

Commentary: Texas can close digital divide in higher education

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Texas is still facing a troubling higher education digital divide — one in which those who already have access to technology can obtain an advanced degree. The Legislature must establish a statewide broadband plan this session.

Cedar Attanasio /Associated Press

The Texas Legislature is considering legislation that may become one of the most important policy changes for higher education in the state: Senate Bill 5.

This bill, along with its companion, House Bill 5, would establish a statewide broadband office and require a statewide plan for high-speed internet access. It would have far-reaching implications for both online and classroom learning.

While SB 5 is a crucial first step, we must continue working together to ensure Texans, including students in higher education, have broadband access regardless of where they live or their income level.

COVID-19 hampered state efforts to help Texans enroll in and complete higher education. In our second biannual statewide higher education poll, we found that roughly 1 in 10 students reported an interruption to their higher education training or certificate due to the pandemic.

Distance learning forced 1 in 3 Texans to purchase new equipment to continue going to work or school, with 87 percent of those who purchased technology for school not reimbursed. Worse, 43 percent reported these purchases were a financial hardship.

Texas is still facing a troubling digital divide in higher education — one in which those who have access to technology can obtain an advanced degree. In contrast, those disadvantaged by socioeconomic status or location are locked out.

Yet, it's not just gaining access to a computer, tablet or phone that creates obstacles for students; it's also access to high-speed internet. Lack of reliable internet service to access online courses or education is cited by 23 percent of Texans as an obstacle to completing a college degree.

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In 2019, the Texas Legislature established the Governor's Broadband Development Council. As of July, the council found that 926,859 Texans do not have access to broadband at home. We strongly support the council's recommendation that the Texas Legislature create a state broadband plan, office and funding program that incentivizes deployment in underserved areas.

Broadband access is necessary to close the higher education digital divide, ensure quality jobs and prepare our economy for the future.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's strategic Initiative, 60x30TX, was created to ensure that by 2030 at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will

have a certificate or degree. Higher education is an essential step in a student's career path.

Of the 11.6 million jobs created in the years following the Great Recession, 99 percent of them went to workers with some form of higher education. Students are feeling this pressure. We found that more than 90 percent of Texans agree it is essential to have an educated workforce if Texas is going to compete with other states.

It is no longer enough to support Texas students until they have their high school diploma. We need to help them through their entire higher education journey. We have long raised the alarm that financial concerns top the list of reasons students do not complete their degrees.

As technology continues to permeate higher education, the digital divide threatens to compound the cost of a degree, making graduation contingent upon finances more than a willingness to learn.

Higher education leaders applaud the work done by the Texas Legislature to develop a statewide broadband plan — but it can't stop there. Together, we must work to ensure all Texans, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status, not only have access to high-speed broadband but can also afford and use the technology necessary to power the future of our state's economy.

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