

**State of Texas Higher Education**  
**Harrison Keller, Ph.D.**  
**Commissioner of Higher Education**  
**November 19, 2020**

Welcome back.

For those of you I haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet, I'm Harrison Keller, Commissioner of Higher Education. Thank you for spending your afternoon with us. I appreciate your service to Texas higher education, and your participation in today's virtual conference.

Especially for new board members, I hope you've enjoyed today's sessions and have gained valuable background and insights into university system and institutional governance, budget processes and other essential topics. At the Coordinating Board, we're looking forward to working with each and every one of you and supporting your institutions and university systems.

Today, I'm speaking to you from UT Austin's Thompson Conference Center. I'm sorry we can't be together in person. For me, being on a university campus is a welcome change from the dining table that served as my office for most of 2020, with lots of unscheduled and unsolicited input from my kids, cats, and dogs. These past few months, we've all developed new habits, including having a lot more of our daily personal lives on display in the background of our work meetings. Today I'm here by myself, so if you hear a barking dog or a ninth-grade band class, this time it wasn't me.

I'd like to talk with you about the current state of Texas higher education, and why the leadership roles you've taken on have never been more critical.

**Unprecedented Challenges**

2020 has been quite a year!

In addition to the kinds of major challenges the world's tenth largest economy routinely has to deal with, we've encountered unprecedented challenges, including the painful convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and a crisis in global energy markets.

The shocks to our state economy have been profound.

Since March, [nearly 3.8 million](#) Texans have applied for unemployment. In September, the unemployment rate was about 8.3% – down from a high of about 13% in May – but still more than double what it was at the beginning of the year. Sales tax collections, which are the major source of revenue for the state budget, were down about 6.1% in September from September 2019, but they were down about 13.2% in May, which was the steepest year-over-year decline in more than a decade.

These past months aren't like anything we ever imagined we would experience. We went from one of the most robust economies in state history to having millions of Texans out of work and business shuttered, and many of those same jobs may not come back. Meanwhile, the threat of COVID-19 continues to disrupt our lives and livelihoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has entailed massive costs for our colleges and universities in the hundreds of millions of dollars, not only with new costs of converting to online instruction and operations, moving students off-campus, and setting up new COVID-19 mitigation strategies and testing centers, but also with a simultaneous collapse of multiple revenue streams from housing, food service, events, athletics, and philanthropy. For our colleges and universities, this has been the most significant disruption to their operations since the end of the Second World War.

I commend Texas colleges, universities and systems for their swift and creative responses that prioritized the safety of students, faculty, and staff. Institutional leaders and faculty have been working tirelessly to support students' continued academic progress and success, including converting nearly all of their courses to online delivery, changing academic calendars, standing up emergency financial aid, and buying thousands of laptops and hotspots. Institutions have also been active partners in their communities' public health responses, not only through their hospitals and clinics but also by donating personal protective equipment, re-engineering respirators, sanitizing masks, and 3-D printing face shields.

It has not been easy, and while so much remains uncertain, it is certain that more hard work is still ahead.

Throughout this crisis, our primary roles at the Coordinating Board have been to act as a resource, partner, and advocate for Texas higher education. In particular:

- We've been working closely with the governor, legislative leadership, and other state agencies to provide regulatory flexibility to help institutions adapt to COVID-19 and continue to serve students.
- We've been partnering with the [Texas Higher Education Foundation](#) and state and national philanthropies to raise private funds for emergency student aid for our public and independent institutions.
- And, we continue to support our higher education institutions to help them ensure continuity of campus operations and instruction for students.

The most significant recent actions we've been able to take have come about because of the [commitment](#) by Governor Abbott and legislative leadership of \$175 million for higher education from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, which is also referred to as GEER.

Most of these funds were dedicated to student financial aid, including \$57 million to protect our need-based financial aid programs from coronavirus-related budget cuts, and another \$46.5 million for emergency financial aid for students who were adversely impacted by the pandemic.

An additional \$46.5 million was allocated to help Texans who have some college credit but no credential and to help displaced Texas workers who need to reskill and upskill with short-term credentials so they can rejoin the workforce, get back on their feet, and help drive the recovery of the state economy. The remaining funds will support high-quality digital learning and the modernization of our state educational and workforce data infrastructure, so we can focus our resources effectively and efficiently and support continuous improvement.

This financial support represents a powerful statement from our Texas state leadership — leadership you're not seeing in every other state. They recognize the critical role higher education needs to play in driving the state's recovery and are investing in the future of Texas.

To our institutional leaders, I also want to acknowledge your partnership in the design and strategic allocation of these funds. These are unique circumstances that require quick turnarounds, and the rapid distribution of these stimulus funds will make a real difference for students, institutions, and communities across Texas.

Over the past several months, I've had many long conversations and late-evening communications with college, university, and system leaders and board members. Despite the scale of the challenges we're still facing, we all recognize higher education is an essential part of the solution for how Texas will adapt, overcome, and emerge even stronger.

In fact, this work is already underway, though it will have to accelerate over the next several months and into the coming years.

Our community and technical colleges and universities are gearing up to expand access, so more Texans can achieve high-value postsecondary credentials than we've ever served before. All our institutions are rapidly expanding the ways they leverage digital learning. Our institutions also continue to work at the frontiers of knowledge – leading discoveries and insights that will power a brighter, more competitive, Texas future.

Today, we are in the early stages of a historic transformation in higher education. The way forward will require bold leadership, strategic investment, stronger partnerships, and true grit for the benefit of all of Texas.

### **Serving Texans**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, we had identified gaps in our postsecondary talent pipelines that threaten our long-term competitiveness. In particular, we were slowly losing ground in the percentages of students who enrolled in college directly after high school, and large numbers of Texans who did enroll were dropping out of postsecondary education.

The U.S. Census [estimated](#) nearly 3.9 million Texans – about one out of every five age 25 or older – had earned some college credit but had not earned a credential. State and national data also signaled disproportionate problems in postsecondary opportunities and outcomes for Texans who are low-income, Black or Hispanic, or live in rural communities. And, despite clear and compelling evidence that new jobs increasingly require credentials beyond high school, multiple studies raised significant concerns about [public confidence](#) that higher education is accessible and worth the financial risks.

In response, Governor Abbott rebooted the [Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative](#) earlier this year, with new charges designed to expand educational and workforce opportunities for all Texans and promote better collaboration among the Coordinating Board, Texas

Education Agency, and Texas Workforce Commission. We have just released a new Tri-Agency report, and I'm looking forward to the collaborative work ahead.

At the Coordinating Board, we also redesigned and relaunched our GradTX initiative to expand opportunities for adults with some college credit but no credential, working with the Greater Houston Partnership and Houston area colleges and universities.

GradTX 2.0 takes a comprehensive regional approach to expand the number and diversity of Texans who complete high-value credentials. It includes targeted grants to institutions, student financial aid, coordinated marketing, data insights, and advising to help adult students re-enroll in institutions that best fit their academic, career, or personal needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the urgency of our work to promote reskilling and upskilling. It has unleashed suffering and grief across our state and our nation. It has also accelerated changes underway in our economy that underscore the importance of high-value postsecondary credentials, as illustrated by [disproportionate](#) job losses for workers without degrees. [Unemployment rates](#) for workers with only high school diplomas or with some college but no postsecondary credential are about twice the unemployment rates for workers with bachelor's degrees.

Individual Texans know they may need additional education and training to get back on their feet. For example, in a recent poll we conducted of Texans who have some college and no credential, more than a third of the respondents said they had lost or left their jobs due to the pandemic; more than half said they expected they would need to re-enroll and complete a degree or certificate in the next 12 months.

However, more than 70% of these Texans with some college and no credential responded that if they had support in covering program costs, job placement services, and in some cases help finding childcare, they would be likely to re-enroll and complete a credential. This kind of data is immensely helpful for institutions and for our agency as we work together to refine marketing, outreach, and student support strategies.

At the Coordinating Board, we are responding to these critical needs – especially through the strategic investment of GEER funds, our GradTX 2.0 efforts, and our collaborative work with our Tri-Agency partners to support the reskilling and upskilling of the Texas workforce.

In particular, the important work we've begun in Houston as part of GradTX 2.0 is highly scalable, and we're eager to work with other institutional and community partners to advance this initiative throughout Texas. For example, we recently expanded the scope of technical analyses to support institutions statewide. One product of that work is an interactive Texas [labor market tool](#) we developed with the Brookings Institution.

This tool was designed to assist institutions as they prepare applications for the \$46.5 million in GEER funds that have been allocated for reskilling and upskilling. In the next several months, we will continue to refine and expand resources for analyzing and sharing timely labor market data with higher education institutions, employers, and the public, working closely with our colleagues at the Texas Workforce Commission.

### **Innovating with Technology**

Texans have a long track record of innovating through adversity, and this year has been no exception. So, while 2020 has brought unprecedented challenges, it has also presented extraordinary opportunities to accelerate the pace of innovation in teaching and learning and exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit of Texas colleges and universities.

Imagine if I had gotten up and said a year ago that our colleges and universities would be able to transition almost all their courses online within about two weeks. That would have sounded crazy. However, that's exactly what happened. Remember those old criticisms about colleges and universities being resistant to technology and slow to change? That got blown out of the water in about two weeks in March.

This was amazing.

Many of you might point out there are important differences between emergency online instruction and high-quality digital learning. And, you're right. Faculty raced to convert courses to online delivery, and campus instructional support staff were suddenly called on to support thousands of new online courses. Sometimes the technology didn't deliver, and sometimes the course redesigns didn't achieve the intended quality and accessibility the first time they were rolled out.

Still, what I have consistently heard from faculty and institutional leaders across the state and the nation is that as the creative energy of students, faculty, departments, and whole institutions was suddenly thrust into digital learning, a panoply of new ideas and experiments have emerged, including major changes to courses, programs, calendars,

and the use of physical spaces and technology, far beyond anything we might have anticipated a year ago.

Now is a critical time when we need to get behind our faculty innovators, share what we're learning about effective design for learning, and advocate for resources, policies, and partnerships that allow educational innovation to flourish and scale. That's why I was grateful to the governor and legislative leadership for committing a portion of GEER funding to strengthen the quality of digital learning and reduce the costs of instructional materials to students.

These funds will support Texas faculty innovators and their campus support units in creating and improving digital resources to share across institutions, including digital course materials for the most commonly transferred core courses, college readiness materials, and workforce education programs, all of which will be available free of charge to students.

Thanks to support from the legislature, we have already launched the [OERTX Repository](#) for these and other open digital resources, and right now, faculty teams at public and independent institutions across the state are working on applications for the GEER-funded [Open Educational Resources Course Development and Implementation Grant Program](#). We've also created a new office within our agency to support digital learning. We look forward to partnering with your institutions to support their vital work to leverage new technologies for teaching and learning.

We are also working to better align college and career advising with students' needs.

Historically, one of the limiting factors in Texas students' educational and career pathways has been access to high-quality advising. As we know, students traditionally gain access to advising when they're already enrolled in institutions. However, a growing number of students take courses from multiple institutions. Also, many students — especially students whose parents don't have postsecondary credentials — aren't aware of the full range of options available to them.

So, on behalf of the Tri-Agency Initiative, the Coordinating Board is leading a statewide effort — in partnership with institutions of higher education, school districts, employers, and state and national organizations — to innovate and strengthen college and career advising. Our aim is to ensure all Texas students — from middle school through adult

learners — have access to high-quality college and career advising, including well-designed digital resources and well-trained counselors and advisors.

These resources will include curated information for students and their families, virtual advising, an [artificial intelligence chatbot](#) that can text personalized reminders and guidance to students, data dashboards for advisers and institutional leaders, and the [Texas OnCourse](#) digital academy with extensive just-in-time training and support for counselors and advisors across the state.

In all this work, it is imperative we remain thoughtful about how we support innovations and leverage new technologies in digital learning and in new approaches to advising. We must keep in mind the difficult and expensive lessons we've learned about developing, refining, and scaling digital courseware, while at the same time taking full advantage of these unprecedented opportunities to build upon those lessons we learned. This work is essential for Texas to accelerate its economic recovery and provide the resilient, highly competitive workforce our future will demand.

### **Charting the Course**

Ensuring Texas' continued economic competitiveness was a guiding principle for the state's [60x30TX higher education plan](#) – especially the central goal that by 2030, at least 60% of workers between the ages 25-34 should have earned a postsecondary credential. When it was adopted in 2015, the *60x30TX* plan was a bold step forward, and since then, it has played a valuable role in shaping state policy conversations about how to expand opportunities for Texans to achieve the credentials and skills our economy increasingly demands.

While the state has made steady progress on most of the *60x30TX* metrics since the plan's adoption, in recent years the rate of improvement has slowed. Last year, we had already begun to consider what types of changes might be required to realize the broader vision of *60x30TX*. In fact, one of the governor's new charges to the Tri-Agency initiative was to assess whether the *60x30TX* goals needed to be refined to better reflect the state's current needs.

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have intensified the significance of this work, threatening higher education's momentum in Texas while simultaneously elevating its importance.

And, we must respond swiftly.



Enrollments at the colleges and universities most Texans attend are generally down. Many students are suddenly at risk of being off-track to complete their credentials. This immediate challenge represents a long-term threat for these individuals, their communities, and our state.

After the Great Recession, nearly all new jobs created in the United States and 85% of the new jobs created in Texas required at least some education beyond high school. And today, early steps toward economic recovery already appear to be leaving those without postsecondary credentials behind. The current recession is also the most inequitable our nation has seen since unemployment data has been tracked. Women, Black and Hispanic Texans, low-income Texans, and Texans in rural communities have disproportionately lost jobs and are seeing slower return to employment.

That is why we have launched an initiative to assess and update the *60x30TX* plan to be responsive to what Texas needs now from higher education. Those needs include:

- Expanding the plan's focus to include adults and nontraditional students,
- Identifying and prioritizing the kinds of high-value credentials that are especially important for current and future workforce needs,
- Leveraging higher education's research and development capabilities, and
- Advancing access and outcomes equitably so all Texans can have opportunities to participate in and contribute to the great benefits of our state.

We look forward to working with institutions, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders across the state in this effort.

Today, data are among our most important assets – to help refine our strategies, inform decision making, drive improvement, and focus resources where they're most needed.

The Coordinating Board is the steward of the state's combined state educational and workforce data infrastructure, which includes rich data from school districts, colleges, universities, state agencies, and national partners. We are now leveraging this data to understand who has been most impacted by COVID-19, what kinds of occupations and skills might be most important for driving economic recovery, and how we need to improve short- and long-term educational and training pipelines.

As I mentioned earlier, a portion of the GEER funding we received is being used to support the modernization of our data infrastructure and to make data more accessible and useful. This new data infrastructure will include interactive advising tools so

students can find and compare educational programs and training opportunities, view potential costs and earnings, and connect with postsecondary programs.

We are currently licensing and developing several tools and dashboards for institutions to help inform local decision making. For example, we recently negotiated an agreement with the National Student Clearinghouse to provide all our public institutions with dashboards so they can understand where Texas students enroll and complete. We will also provide secure tools that allow every college and university to monitor and support individual student progress. Texas will be the first state that will enable all public colleges and universities — and any independent colleges that opt in — to monitor and analyze their students' progress-to-credentials.

Building on the work we've already started through the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, GradTX 2.0 and other initiatives, we will continue to work closely with our partners to provide actionable intelligence for students and families, institutions, employers, and policymakers about educational opportunities and workforce needs.

## **Closing**

This year has brought about profound challenges, and there is still a great deal of hard work ahead. Yet, I remain optimistic, and I hope you do too.

I am confident that Texas can come through these crises and emerge even stronger, and Texas higher education will be an essential part of the solution.

Yes, our students and institutions have experienced severe financial shocks, but this isn't a time to try to backfill lost revenue, hunker down, and hope things get back to normal.

Now, our priority needs to be laying foundations for economic recovery and a better, more just future. In our agency, as in your institutions, we have to push ourselves to ask hard questions about the impact of what we've been doing, examine how well and how fairly we're serving the students entrusted to us, and share concerns and insights. In some cases, we've had to make hard decisions to change the ways we're working. The ideas and energy of Texas higher education leaders, faculty, and students will continue to be essential for accelerating our path through these incredibly challenging times. And, we need to hear new voices, including employers and communities whose perspectives have not always been heard.

As we look forward to 2021 and the 87<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session, we must come together for the advancement of higher education in Texas. Together, I believe we can overcome any additional challenges that come our way, especially by expanding opportunities for Texans to achieve new credentials and skills, accelerating educational innovation by leveraging the potential of technology, and working at the frontiers of knowledge to develop the insights and discoveries that will enable a better Texas future.

The history of American higher education is filled with declarations about crossroads, watersheds, and paradigm shifts. Some of those declarations have been proven true and some were false. Many of them ended up being memorials to missed opportunities. My hope and my commitment is that in Texas, we will remember this as a time we came together and bridged traditional boundaries among state agencies, institutions, disciplines, communities, and stakeholders, so this moment in our history will mark an important transition — not only in how we use educational technologies, but more importantly toward higher education systems and policies that are more inclusive, stronger, and more widely celebrated as stewards of our shared commitments to opportunity, discovery, justice, and humanity.

Thank you again for your time and attention today. My colleagues at the Coordinating Board and I look forward to working with you, as a resource, partner, and advocate for Texas higher education.

Thank you.