

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Implications of Texas Excess Credit Policy Implementation

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STATEMENT OF ISSUE

Several states, including Texas, have implemented an “excess semester credit hours (ESCH)” policy. State ESCH policies assess a fee to students at public institutions when they exceed a set number of lifetime cumulative credit hours. The aim of such policies is to encourage institutions to create streamlined systems which discourage students from taking a large number of courses that are unnecessary to obtain their degrees. This should, in turn, limit time to degree and debt incurred. Since 1999, in-state students with too many ESCH no longer receive state funding and institutions are allowed to charge students up to the out-of-state tuition rate. This project was aimed at illuminating the administrative burden that the implementation of and communication about these policies places on Texas students, focusing on 120 documents provided on the websites of two- and four-year institutions.

KEY FINDINGS

- In Texas, four-year institutions have, on average, twice the number of documents detailing their ESCH policies as two-year institutions. 34 of 65 two-year institutions had no such documents available. This is significant because transfer students are especially vulnerable to ESCH policies.
- Several institutions’ websites include erroneous, outdated, or incomplete information on their ESCH policies, with four two-year institutions containing information from before the 2006 update, which changed the number of ESCH students could accumulate before losing state funding.
- The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) sends a report to each institution outlining the students who are nearing the ESCH threshold. Rarely did these institutions employ an automatic notification system to inform students of this status. Such notifications, when employed, range from informing students that they are approaching the ESCH threshold to warning them that they have already reached the threshold.
- Appeals to ESCH sanctions are only discussed in the documents provided by four-year institutions, with wide variation from school to school in how and why waivers are given.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Explore ways to give students greater access to their accurate total attempted credit hours. Increased communication between institutions or the THECB and students would allow students to proactively plan before being sanctioned under ESCH policies. Having students sign a one-time FERPA release allowing the THECB to disclose their total number of attempted credit hours to their institution could also help students better track their credits.
- Create statewide automatic exemptions to the ESCH policy, such as receiving a Pell grant. Such exemptions would create a more systematic way to appeal large increases in tuition and fees without increasing administrative burden.
- Increase clarity of ESCH policy communication from two-year institutions, as transfer students face additional hurdles and certain community colleges can now award bachelor’s degrees in high-need areas as of 2017.
- Investigate how students and institutional administrators perceive the burden of learning and complying with ESCH policies. An understanding of variation in administrative burden is imperative to analyze the causal impact of adopting an ESCH-type policy in the state of Texas.

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