Texas Students Could Be Required to Seek Off-Campus Learning Options

By Marc Parry

A Texas higher-education panel is recommending that students be required to complete at least 10 percent of their degrees outside the classroom, through options like online courses.

The proposal is one of several online-learning ideas in a new draft report prepared in response to Gov. Rick Perry's call for higher-education cost-savings recommendations.

The report also recommends that the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board be given authority to create a new institution to offer associate's programs online.

"If the University of Phoenix can be successful providing online programs, "the question needs to be asked: Can the public sector do the same?" said Bernie Francis, a member of the committee of education and business leaders that the coordinating board established to produce the report. Mr. Francis, chief executive of Business Control Systems, stressed that he was offering his own opinion and not speaking on behalf of the committee.

It would be unusual for a state to mandate that college students take online courses, according to several national distance-learning experts. But there are other state and campus efforts now under way to shift instruction online. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, for example, announced a new push to have 25 percent of all system credits earned through online courses by 2015, nearly triple the 2008 level of 9.2 percent.

Richard Garrett, managing director at the consulting firm Eduventures, said requiring online education "would seem unnecessary" because it's already "increasingly difficult to graduate from a mainstream higher-education institution and not have taken something that is more or less an online course."

"It might create more negative feeling and go against what's a pretty organic trend already," he said. "In many ways, online is most successful where it's been significantly bottom up rather than top down."

Texas hopes to add 630,000 more students by 2015 under a plan, "Closing the Gaps," to improve the state's higher-education performance. That requires using buildings more efficiently and making better use of technology, said David W. Gardner, deputy commissioner for academic planning and policy for the coordinating board.

As the advisory committee sees it, the proposal to require students to complete at least 10 percent of their degrees through off-campus options represents a way to minimize construction needs. Beyond distance courses, other options that would satisfy the mandate include internships, placement exams for credit, and dual-credit classes.

The proposed requirement would apply to all undergraduates at public institutions in Texas, Mr. Gardner said.

The committee hopes to make freshman- and sophomore-level courses available online in a more centralized way, Mr. Gardner added. One option might be to build on the Virtual College of Texas, which allows community-college students registered at one institution to take online classes from other colleges in the state.

The online-learning push comes on the heels of a recent decision by the University of Texas system to close its central distance-education arm.

The coordinating board will produce its final recommendations to the governor by November 1.