



Testimony

Interim Charge 1

Texas Senate Committee on Higher Education

by Erin Davis Valdez

Chairman Creighton and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information to the committee regarding Interim Charge 1. Interim Charge 1 reads:

Adult Learner Students: *Examine existing innovative programs in higher education institutions that assist non-traditional students in completing a degree or credential, including first-time adult learners, re-enrolling students, first generation students, working adults, and at-risk students. Provide recommendations on methods the state can use to partner with higher education institutions to expand successful programs throughout the state.*

Non-traditional students in particular could benefit from three reforms to the higher education system:

1. *Returned-value funding model.* The Texas State Technical College system has pioneered a funding model that incentivizes them to be innovative and responsive to the needs of their students and to the needs of employers. With the gap between supply and demand in the [skilled trades becoming increasingly larger](#) as baby boomers retire, it is essential that community colleges, which are given the mission to offer vocational education, [have the proper incentives](#) to meet the demands of both students and businesses. The returned-value funding model for workforce-focused programs provides better return on investment for taxpayers as well as more efficient pathways into gainful employment for graduates.
2. *Competency-based education (CBE).* Higher education's reliance on credit hours has a number of negative consequences for non-traditional and high-need students, including transferability issues, student loan debt, and lack of relevance to workforce demand. CBE's flexibility makes it attractive to adult learners, who juggle work and family obligations. The Foundation's research on CBE indicates that graduates from these programs [borrow less and are more prepared](#) for their chosen professions.
 - a. Give institutions regulatory relief in the form of seat time waivers for adopting robust competency-based pathways, including allowing students to demonstrate skills learned on the job, while running a business, and in other capacities outside the walls of the school.
 - b. Incentivize institutions to create their own outcomes-based accountability plans based on their unique missions through regulatory relief and hold-harmless waivers during the transition.
3. *Community and technical colleges* can play a vitally important role in helping adult learners discover and cultivate their gifts and talents. Yet [there is no robust evidence](#) that community colleges are able to meet always-changing workforce demand. Employers often find that there is [too much "red tape"](#) involved in creating customized, short-term training programs with community colleges and technical colleges. Identifying and removing obstacles that prevent employers from choosing which community colleges or technical colleges can best create short-term, credit and noncredit, highly targeted programs is likely to [increase participation in higher education among high-need adult learners](#) and [improve talent pipelines for employers](#).

Recommendations

The Foundation recommends the following changes to state policy regarding adult education:

1. Encourage community colleges to "opt in" to a returned-value funding model for their workforce-focused programs.

continued

2. Encourage institutions to provide robust competency-based pathways, including allowing students to demonstrate skills learned on the job, while running a business, and in other capacities outside the walls of the school.
3. Encourage institutions to create their own outcomes-based accountability plans based on their unique missions.
4. Identify and remove obstacles that prevent employers from choosing which community college or technical college partner can best meet their specific training needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information, and I look forward to future discussions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erin Davis Valdez is a policy analyst for Next Generation Texas. She has been passionate about the transformational power of education all her life, having been given the gift of being homeschooled. She taught for over a decade in Austin-area schools and served as an assistant principal at a charter school in Lewisville. These experiences have given her the opportunity to see first-hand how students can thrive when they have excellent options.

Since joining the Foundation, Valdez has conducted research on career and technical education at the secondary and post-secondary levels, civics education, and welfare to work programs in Texas. Valdez earned an MA in classics from the University of California, Santa Barbara and a BA in classical studies from Hillsdale College.

About Texas Public Policy Foundation

The Texas Public Policy Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan research institute. The Foundation promotes and defends liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas and the nation by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreach.

Funded by thousands of individuals, foundations, and corporations, the Foundation does not accept government funds or contributions to influence the outcomes of its research.

The public is demanding a different direction for their government, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation is providing the ideas that enable policymakers to chart that new course.

