

ASSEMBLY HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 4836

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: MARCH 8, 2021

The Assembly Higher Education Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 4836 with committee amendments.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Governor signed Executive Order (EO) No. 104 on March 16, 2020, which suspended in-person instruction at institutions of higher education and thus caused all classes taken by students attending college in the State to be moved online. Subsequently, the Governor signed EO No. 155, which allowed in-person clinical, lab, and hands-on programming at institutions of higher education to resume as of July 1, 2020; then, EO No. 175 was signed on August 13, 2020, permitting institutions to resume all in-person instruction.

Despite being permitted to resume all in-person instruction, many institutions in the State opted to provide most, if not all, of their classes online for the fall 2020 semester. While the implementation of a more expansive array of online classes is necessary to limit the transmission of COVID-19, an examination of the quality of those online classes is necessary to ensure that college students continue to receive a valuable education and that institutions are prepared to effectively provide that education in the event of future emergencies.

As amended, this bill establishes a task force to examine the quality, efficacy, costs, and educational outcomes of online courses offered by public and independent institutions of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and to provide recommendations for potential improvements in the delivery of online courses to students. The task force will consist of 16 members as follows: the Secretary of Higher Education; four public members, one each appointed by the President of the Senate, the Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker of the General Assembly, and the Minority Leader of the General Assembly; and 11 members appointed by the Governor, including various representatives from each sector of the public institutions of higher education, and from the independent institutions, labor groups, and students.

The task force will study and develop a report on issues including: the manner in which public and independent institutions of higher education shifted to online learning during the pandemic;

a description of each institution's strategy in delivering education to students; a description of the technology and software utilized by the institutions to provide online courses; the costs borne by institutions and students in the shift to online learning; a description and assessment of efforts and policies set forth to ensure that students had access to the technology and other resources necessary to complete online courses; the effect that offering an increased volume of online classes had on student enrollment and retention; 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; the perceptions of students, faculty, and staff of the quality and value of online courses; a comparison of the average completion rate and grade for students enrolled in each online course offered by each institution during the pandemic and the average completion rates and grades for those courses in the prior academic year; and an assessment of the policies and procedures each institution has in place to ensure that institutional, technological, and faculty support are provided to students enrolled in online courses.

The task force is required to issue a final report containing its findings and recommendations to the Governor and to the Legislature no later than two years after the task force organizes.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amended the bill to provide that the Governor will appoint a representative of the New Jersey Education Association to the task force.