

CHAPTER 299

AN ACT establishing a task force to study the quality of online education provided by public and independent institutions of higher education , and certain proprietary institutions, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. a. There is established a task force for the purpose of examining the quality, efficacy, costs, and educational outcomes of online courses offered by public and independent institutions of higher education , and proprietary institutions licensed to offer academic degrees, during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing recommendations for potential improvements in the delivery of online courses to students.

b. The task force shall consist of 17 members as follows:

(1) the Secretary of Higher Education, ex officio, or a designee;

(2) one public member appointed by the President of the Senate and one public member appointed by the Minority Leader of the Senate, both of whom have expertise in issues related to the delivery of online courses in higher education;

(3) one public member appointed by the Speaker of the General Assembly and one public member appointed by the Minority Leader of the General Assembly, both of whom have expertise in issues related to the delivery of online courses in higher education; and

(4) 12 members appointed by the Governor, including: the president of a public research university, or a designee; the president of a State college or university established pursuant to chapter 64 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, or a designee; the president of a county college established pursuant to chapter 64A of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, or a designee; the president of an independent institution of higher education, or a designee; the president of a proprietary institution licensed to offer academic degrees, or a designee; a representative of the American Association of University Professors; a representative of the Council of New Jersey State College Locals AFT/AFL-CIO; a representative of the New Jersey Education Association; two individuals who are chief information officers or equivalent positions, one of whom shall be employed at a four-year institution of higher education and one of whom shall be employed at a county college; and two students, one of whom shall be currently enrolled in a four-year institution of higher education and one of whom shall be currently enrolled in a county college.

c. Appointments to the task force shall be made within 30 days of the effective date of this act. Vacancies in the membership of the task force shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointments were made. Members of the task force shall serve without compensation, but shall be reimbursed for necessary expenditures incurred in the performance of their duties as members of the task force within the limits of funds appropriated or otherwise made available to the task force for its purposes.

d. The task force shall organize not later than 30 days following the appointment of its members. The task force shall choose a chairperson from among its members and shall appoint a secretary who need not be a member of the task force.

e. The Office of the Secretary of Higher Education shall provide such stenographic, clerical, and other administrative assistants, and such professional staff as the task force requires to carry out its work. The task force also shall be entitled to call to its assistance and avail itself of the services of the employees of any State, county, or municipal department, board, bureau, commission, or agency as it may require and as may be available for its purposes.

2. a. The task force shall study and consider issues including, but not limited to, the following:

(1) the manner in which public and independent institutions of higher education and degree-granting proprietary institutions shifted to online learning following the issuance of Executive Order No. 104 of 2020 and the methods undertaken by institutions to resume in-person courses following the issuance of Executive Order No. 155 and Executive Order No. 175 of 2020;

(2) a description of each institution's strategy in delivering education to students, including whether an institution offered all of its classes online, in person, or through a hybrid program of online and in-person courses;

(3) a description of the technology and software utilized by the institutions to provide online courses to students;

(4) the costs borne by institutions and students in the shift to online learning that occurred as a result of Executive Order No. 104 of 2020 and throughout the pandemic;

(5) a description and assessment of the efforts and policies set forth by the institutions to ensure that students had access to the technology and other resources necessary to complete online courses during the pandemic;

(6) the effect that offering an increased volume of online classes had on student enrollment and retention compared to the prior academic year and on the cost of attendance;

(7) the traditional cost of offering an online course at each institution compared to the cost of offering an in-person course, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected that cost;

(8) the perceptions of students, faculty, and staff of the quality and value of online courses as compared to courses provided in person;

(9) a comparison of the average completion rate and average grade for students enrolled in each online course offered by each institution during the COVID-19 pandemic and the average completion rates and grades for those courses in the prior academic year. The comparison shall indicate whether or not the courses were provided online or in person in the previous academic year; and

(10) an assessment of the policies and procedures each public and independent institution of higher education and each degree-granting proprietary institution has in place to ensure that institutional support, technological support, and faculty support are provided to students enrolled in online courses to ensure a high quality educational experience.

b. The task force shall issue a final report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), no later than two years after the task force organizes.

c. The task force shall expire 30 days after the issuance of its final report.

3. This act shall take effect immediately.

Approved November 8, 2021.