is effectively streamlined for students, as required by Chapter 363, we asked the Chancellor's Office to explain the steps for how students sign up for a course and verify how course units will transfer back to their home campus. The Chancellor's Office provided insufficient information

on this process to allow for an overall evaluation of the registration process. Regarding the timing of student registration, initial CSU practices appear to have been problematic. Based on our conversations with the Chancellor's Office, campuses until recently generally did not permit students from other campuses to register until just before the start of each term—a practice inconsistent with Chapter 363. According to the Chancellor's Office, campuses enacted these late-enrollment policies so as to ensure that their own students enrolled first in online courses. Data are unavailable on how many students might have tried to cross-enroll but were unable due to lack of available space in these classes. The Chancellor's Office states that beginning in fall 2017, however, new CSU registration policy requires campuses to allow students from other campuses to enroll during the regular open registration period. This new CSU policy appears to comply with Chapter 363's requirement.

Cross-Enrolled Students Would Benefit From a Common LMS. Currently, CSU campuses decide on their own which LMS to purchase and use campus funds to pay the vendor. According to the Chancellor's Office, CSU campuses use one of four platforms. Multiple platforms can present challenges for students who cross-enroll at other campuses. This is because each LMS has a different layout, requiring students to spend time learning how to navigate that particular system. Adopting a common platform, by contrast, would promote greater ease-of-use among students taking online classes at other campuses. For similar reasons, the California Community Colleges recently adopted a common LMS for its faculty and students.

Legislature Would Benefit From Receiving Additional Enrollment and Performance Data. While the existing Chapter 363 data and biennial reporting requirements are useful for assessing CSU's online programs, we believe that additional data would provide a fuller picture of online education at CSU. Most notably, while Chapter 363 requires CSU to report on the number of students who cross-enroll in online courses, the Legislature also has an interest in knowing how many students successfully complete these courses and earn academic credit toward their degree. The Legislature also may have an interest in knowing which campuses are hosting the most students from other campuses and the total number of FTE students served annually via online education. Data

such as these would help the Legislature provide better oversight of CSU's online programs.

CSU's Memo on Bachelor's Degree Completion Program Did Not Meet Legislature's Expectations. In addition to being submitted very late, we find that CSU's one-and-a-half-page memo contains very little useful information. The report does not provide any information on how CSU provides outreach to former students who started college but did not obtain a degree. It does not provide any data on how many such students CSU currently serves through its degree

completion programs and how many bachelor's degrees have been awarded. It also does not identify which degrees students were pursuing when they originally dropped out of college and whether the degrees offered through CSU's completion programs align with those majors or returning students' career goals. In addition, the report does not provide an explanation of why similar online accelerated bachelor's degrees are state-supported (such a bachelor of arts in sociology at Chico) while others are offered through a campus extension program (such as a bachelor of arts in sociology at Fullerton).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given our findings and assessment, we recommend the Legislature enact legislation requiring CSU to report on four issues related to online education, as discussed below.

Require CSU to Report on Actions Related to Boosting Cross-Campus Online Enrollment. Specifically, we recommend the legislation direct CSU to develop comprehensive plans for increasing students' awareness of opportunities to take online courses at other campuses. We also recommend the legislation require CSU to revamp its website by a specified date so that students can easily search for and identify online courses in the database (such as adding a capability that allows users to search by academic discipline). Finally, the legislation should require CSU to report on its registration process and include an explanation of the process by which students verify how a course will count toward their degree requirements.

Require CSU to Report on Adopting a Common LMS. To make the online course-taking experience more accessible to students enrolled at multiple CSU campuses, we recommend the legislation direct CSU to study the possibility of moving toward a common LMS. We do not believe additional funding from the state would be needed for such a system. This is because in purchasing their existing LMS on a campus basis, campuses likely pay much more than they would if they were to buy "in bulk" from one vendor and divide the total cost of the LMS among themselves. Accordingly, we recommend the legislation direct the Chancellor's Office to identify opportunities for campuses to

collaborate in selecting and paying for the system using existing funding and note any potential challenges to adopting a systemwide LMS.

Recommend Legislature Require Additional Enrollment and Performance Data. We recommend the legislation require CSU to include additional data in future biennial reports (beyond what Chapter 363 already requires), including (1) annual student enrollment (headcount and FTE students) in all state-supported online courses, disaggregated by undergraduate and graduate students as well as by campus; (2) annual cross-campus online enrollment (headcount and FTE students); (3) cross-campus online enrollment (in FTE students) by host campus; (4) successful course completion rates in cross-enrolled online courses; and (5) units earned by cross-enrolled online students, including the type of academic credit they received (major, general education, or elective).

Require CSU to Provide More Information on Online Bachelor's Degree Completion Programs. Finally, we recommend the legislation require CSU to rewrite and resubmit a study on its existing completion programs for former students who started a bachelor's degree but never graduated and its plans to expand these program offerings. The study should include (1) how many former students are currently enrolled in an accelerated online bachelor's degree completion program and how many have successfully completed a program over the past five years; (2) an analysis of the estimated number of former students that might benefit from an accelerated online bachelor's degree program; (3) current practices and future plans to

connect with potential re-entry students; (4) an analysis of the extent to which the current inventory of CSU bachelor's degree completion programs align with potential re-entry students' educational pathways and labor market demands; and (5) an explanation as to why some current online degree completion programs are offered on a state-supported basis, while others are offered through extended education.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we find that CSU has much more work to do to comply with Chapter 363's requirements, particularly by developing a more student-friendly database of online courses. The Legislature, meanwhile, has opportunities to promote acquisition of a common LMS at CSU and collect more meaningful data on CSU's online programs. We believe that our recommended legislation would help improve students' access to online courses, as well as promote cost efficiencies and more transparency for CSU's online programs.

LAO PUBLICATIONS