



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

ONLINE COURSE FEES IN TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION



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Introduction

Tennessee's public higher education institutions have offered online courses for over two decades, and the prevalence of distance learning options has increased during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in March 2020, institutions adjusted their course delivery methods, with some institutions shifting most courses entirely online or increasing their online course options.

In fall 2019, about 97,700 undergraduate students (about half) enrolled in at least one online course through one of Tennessee's public colleges or universities. College students may choose to enroll in online courses, either in addition to or instead of attending traditional in-person classes, for any number of reasons including schedule flexibility and health concerns related to the coronavirus. Students who enroll in online courses are typically charged the same tuition and mandatory fees as students who attend class in person. However, many institutions charge an additional fee to students who enroll in one or more online courses, though online fee assessments were adjusted during the pandemic at Tennessee's public postsecondary institutions.

This report provides an overview of undergraduate online course fees charged by Tennessee's public colleges and universities, including information about pandemic-related changes made to online course fees during 2020 and 2021.¹

Many institutions assess an additional fee for online courses

Many of Tennessee's public colleges and universities assess an online course fee to students enrolled in one or more online courses. Online course fees are considered non-mandatory (i.e., they are not charged to all students, though they are required for enrollment in certain courses) and the imposition of such fees is solely at the discretion of the governing board for each institution or system. As of June 2021, one locally governed institution (LGI) and six community colleges do not assess additional fees for online courses, meaning students enrolled at those institutions pay the same tuition and mandatory fees regardless of course delivery method. The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), which governs all community colleges and the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs), and one LGI have made changes in this policy area that go into effect fall 2021 (see page 8 for more details). Because online learning has received so much attention over the past year, institutions and systems will likely continue to evaluate and adjust online course fees and assessment methods. TCATs do not assess online course fees and offer few online or hybrid program options compared to Tennessee's other public postsecondary institutions. Page 3 contains an abbreviation key for the various systems and institutions used throughout the report.

Typically, online fees are assessed in addition to mandatory fees, though a few universities assess fewer or different mandatory fees for online courses or programs

Tennessee's public colleges and universities vary in their online fee assessment method, as shown in Exhibit 1. Most institutions assess the online course fee in addition to tuition and mandatory fees. Mandatory fees vary by institution and may include a student government fee, campus access fee, and library fee. Additionally, mandatory fees differ from the fees that are assessed for specific programs or courses, such as an online course fee, in that they are required for enrollment or attendance at the institution and are charged to all students, regardless of program of study or course selection. There are a few exceptions, however. Five universities (TTU, UM, UTC, UTK, and UTM) assess fewer or different fees to students enrolled in online courses or fully online degree programs.

¹ Many analyses in this report will exclude TN eCampus; see page 16 for information about TN eCampus.

Abbreviation Key

Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) System	
Chattanooga State Community College	Chattanooga State
Cleveland State Community College	Cleveland State
Columbia State Community College	Columbia State
Dyersburg State Community College	Dyersburg State
Jackson State Community College	Jackson State
Motlow State Community College	Motlow State
Nashville State Community College	Nashville State
Northeast State Community College	Northeast State
Pellissippi State Community College	Pellissippi State
Roane State Community College	Roane State
Southwest Tennessee Community College	Southwest
Volunteer State Community College	Volunteer State
Walters State Community College	Walters State
Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology	TCAT
Locally Governed Institutions (LGI)	
Austin Peay State University	APSU
East Tennessee State University	ETSU
Middle Tennessee State University	MTSU
Tennessee State University	TSU
Tennessee Technological University	TTU
University of Memphis	UM
University of Tennessee (UT) System	
University of Tennessee - Chattanooga	UTC
University of Tennessee - Knoxville	UTK
University of Tennessee - Martin	UTM

As shown in Exhibit 1, most institutions assess an online course fee for all online courses and programs, though two universities (UTK and UM) assess an online course fee only for courses that are part of fully online degree programs. UTK and UM students who enroll in online courses that are not part of a fully online degree program are not charged an additional fee.

UTC charges an online course fee to students enrolled in any online course, though students enrolled in a fully online degree program are charged fewer mandatory fees. See pages 8-14 for more information on fee assessment methods and how they impact what students pay to enroll in online courses.

Some institutions significantly increased their online course offerings in 2020 and 2021 in response to the coronavirus pandemic. In most cases, students were not charged an online course fee for courses that were converted to an online delivery method as a result of the pandemic. Some institutions waived online course fees for all courses, including for those that were already delivered online prior to the pandemic. Other institutions adjusted their assessment method by assessing the fee for fully online degree programs only rather than all online courses. Additionally, some institutions adjusted their assessment method or waived online course fees entirely in one or more semesters. See page 18 for more details. Exhibit 1 displays online course fee assessment methods without consideration of changes made in response to the pandemic.

Exhibit 1: Online course fee assessment methods | Tennessee's public colleges and universities

	No fee	Fee assessed for online courses in addition to mandatory fees	Fee assessed for online courses in lieu of mandatory fees	Fee assessed for online programs in addition to mandatory fees	Fee assessed for online programs – fewer mandatory fees assessed
TTU			X		
UM [^]				X	
UTC		X			X
UTK					X
UTM			X		
APSU		X			
Chattanooga State		X			
Cleveland State		X			
Columbia State		X			
Dyersburg State		X			
ETSU		X			
Jackson State		X			
MTSU		X			
Roane State		X			
Walters State		X			
TSU	X				
Motlow State	X				
Nashville State	X				
Northeast State	X				
Pellissippi State	X				
Southwest	X				
Volunteer State	X				
TCATs*	X				

Notes: (1) This table represents online course fee assessment methods without consideration of changes made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. See page 18 for COVID-19-related changes. (2) *TCATs offer few online or hybrid program options compared to Tennessee's other public postsecondary institutions. (3) ^UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

Source: Information obtained by OREA from Tennessee's public postsecondary institutions.

Online course fee amounts vary by institution

The online course fee amount varies by institution and is generally lower at community colleges and higher at four-year universities, as shown in Exhibits 2, 3, and 4.

Online courses are delivered in a variety of formats, which can be generally categorized as follows:

- **fully online courses:** learning takes place entirely online and students are not required to visit campus for instruction.
 - **asynchronous:** no set meeting times.
 - **synchronous:** set meeting times with live two-way interaction using video and audio.
- **hybrid courses:** blend of face-to-face instruction and online learning. The ratio of in-person to online learning varies by course.

Most institutions that charge an online course fee typically do not charge the fee for hybrid classes. Some institutions, however, charge the same fees for all online courses, regardless of delivery method.

Exhibits 2, 3, and 4 provide online course fee amounts and information on applicable programs and course types with limited details of changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. See page 18 for more information on pandemic-related changes to tuition and online course fees.

Community colleges: Online course fee amounts and assessment

Most community colleges charge the online course fee per credit hour, except for Chattanooga State, which charges the fee per course. Seven of the 13 community colleges assess an online course fee, with the amount for a three-hour course ranging from \$25 at Chattanooga State to \$126 at Columbia State.

Additionally, most institutions assess the online course fee per credit hour with no maximum. For example, a student enrolled in 12 hours of online courses at Cleveland State is charged \$10 per credit hour, or \$120 in online course fees. Online course fees are not capped at 12 hours, so the student is charged \$150 for 15 credit hours, \$180 for 18 credit hours, and so on. At Roane State, however, the online course fee of \$18 per credit hour is capped at 12 credit hours. A student enrolled in 12 hours of online courses at Roane State is charged \$216 (\$18 x 12 hours = \$216). Students are not charged additional online course fees for hours enrolled over 12.

Exhibit 2: Online course fees | 2020-21 academic year | Community colleges

Institution	Fee per credit hour	Fee per three-hour course	Notes	COVID-related change?
Chattanooga State	Not applicable	\$25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fee is assessed per course, not per hour Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses or video conferencing courses 	
Cleveland State	\$10	\$30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses or video conferencing courses 	
Columbia State	\$42	\$126	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses or video conferencing courses 	
Dyersburg State	\$25	\$75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for asynchronous online courses, hybrid courses, video conferencing courses 	
Jackson State	\$10	\$30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses or video conferencing courses 	Waived fee spring 2021
Motlow State			No online course fee	
Nashville State			No online course fee	
Northeast State			No online course fee	
Pellissippi State			No online course fee	
Roane State	\$18	\$54	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximum fee \$216 (12 credit hours) Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses or video conferencing courses 	
Southwest			No online course fee	
Volunteer State			No online course fee	
Walters State	\$10	\$30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for synchronous and asynchronous online courses, hybrid, and video conferencing courses 	
Average		\$52.86		

Notes: (1) See page 18 for more details regarding COVID-19-related changes. (2) Average includes only institutions that assess a fee.
Source: OREA review of fee sheets; amounts and applicable course types were confirmed via email.

LGIs: Online course fee amounts and assessment

Of the six LGIs, five assess an additional fee for most online courses, though UM assesses an online course fee only for courses that are part of a fully online degree program; students who enroll in online courses that are not part of a fully online degree program are not charged an additional fee.² The fees assessed by the five LGIs for a three-hour online course range from \$90 at MTSU to \$384 at TTU. The five LGIs that assess an online course fee do so per credit hour, and online fees are not reduced or capped once a certain number of credit hours is reached.

Most LGIs assess the online course fee in addition to regular mandatory fees, though there is one exception: students enrolled in online courses at TTU pay the online course fee in lieu of the regular mandatory fees that are charged to students who take in-person courses. TTU students who enroll in a combination of in-person and online courses incur regular mandatory fees for their in-person course credit hours and the online course fee for their online course credit hours.

Exhibit 3: Online undergraduate course fee amounts | 2020-21 academic year | LGIs

Institution	Fee per credit hour	Fee per three-hour course	Notes	COVID-related change?
APSU	\$34	\$102	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for fully online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses 	
ETSU	\$40	\$120	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for fully online courses Not assessed for hybrid courses 	
MTSU	\$30	\$90	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for fully online and hybrid courses 	Waived fee summer and fall 2020, spring 2021
TSU			No online course fee	Adjusted tuition rate
TTU	\$128	\$384	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for fully online courses Assessed in lieu of mandatory fees 	Adjusted assessment method spring 2021
UM[^] (online programs)	\$50	\$150	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed for courses that are part of a fully online degree program only 	Waived fee summer and fall 2020, spring 2021
UM[^] (online courses not part of online program)			No online course fee	
Average		\$154.20		

Notes: (1) See page 18 for more details regarding COVID-19-related changes. (2) The course fees presented in this table apply to undergraduate courses. (3) Average includes only institutions that assess a fee. UM appears in the table twice. The fee rates for UM were added together and divided by two to create an institutional average. (3) [^] UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

Source: OREA review of fee sheets; amounts and applicable course types were confirmed via email with each university.

UT System: Online course fee amounts and assessment

All three universities within the UT System assess a \$56 per credit hour online course fee with no maximum, but each university uses a different fee assessment methodology. At UTC, the online course fee is assessed in addition to regular mandatory fees for online courses that are *not* part of a fully online degree program. UTC students enrolled in a fully online degree program are also assessed online course fees, but they pay fewer mandatory fees than other students. At UTK, the online course fee is assessed *only* for courses that are part of a fully online degree program. Like students at UTC, UTK students enrolled in a fully online degree program are charged fewer mandatory fees than other students. UTK students enrolled in online courses that are not part of a fully online degree program are charged the same mandatory fees as for in-person courses but are not charged online course fees. At UTM, students enrolled in online courses are assessed an online course fee in lieu of mandatory fees. Additionally, UTM assesses a different tuition rate for online courses.

²UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

Exhibit 4: Online undergraduate course fee amounts | 2020-21 academic year | UT System

Institution	Fee per credit hour	Fee per three-hour course	Notes	COVID-related change?
UTC (online programs)	\$56	\$168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed in lieu of most mandatory fees Students pay tuition and the following fees: online support, technology, and library 	
UTC (online courses not part of online program)	\$56	\$168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed in addition to mandatory fees 	Waived fall 2020, spring 2021
UTK (online programs)	\$56	\$168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed in lieu of most mandatory fees Students pay tuition and the following fees: online support and library 	
UTK (online courses not part of online program)			No online course fee	
UTM	\$56	\$168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessed in lieu of mandatory fees Not assessed for hybrid courses Different tuition rate assessed for online courses 	

Notes: (1) See page 18 for COVID-19 related changes. (2) The course fees presented in this table apply to undergraduate courses. Source: OREA review of fee sheets; amounts and applicable course types were confirmed via email.

The revenues generated by online fees are used by institutions for online course development, student support, faculty training, and technology

Institutions that assess a fee for online courses use the revenue to support a variety of functions associated with offering online courses. They can be generally categorized as follows.

Course development, design, review, and revision

The cost to develop online courses and programs is front-loaded. There are expenses associated with acquiring technology as well as training and compensating faculty to develop courses. Some institutions hire instructional designers to assist with course development. Multiple institutions and systems noted that designing online courses that work well takes substantially more time, effort, and specialized expertise compared with traditional in-person courses.

Following an online course’s design and development phase, institutions and systems incur additional costs as existing online courses are reviewed and revised over time. At least two institutions utilize Quality Matters, a nonprofit organization that specializes in online course design improvement.

Instructor compensation, training, and support

At some institutions, a portion of the revenues generated by online course fees is used to compensate faculty who teach online courses and provide them with related professional development, training, and technology support.

Student support services

Institutions that assess an online course fee use a portion of it to provide a variety of services (e.g., tutoring, library resources, technology assistance, telehealth, etc.) to online students.³ Some institutions use online course fee revenues to compensate faculty advisors and success coaches who work specifically with online students.

³ Providing meaningful student engagement in an online course is more labor intensive than for an in-person course, according to administrators at one institution. Administrators at this institution therefore strongly encourage departments to limit enrollment for online courses to 25 students. The limitation on enrollment enables meaningful student engagement in online courses but can also result in upward pressure on staffing costs for online courses (i.e., more sections of an online course may be necessary given the class size limitation), which means additional instructors are needed.

One university and six community colleges do not charge an extra fee for online courses

TSU is the only public university in Tennessee that does not charge an extra fee to students who enroll in any online courses.⁴ A TSU administrator said the university has never charged an online fee and has no current plans to do so.

Six community colleges do not charge an online course fee: Motlow State, Nashville State, Northeast State, Pellissippi State, Southwest, and Volunteer State. According to TBR, a community college's decision to assess an online fee depends on the president's philosophy regarding online classes (i.e., how many online classes will be offered, the level of services provided to online students, and more) and the funding available to adequately support online offerings.

TCATs do not currently assess online course fees.⁵ This is because most TCAT programs require in-person, hands-on instruction that is difficult to replicate online.

UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021

UM began phasing out its online course fee in the 2019-20 academic year, reducing it from \$100 per credit hour to its current rate of \$50 per credit hour. The university will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021 in order to make online instruction more affordable for students. (UM began charging an online course fee in 2008 to support the development of online courses and programs.)

TBR has suspended the assessment of online course fees for the 2021-22 academic year

At its June 2021 quarterly board meeting, TBR voted to suspend the assessment of online course fees for the 2021-22 academic year. This applies to the seven community colleges that currently assess such fees. TCATs do not assess online course fees. The board suspended the assessment of online course fees to remove the financial barrier for students who opt to take online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. TBR anticipates a loss of approximately \$2.6 million in online fee revenue.

Most institutions indicated the revenues generated through online course fees are essential for providing online course options

For example, MTSU's online course fee is the sole funding source for the university's online courses. The fee covers online course development, instruction, equipment, and online student support among other items.

Without an online course fee, these institutions would either reduce or eliminate their online course offerings or turn to other revenue sources to fund the same level of online course offerings. Base tuition and/or mandatory fees paid by all students might be increased, for example.⁶

At most public colleges and universities in Tennessee, students pay more to enroll exclusively in online courses than to attend courses on campus

All of Tennessee's public universities and most of the state's community colleges offer undergraduate degrees that can be completed entirely online. On average, community college students pay \$256.57 more and

⁴UTK and UM charge an online course fee only for courses that are part of a fully online degree program. Online course fees are not charged by either institution for online courses that are not part of a fully online degree program. Additionally, UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

⁵In the past, a limited number of TCAT programs were provided exclusively online or in a hybrid format (i.e., a mixture of in-person and online instruction).

⁶One institution stated that online course fees provide greater funding transparency to students and other parties, especially at institutions where online course fees are earmarked for online course costs.

university students pay \$630.81 more per semester to enroll exclusively in online courses, based on a 15-hour course load.⁷

At most institutions that assess an online course fee, students pay the same base tuition and mandatory fees that are assessed for in-person courses, plus the additional online course fee. This explains why students pay more to attend courses online than in person at most of Tennessee's public colleges and universities. Additionally, most online course fees are assessed per credit hour with no cap or reduced rate once a certain number of credit hours is reached. This differs from how tuition and mandatory fees are typically assessed. At most institutions, tuition and mandatory fees are capped or assessed at a reduced rate at 12 or more credit hours.

The following exhibits compare the amount of tuition and fees (i.e., sum of tuition, mandatory fees, and applicable online course fees) required to enroll in 12 or 15 credit hours in person or online at Tennessee's public colleges and universities. Enrolling in 15 credit hours in the fall and spring semesters is considered a standard course load for students who intend to graduate with an associate degree within two years or a bachelor's degree within four years.⁸ Though still considered a full-time course load, students who enroll in 12 credit hours per semester must enroll in courses during the summer semester or enroll in more than 15 credit hours in one or more fall or spring semesters to complete their degree within two or four years.

Community colleges: Tuition and fee rates to enroll in person versus online

At the seven community colleges that assess an online course fee, students pay the same base tuition and mandatory fees that are assessed for in-person courses, plus the additional online course fee. On average, community college students enrolled in one of these seven colleges pay an average of \$17.62 per credit hour in additional fees to enroll in online courses. Six community colleges do not assess an additional online course fee. Students enrolled in one of those six colleges pay the same tuition and fees regardless of course delivery method.

Exhibit 5 displays the difference in tuition and fees required for enrollment in 12 or 15 credit hours in person or online at Tennessee's 13 community colleges. Students who enroll in 12 credit hours online are charged an average of \$211.43 more than students who enroll in the same number of credit hours in person. The additional amount varies from \$100 at Chattanooga State, which has the lowest per credit hour online course fee (\$8.33),⁹ to \$504 at Columbia State, which assesses the highest per credit hour online course fee (\$42). The additional amount assessed for 15 credit hours online is \$256.57, on average, ranging from \$125 at Chattanooga State to \$630 at Columbia State.

The difference in tuition and fees assessed for 12 or 15 credit hours of online versus in-person courses is a function of the online course fee amount and differences in the assessment method between mandatory and online fees. Mandatory fees reach a maximum amount at a certain number of credit hours while online course fees are assessed per credit hour with no maximum.¹⁰ The number of credit hours at which mandatory fees are capped varies among the community colleges, though 12 credit hours is most common, as shown in Exhibit 5. For example, a student enrolled in in-person courses at Walters State will pay the maximum mandatory fee amount of \$147.50 for 12 or more credit hours. In contrast, a Walters State student will pay \$120 to enroll in 12 credit hours online ($\$10 \times 12 \text{ hours} = \120), \$150 to enroll in 15 credit hours online ($\$10 \times 15 \text{ hours} = \150), or \$180 to enroll in 18 credit hours online ($\$10 \times 18 \text{ hours} = \180), in addition to the maximum mandatory fee amount of \$147.50.

⁷ There are six community colleges and one university where there is no difference in tuition and fee amounts between in-person and online courses because those institutions do not assess an online course fee. Additionally, students enrolled in online courses that are not part of a fully online program at UTK or UM are not charged an additional online course fee.

⁸ Most associate degrees are 60 hours; 15 credit hours x 4 semesters = 60 hours. Most bachelor's degrees are 120 hours; 15 credit hours x 8 semesters = 120 hours.

⁹ Chattanooga State does not publish a per credit hour online course fee and instead charges \$25 fee per three-hour online course; $\$25/3 \text{ hours} = \8.33 per hour.

¹⁰ There is one exception, however, as Roane State caps its online course fee at \$216. Students enrolled in online courses at Roane State are charged the \$18 per credit hour for the first 12 credit hours enrolled online ($\$18 \times 12 \text{ hours} = \216) and will not pay additional online course fees for hours enrolled over 12. A Roane State student enrolled in 15 credit hours online, for example, will pay the same amount in online course fees (\$216) as a student enrolled in 12 credit hours online.

Exhibit 5: Community colleges | Comparison of in-state tuition and fees for 12 and 15 credit hours taken in person versus online | 2020-21 academic year

	Mandatory fee max	Online fee per hour – no max	12 credit hours			15 credit hours		
			In person	Online	Difference	In person	Online	Difference
Chattanooga	\$158 12 hours	\$8.33*	\$2,174	\$2,274	\$100	\$2,279	\$2,404	\$125
Cleveland	\$148 9 hours	\$10	\$2,164	\$2,284	\$120	\$2,269	\$2,419	\$150
Columbia	\$160 12 hours	\$42	\$2,176	\$2,680	\$504	\$2,281	\$2,911	\$630
Dyersburg	\$138 5 hours	\$25	\$2,154	\$2,454	\$300	\$2,259	\$2,634	\$375
Jackson	\$146 12 hours	\$10	\$2,162	\$2,282	\$120	\$2,267	\$2,417	\$150
Motlow	\$149 12 hours	-	\$2,165	\$2,165	\$0	\$2,270	\$2,270	\$0
Nashville	\$131 12 hours	-	\$2,147	\$2,147	\$0	\$2,252	\$2,252	\$0
Northeast	\$147 10 hours	-	\$2,163	\$2,163	\$0	\$2,268	\$2,268	\$0
Pellissippi[^]	\$173 8 hours	-	\$2,189	\$2,189	\$0	\$2,294	\$2,294	\$0
Roane	\$143 12 hours	\$18**	\$2,171	\$2,387	\$216	\$2,276	\$2,492	\$216
Southwest	\$155.50 7 hours	-	\$2,171.50	\$2,171.50	\$0	\$2,276.50	\$2,276.50	\$0
Volunteer	\$140 12 hours	-	\$2,156	\$2,156	\$0	\$2,261	\$2,261	\$0
Walters	\$147.50 12 hours	\$10	\$2,163.50	\$2,283.50	\$120	\$2,268.50	\$2,418.50	\$150
Average		\$17.62	\$2,166.36	\$2,377.79	\$211.43	\$2,271.36	\$2,527.93	\$256.57

Notes: (1) This table represents tuition and fee assessments without consideration of changes made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. See page 18 for COVID-19-related changes. (2) The amounts shown for in-person and online enrollment include tuition, mandatory fees, and applicable online course fees. (3) Average includes only institutions that assess an online course fee. (4) *Chattanooga State does not publish a per credit hour online course fee and instead charges a \$25 fee per three-hour online course; \$25/3 hours = \$8.33 per hour. (5) **Roane State caps its online course fee of \$18 per credit hour at 12 credit hours (\$18 x 12 hours = \$216). (6) [^]Tuition reflects spring 2021 rates; in fall 2020, the international education fee (\$15) and recreation center fee (\$15) were not assessed. Source: OREA analysis of institution tuition and fee tables.

LGIs: Tuition and fee rates to enroll in person versus online

Five of the six LGIs assess an online course fee. On average, LGI students enrolled in one of those five universities pay \$51.40 in additional fees per credit hour to enroll in online courses. TSU does not assess an additional online course fee, and UM assesses a fee only for online courses that are part of a fully online degree program.¹¹ UM students enrolled in online courses that are not part of an online degree program pay the same tuition and fees as students taking courses in person.

Exhibit 6 displays the difference in tuition and fees required for enrollment in 12 or 15 credit hours in person or online at the LGIs. Students who enroll in 12 credit hours online are charged an average of \$489 more than students who enroll in the same number of credit hours in person at an LGI. The additional amount varies from \$360 at MTSU, which has the lowest per credit hour online course fee (\$30), to \$897 at TTU, which assesses the highest per credit hour online course fee (\$128). The average additional amount assessed for 15 credit hours online is \$643.20 compared to in-person courses, with the difference ranging from \$450 at MTSU to \$1,281 at TTU.

¹¹ UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

Similar to the community colleges, the difference in tuition and fees assessed for online versus in-person courses at the LGIs is a function of the online course fee amount and the assessment method used for mandatory and online fees. Mandatory fees reach a maximum amount at a certain number of credit hours, as determined by each institution, while online course fees are not capped at any LGI. For example, APSU caps its \$79.15 per credit hour mandatory fee at 10 credit hours, meaning the maximum amount of mandatory fees charged to students who enroll in 10 or more credit hours is \$791.50. The number of credit hours at which mandatory fees are capped varies among the LGIs, ranging from six credit hours at TTU to 12 credit hours at MTSU and UM, as shown in Exhibit 6. In contrast, the online course fee is not capped by any LGI, so the fee amount continues to increase with each additional online course hour enrolled.

LGI students enrolled in online courses pay the same base tuition and mandatory fees that are assessed for in-person courses, plus the additional online course fee, though there is one exception. TTU assesses the online course fee in lieu of mandatory fees for online course credit hours, meaning students enrolled in online courses are not charged both mandatory fees and online course fees. See page 13 for more details.

Exhibit 6: LGIs | Comparison of in-state tuition and fees for 12 and 15 credit hours taken in person versus online | 2020-21 academic year

	Mandatory fee max	Online fee per hour – no max	12 credit hours			15 credit hours		
			In person	Online	Difference	In person	Online	Difference
APSU	\$791.50 10 hours	\$34	\$4,151.50	\$4,559.50	\$408	\$4,313.50	\$4,823.50	\$510
ETSU	\$959.50 8 hours	\$40	\$4,571.50	\$5,051.50	\$480	\$4,745.50	\$5,345.50	\$600
MTSU	\$935 12 hours	\$30	\$4,535	\$4,895	\$360	\$4,712	\$5,162	\$450
TSU	\$579 8 hours	-	\$3,927	\$3,927	\$0	\$4,092	\$4,092	\$0
TTU	\$639 6 hours	\$128	\$5,169	\$6,066	\$897	\$5,169	\$6,450	\$1,281
UM (online courses <i>not</i> part of online program)	\$852 12 hours	-	\$4,956	\$4,956	\$0	\$4,956	\$4,956	\$0
UM (online programs) [^]	\$852 12 hours	\$50	\$4,956	\$5,556	\$600	\$4,956	\$5,706	\$750
Average		\$51.40	\$4,676.60	\$5,165.60	\$489	\$4,779.20	\$5,422.40	\$643.20

Notes: (1) This table represents tuition and fee assessments without details of changes made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. See page 18 for COVID-19 related changes. (2) The amounts shown for in-person and online enrollment include tuition, mandatory fees, and applicable online course fees. (3) Average includes only institutions that assess a fee. UM appears in the table twice to account for online courses at UM that are part of a fully online degree program and those that are not. The rates for UM were added together and divided by two to create an institutional average. (4) ^UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021. Source: OREA analysis of institution tuition and fee tables.

UT System: Tuition and fee rates to enroll in person versus online

The three universities within the UT System assess the same \$56 per credit hour online fee, though the difference in tuition and fees charged to students who enroll in person compared to online varies among the institutions due to differences in assessment method.

UTC and UTM assess the fee for all online courses while UTK assesses the fee only for online courses that are part of a fully online degree program. Additionally, UTC and UTK assess fewer mandatory fees for students enrolled in online programs. UTC students who enroll in online courses that are *not* part of an online program pay the same base tuition and mandatory fees that are assessed for in-person courses, plus the

additional online course fee. In comparison, UTK students who enroll in online courses that are not part of an online program pay the same tuition and fees as students enrolled in person but do not pay an additional online course fee. UTM assesses a higher tuition rate for students enrolled in online courses, with its online fee assessed in lieu of mandatory fees for online courses.

Exhibit 7 displays the difference in tuition and fees required for enrollment in 12 or 15 credit hours in person or online in the UT System. Students who enroll in 12 credit hours online are charged an average of \$107.17 more than students who enroll in the same number of credit hours in person. The average amount assessed for 15 credit hours online is \$610.17 more than for taking the same number of hours in person.

Because of the variations in tuition and fee assessment methods, the difference in cost to enroll in online courses compared to in-person courses varies between the universities. Considering a 12-hour course load, students enrolled completely online at UTK will pay \$254 less than students enrolled in person.¹² At UTC, students enrolled in 12 hours of online courses will pay \$672 more than students enrolled in person.¹³

Considering a 15-hour course load, UTK online students pay \$86 less than students enrolled in the same number of credit hours in person,¹⁴ while UTM students pay \$1,411 more.¹⁵ See pages 12-14 for further explanation of how variation in tuition and fee assessment methods impact what a student will pay to enroll in person versus online.

Exhibit 7: UT System comparison of in-state tuition and fees for 12 and 15 credit hours taken in person versus online | 2020-21 academic year

	Online fee per hour – no max	12 credit hours			15 credit hours		
		In person	Online	Difference	In person	Online	Difference
UTC (online courses <i>not</i> part of online program)	\$56	\$4,828	\$5,500	\$672	\$4,828	\$5,668	\$840
UTC (online program)	\$56	\$4,828	\$4,745	\$(83)	\$4,828	\$4,913	\$85
UTK (online courses <i>not</i> part of online program)	-	\$6,632	\$6,632	\$0	\$6,632	\$6,632	\$0
UTK (online program)	\$56	\$6,632	\$6,378	\$(254)	\$6,632	\$6,546	\$(86)
UTM	\$56	\$4,874	\$5,028	\$154	\$4,874	\$6,285	\$1,411
UT Average	\$56			\$107.17			\$610.17

Notes: (1) This table represents tuition and fee assessments without details of changes made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. See page 18 for COVID-19-related changes. (2) UTC and UTK appear in the table twice. Each institution's rates were added together and divided by two to create an institutional average. Source: OREA analysis of institution tuition and fee tables.

Five universities assess different tuition rates or fees for online courses and programs

At most institutions, the online course fee is assessed for all online courses in addition to the base tuition and mandatory fees. However, five universities vary the tuition and fee rate and/or assessment method for online courses or programs. Exhibit 8 displays the tuition and fees assessed for 15 credit hours by delivery method (i.e., in-person, online courses that are not part of an online program, and online courses that are part of an online program) at TTU, UM, UTC, UTK, and UTM.

¹² Based on a comparison of 12 hours in person (\$6,632) to 12 hours enrolled in an online program (\$6,378).

¹³ Based on a comparison of 12 hours in person (\$4,828) to 12 hours enrolled in online courses that are not part of an online program (\$5,550).

¹⁴ Based on a comparison of 15 hours in person (\$6,632) to 15 hours enrolled in an online program (\$6,546).

¹⁵ Based on a comparison of 15 hours in person (\$4,874) to 15 hours enrolled in an online program (\$6,285).

Two universities (UTK and UM) assess the online course fee for fully online degree programs only, meaning students enrolled in online courses that are not part of an online program pay the same tuition and fees as students who attend classes in person. Students who are enrolled in an online program at the two universities, however, pay an online course fee (\$56 per credit hour at UTK; \$50 per credit hour at UM) in addition to the tuition charged to all enrolled students (\$5,666 at UTK; \$4,104 at UM). The two universities handle mandatory fees for students enrolled in online programs differently. UM students enrolled in an online program pay the same mandatory fees as students enrolled in person (\$852), while UTK students enrolled in an online program pay fewer mandatory fees than students enrolled in person (i.e., \$40 mandatory fees for online programs compared to \$966 for in-person programs).

UTC assesses the \$56 per credit hour online fee for all online courses, whether they are part of an online program or not. However, students enrolled in an online program pay fewer mandatory fees (\$155) than students taking online courses that are not part of an online program, who, like students enrolled in person, pay \$910. All UTC students pay the same tuition rate (\$3,918) regardless of course delivery method.

TTU and UTM assess an online course fee (\$128 per credit hour and \$56 per credit hour, respectively) in lieu of mandatory fees for all online courses. Unlike mandatory fees at both universities, however, online course fees are not capped. (Mandatory fees at TTU are capped at \$639 for 6+ credit hours. At UTM, mandatory fees are capped at \$767 for 12+ credit hours.)

The two universities differ according to the tuition rate charged to students. At TTU, students enrolled in online courses are charged the same tuition rate as those taking classes in person (\$4,530 for 12+ hours). By contrast, at UTM, students enrolled in online courses pay a higher tuition rate (with no maximum rate) than students who take classes in person. Students taking classes in person at UTM pay tuition at a rate of \$342 per credit hour, with the maximum set at \$4,107 for 12+ credit hours. Students enrolled in online courses pay tuition at a rate of \$363 per credit hour, with no maximum amount set. For example, a student enrolled in 15 credit hours of online courses would pay \$5,445 in tuition ($\$363 \times 15 = \$5,445$).

According to a TTU administrator, the university modeled its online fee structure after TN eCampus, which also assesses an online course fee in place of mandatory fees. Like TN eCampus, TTU's online course fee is set at 40 percent of tuition with no maximum (i.e., the fee is charged per credit hour and is not capped or reduced at a set number of credit hours). (See page 16 for more information on TN eCampus.) According to the administrator, many of TTU's online students live near campus and use on-campus amenities, although they are not charged the program service fee paid by students who take courses in person.

As a result of the differences in fee rates and assessment methods, students enrolled in 15 hours of online courses at TTU or UTM pay a higher amount in tuition and fees compared to students who enroll in person: TTU students pay \$1,281 more and UTM students pay \$1,411 more.

Exhibit 8: Tuition and fee rates by delivery method | 2020-21 academic year

	Delivery method	Tuition	Mandatory fees	Online fee	Tuition + Fees for 15 hours	
UTC	In person	\$3,918 max 12+ hours	\$910 max 12+ hours	-	\$3,918 +\$910	\$4,828
	Online courses, not program			\$56 per credit hour No max	\$3,918 +\$910 +\$840	\$5,668
	Online courses, not program			\$155 max 11+ hours	\$56 per credit hour No max	\$3,918 +\$155 +\$840
UTK	In person	\$5,666 max 12+ hours	\$966 max 12+ hours	-	\$5,666 +\$966	\$6,632
	Online courses, not program			-		
	Online program			\$40 max 8+ hours	\$56 per credit hour No max	\$5,666 +\$40 +\$840
UTM	In person	\$342-per-hour \$4,107 max 12+ hours	\$767 max 12+hours	-	\$4,107 +\$767	\$4,874
	Online	\$363-per-hour No max	-	\$56 per credit hour No max	\$5,445 +\$840	\$6,285
TTU	In person	\$4,530 max 12+ hours	\$639 max 6+ hours	-	\$4,530 +\$639	\$5,169
	Online			-	\$128 per hour No max	\$4,530 +\$1,920
UM^	In person	\$4,104 max 12+ hours	\$852 max 12+ hours	-	\$4,104 +\$852	\$4,956
	Online courses, not program			-		
	Online program			\$50 per hour No max	\$4,104 +\$852 +\$750	\$5,706

Notes: (1) This table represents tuition and fee assessments without details of changes made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. See page 18 for COVID-19 related changes. (2) UM will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021.

Source: OREA analysis of institution tuition and fee tables.

A closer look at tuition and fee discounts for students who enroll online

A common expectation is that students who enroll exclusively online should pay less in tuition and fees than students who attend courses in person. An October 2020 Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) survey of public college students found that approximately 54 percent of respondents enrolled exclusively in online courses in fall 2020.¹⁶ Based on a review of open comment boxes, the greatest need for improvement indicated by students was their online/distance education experience, including reducing the cost associated with online coursework.¹⁷

Many of TTU's online students live locally and they do take advantage of the amenities provided by TTU although they do not pay the general access fee that provides these amenities. Our online students are provided a TTU student identification card the same as our on-campus students. Online students use their student ID to take advantage of activities on campus the same as our on-campus students.

-email from TTU administrator, January 2021

TTU assesses the online course fee in lieu of mandatory fees for online course credit hours, meaning students enrolled in online courses are not charged the mandatory fees that support student activities and campus amenities (such as the fitness center). According to a university administrator, many of TTU's online students live near

campus and use on-campus amenities, although they are not charged the program service fee paid by students who take courses in person.

Some public colleges and universities in Tennessee offer discounted tuition and fees for out-of-state students who enroll exclusively in online courses. This discount, also known as the eRate, offers out-of-state students discounted tuition¹⁸ and reduced mandatory fees since qualified students live off campus and are unable to benefit from on-campus amenities or participate in events covered by mandatory fees. A similar discount or reduced rate, however, is not offered to in-state students who enroll exclusively online at most institutions. Students who enroll in a fully online program at UTC or UTK pay fewer mandatory fees than students who attend courses in person, though such students pay an online course fee.

Since most classes are virtual, I would have expected some reduction in tuition and fees. I'm not getting the benefits of the classroom and campus so why should I/we have to pay the same price [as] when classes were all in person?

-student response to THEC survey, October 2020

According to university administrators, in-state students enrolled exclusively online do not receive a discount on tuition and fees because the cost of instruction remains the same regardless of delivery method, accreditation standards require that online students receive the same supports (e.g., tutoring, mental health services, etc.) as on-campus students, and students do not lose access to campus services covered by the mandatory fees when they are enrolled exclusively online.

There are services online students do not use and there are others they depend on and use more than the on-ground students...We are moving away from a separate online fee, not because the costs are less, but because they are simply different for on-ground and online students to ensure quality instruction. We want students to be able to choose the course delivery mode that best fits their needs.

-email from UM administrator, January 2021

¹⁶ Many institutions significantly increased online course options in fall 2020, when the survey was administered.

¹⁷ The survey pertained to student experiences and opinions related to COVID-19.

¹⁸ The eRate is typically 150 percent of in-state tuition.

TN eCampus

Key points

- TN eCampus is available to students enrolled in a community college or LGI.
- Students must enroll in a participating institution, which is considered the student's "home" institution for admission, registration, and the awarding of a degree.
- Tuition is the same rate as the student's "home" institution.
- The TN eCampus online course fee, set at 40 percent of the "home" institution's tuition rate, is assessed per credit hour in lieu of mandatory fees and does not cap at a set number of credit hours.

In a collaborative effort among Tennessee's community colleges and LGIs, students attending any of those institutions are eligible to enroll in online courses delivered through TN eCampus. TN eCampus was created by TBR in 1998 to increase course accessibility and student success.¹⁹ This is achieved by leveraging enrollment capacity and instructor availability, particularly for high-volume general education courses and specialty programs,²⁰ among member institutions.

Courses offered through TN eCampus are fully online and may be developed and taught by a professor from a different institution than the college in which the student is enrolled. A student may take one or more courses through TN eCampus to satisfy some degree requirements. It is possible to complete a degree solely through TN eCampus, though this is rarely done. A student who enrolls in courses through TN eCampus must also be enrolled in a community college or participating university, which is considered the student's "home" institution for admission, registration, financial aid, and the awarding of a degree.²¹ Courses taken through TN eCampus do not have to be transferred as they are automatically credited on the student's "home" institution transcript.

Courses offered through TN eCampus differ from institution-based online courses, which are developed and taught by instructors at a specific college or university. Institution-based online courses are available only to students enrolled in that institution and may be offered entirely in person, entirely online, or through a hybrid format (i.e., part of the course is taught in the classroom and part is taught online).

Students who enroll in courses through TN eCampus are assessed the same per credit hour tuition rate as their home institution and pay an online course fee in lieu of mandatory fees for any hours enrolled through TN eCampus. The TN eCampus online course fee is 40 percent of the home institution's tuition rate.²² Tuition and online fees for courses taken through TN eCampus are assessed per credit hour and are not capped or reduced at a set number of credit hours. This differs from the tuition and mandatory fees assessed for institution-based courses, which are usually capped or reduced at a certain number of credit hours (i.e., at most institutions, mandatory fees reach a maximum between six to 12 credit hours enrolled, and tuition is reduced or waived for hours enrolled over 12). As a result, students who enroll in courses through TN eCampus will likely pay more in tuition and fees than if they were to enroll in institution-based online courses or in-person courses.

On average, about 20,000 students enrolled in at least one course through TN eCampus in one of the past six academic years (2015-16 through 2020-21). During this time, an average of 10.5 percent of community college students enrolled in at least one course through TN eCampus each year, compared to an average of 8.6 percent of LGI students. The percent of LGI students enrolled in courses through TN eCampus decreased by 6.7 percentage points from 2015-16 to 2020-21, while the proportion of community college students enrolling in such courses remained steady. See Exhibit A.

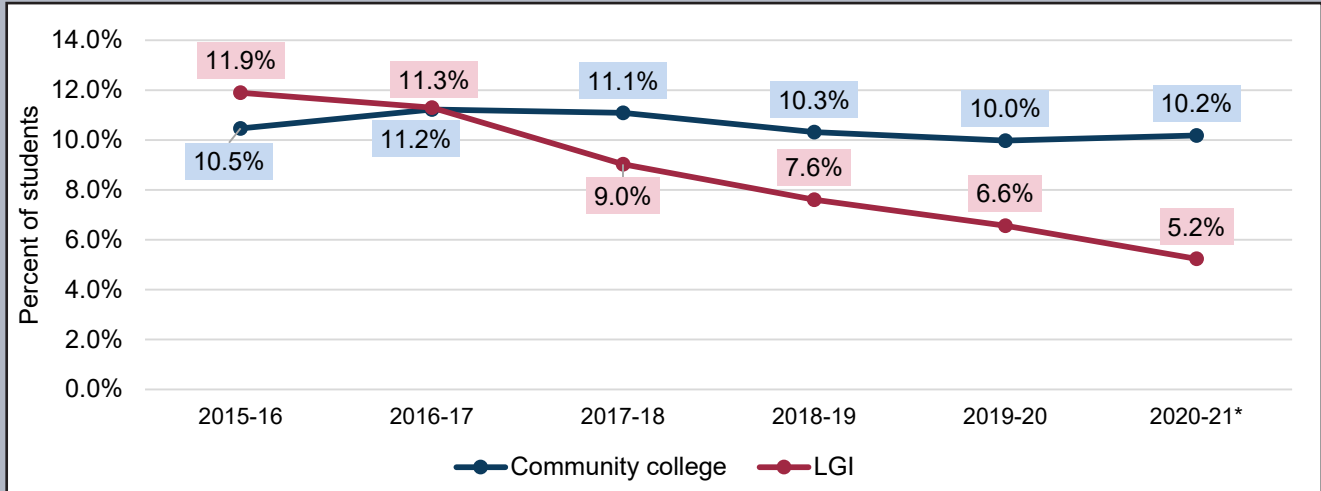
¹⁹ TN eCampus was formerly referred to as the Regents Online Degree Program (RODP) and the Regents Online Campus Collaborative (ROCC). The consortium was developed in 1998, prior to the Focus on College and University Success (FOCUS) Act, when the now LGIs were part of TBR.

²⁰ For example, Chattanooga State wanted to provide a dairy production program but did not have enough interested students to offer the necessary courses. Through TN eCampus, Chattanooga State students were able to enroll in online dairy production courses offered at Dyersburg State, which had enrollment capacity in the necessary course sections.

²¹ At least 25 percent of the credit hours required for the undergraduate degree, or at least one-third of the credit hours required for the graduate degree, must be earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree.

²² TN eCampus fee revenue is split between TBR (60 percent) and the institution (40 percent).

Exhibit A: Community college and LGI student enrollment through TN eCampus | 2015-16 through 2020-21

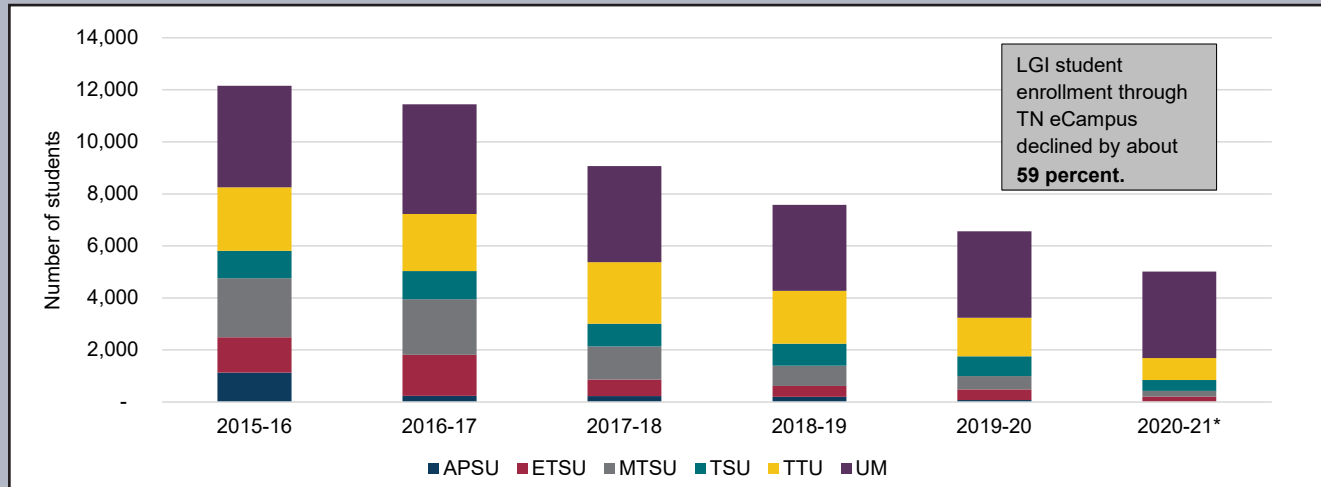


Notes: (1) Table represents unduplicated headcount of students who enrolled in at least one course through TN eCampus. (2) The academic year includes preceding summer, fall, and spring terms. For example, academic year 2015-16 includes data from summer 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016. (3) *Spring 2021 enrollment is based on census (14th day) enrollment data. Prior years are reported with official end-of-term data. Historically, the end-of-term headcount is approximately 1 percent higher than the census count.
Source: OREA analysis of TBR data.

Some LGIs have informed TBR they no longer intend to participate in TN eCampus as they increase offerings of their own institution-based online courses. TN eCampus membership is voluntary and no rule or statute mandates LGI participation. LGIs became members of TN eCampus while they were still governed by TBR. See page 22 for more information on the recent growth in online courses.

Exhibit B shows that the number of LGI students enrolled in at least one online course offered through TN eCampus decreased by about 59 percent from 2015-16 to 2020-21. The largest decreases in enrollment occurred at APSU (99 percent decline), MTSU (90 percent decline), and ETSU (86 percent decline). TN eCampus enrollment also declined at the other LGIs, but to a lesser extent (60 percent decline at TSU and 66 percent decline at TTU). UM student enrollment through TN eCampus declined by about 15 percent.

Exhibit B: LGI student enrollment through TN eCampus | 2015-16 through 2020-21



Change from 2015-16 to 2020-21	APSU	ETSU	MTSU	TSU	TTU	UM	Average
	-99.2%	-85.5%	-90.3%	-60.4%	-65.6%	-14.7%	-58.8%

Notes: (1) Table represents unduplicated headcount of students who enrolled in at least one course through TN eCampus. (2) The academic year includes preceding summer, fall, and spring terms. For example, academic year 2015-16 includes data from summer 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016. (3) *Spring 2021 enrollment is based on census (14th day) enrollment data. Prior years are reported with official end-of-term data. Historically, the end-of-term headcount is approximately 1 percent higher than the census count.
Source: OREA analysis of TBR data.

Changes in response to COVID-19

Most institutions did not assess additional fees for courses converted to online delivery due to COVID-19

In fall 2020 and spring 2021, most institutions that typically assess an online course fee did not assess the fee for courses that were converted to online delivery because of COVID-19. Campuses had to quickly transition face-to-face courses to online delivery. The new online courses did not necessarily undergo the same development and review process campuses might require for courses established online prior to the pandemic.

There was one exception, however. In spring 2021, Walters State Community College charged a reduced online fee (i.e., \$4 per credit hour instead of the typical \$10 per credit hour) for all online courses, including those converted to online delivery due to the coronavirus pandemic.²³ According to TBR, Walters State made this decision for two reasons: (1) ease of administration – charging the same fee for all online courses is easier for the school to administer, and (2) uniformity of application – all students enrolled in online courses are charged the same fee. Since the fee was assessed for more courses, Walters State reduced the rate from \$10 to \$4 per credit hour in an attempt to stay revenue neutral (i.e., not increase revenue from the online fee). On average, community college online fee revenue increased by 29 percent from fall 2019 to fall 2020, while Walters State's revenue decreased by 1 percent. It was the only community college to lose online fee revenue in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019.

Some universities waived or adjusted their online course fees

At most institutions, online course fees continued to be assessed for courses that had already been developed and delivered online before COVID. There were a few exceptions, however, as some institutions waived their online course fees entirely during one or more semesters in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

- MTSU waived its \$30 per credit hour online course fee in the summer and fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. MTSU lost approximately \$2.8 million in online fee revenue in summer and fall 2020, which was a negative impact to its online budget. An MTSU administrator said that continuing to waive the fee is not sustainable if the university is to maintain existing online courses or increase the number of online courses and programs in the future. Student demand for online courses was increasing even prior to COVID-19. See page 23 for more details.
- UM, which typically charges a \$50 per credit hour online course fee, provided students with scholarships to cover the cost of the online fee in summer 2020, and waived the fee entirely in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. A UM administrator said that losing the online fee revenue is a challenge as the university still has to provide the same level of services for its online students. Despite the budget challenge, the university will no longer assess an online course fee beginning fall 2021. See page 8 for more details.
- Jackson State waived its \$10 per credit hour online course fee in spring 2021.

Two universities that usually charge an additional fee for most online courses assessed the fee only for students enrolled in a fully online program:

- In spring 2021, TTU assessed its \$128 per credit hour online course fee for fully online programs only. The fee has historically been charged for most online courses, not just those that are part of an online program.
- In fall 2020 and spring 2021, UTC assessed its \$56 per credit hour online course fee for fully online programs only. Usually, the fee is assessed for all online courses. UTC administrators will determine which online courses (i.e., all online courses or only those part of a fully online program) will incur the fee in the future.

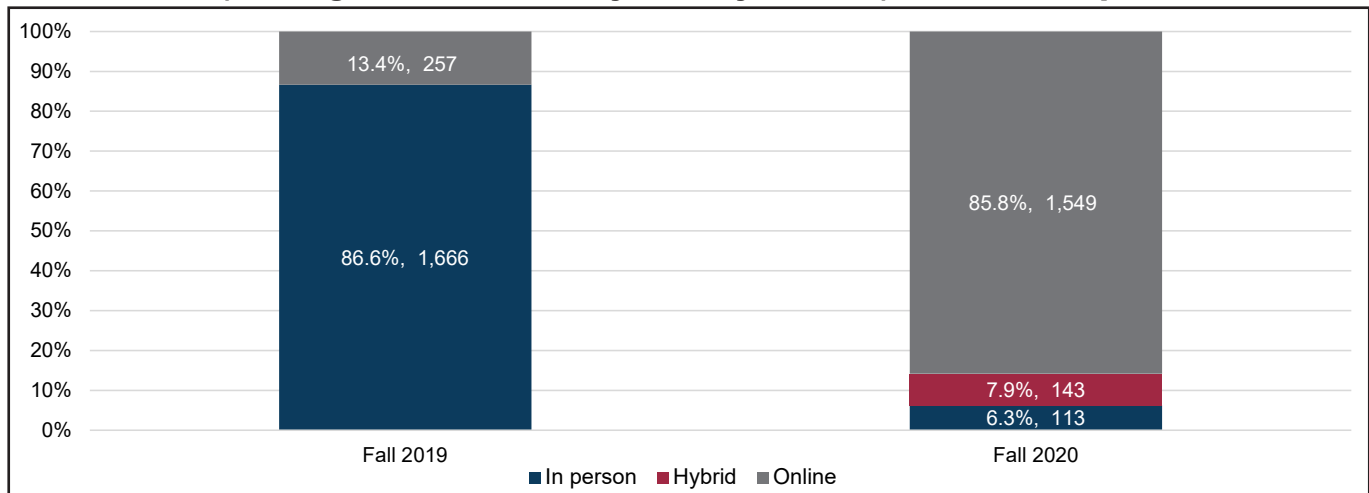
²³ In fall 2020, Walters State, like other institutions, assessed the online fee for courses had been taught online prior to the pandemic only.

TSU discounted tuition for students enrolled entirely online in fall 2020 or spring 2021

TSU, which does not charge an online course fee, offered a 15 percent discount on tuition and mandatory fees for any student who enrolled exclusively in online courses and lived off campus during the fall 2020 or spring 2021 semester. TSU decided to offer discounted tuition as a health and safety measure during the global pandemic and to incentivize online learning.

During the 2020-21 academic year, TSU offered substantially fewer in-person courses. For example, in fall 2020, 6 percent of courses were taught in person compared to 87 percent in fall 2019, a decrease of about 93 percent. See Exhibit 9.

Exhibit 9: TSU | Undergraduate courses by delivery method | Fall 2019 compared to fall 2020

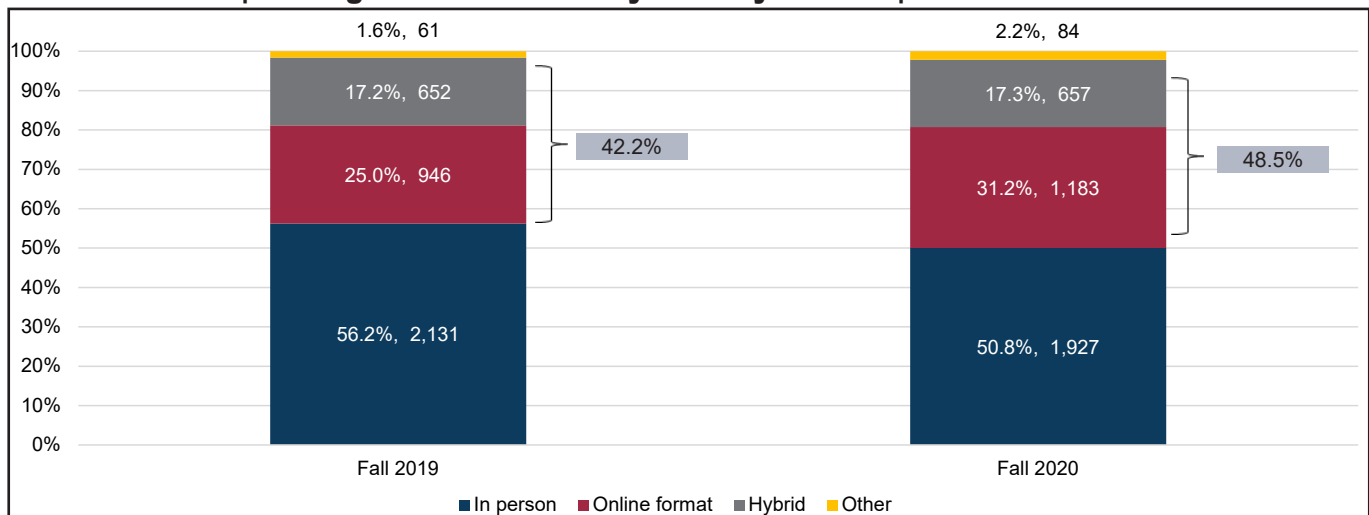


Note: The course code “hybrid” was not used in fall 2019.
Source: OREA analysis of data provided by TSU.

In 2020 and 2021, Tennessee’s colleges and universities varied in their course-delivery methods

Some institutions shifted a substantial portion of courses to an online delivery method, while others maintained their typical ratio of online to in-person courses. For example, at TTU, about 49 percent of courses were offered in an online or hybrid format in fall 2020 compared to 42 percent in fall 2019.

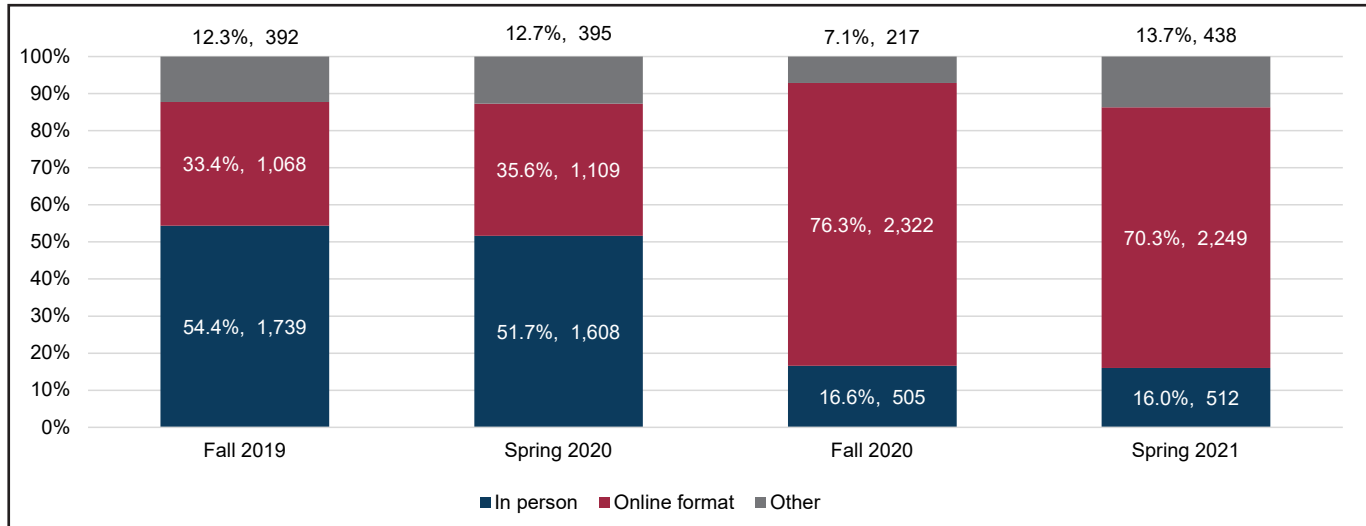
Exhibit 10: TTU | Undergraduate courses by delivery method | Fall 2019 and fall 2020



Note: Online format includes audio tape, computer-based media, fully online, and TN eCampus courses. Other includes co-op courses.
Source: OREA analysis of data provided by TTU.

ETSU doubled the percentage of courses offered online in the 2020-21 academic year, with about 73 percent of courses offered online compared to about 34 percent the previous academic year.

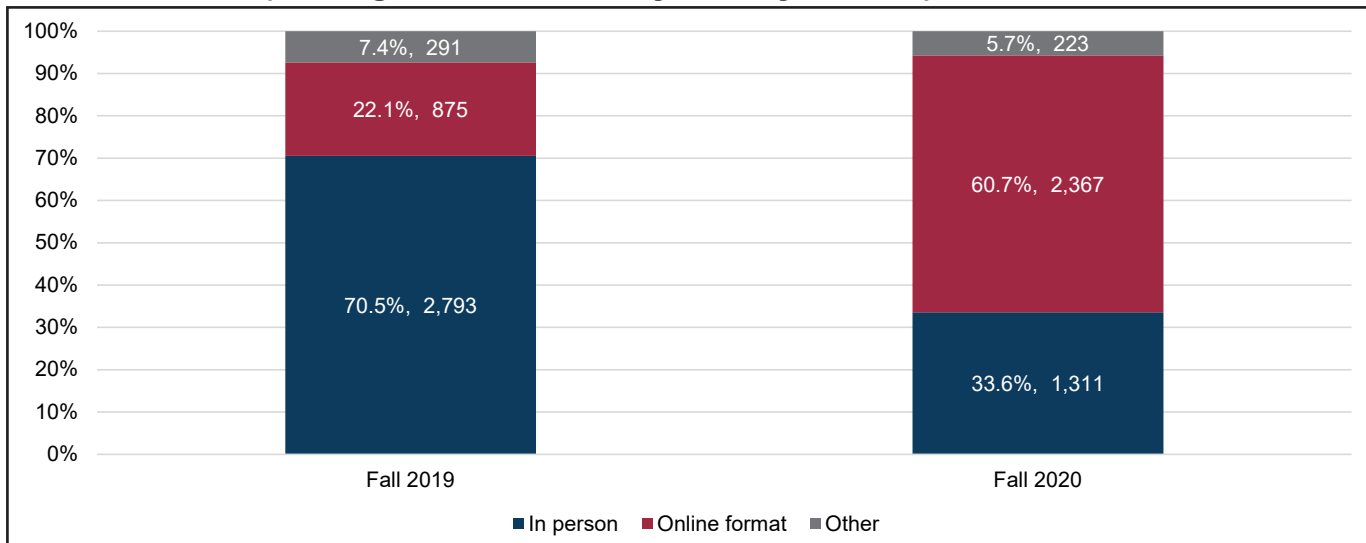
Exhibit 11: ETSU | Undergraduate courses by delivery method | 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years



Notes: (1) Spring 2021 data current as of January 5, 2021. (2) Fall 2019 and spring 2020: online format includes computer-based interactive media, hybrid, other nonconventional media, TN eCampus, two-way video and audio, and web-based delivery. Fall 2020 and spring 2021: online format includes synchronous and asynchronous online courses. (3) Fall 2019 and spring 2021: other includes clinicals, independent study, student teaching, field supervision, and co-op courses. Fall 2020 and spring 2021: other includes in-person courses with remote option.
Source: OREA analysis of data provided by ETSU.

MTSU offered significantly more online courses in fall 2020 compared to the previous year. In fall 2020, 61 percent of courses were offered in an online format compared to 22 percent in fall 2019, representing an increase of about 40 percentage points.

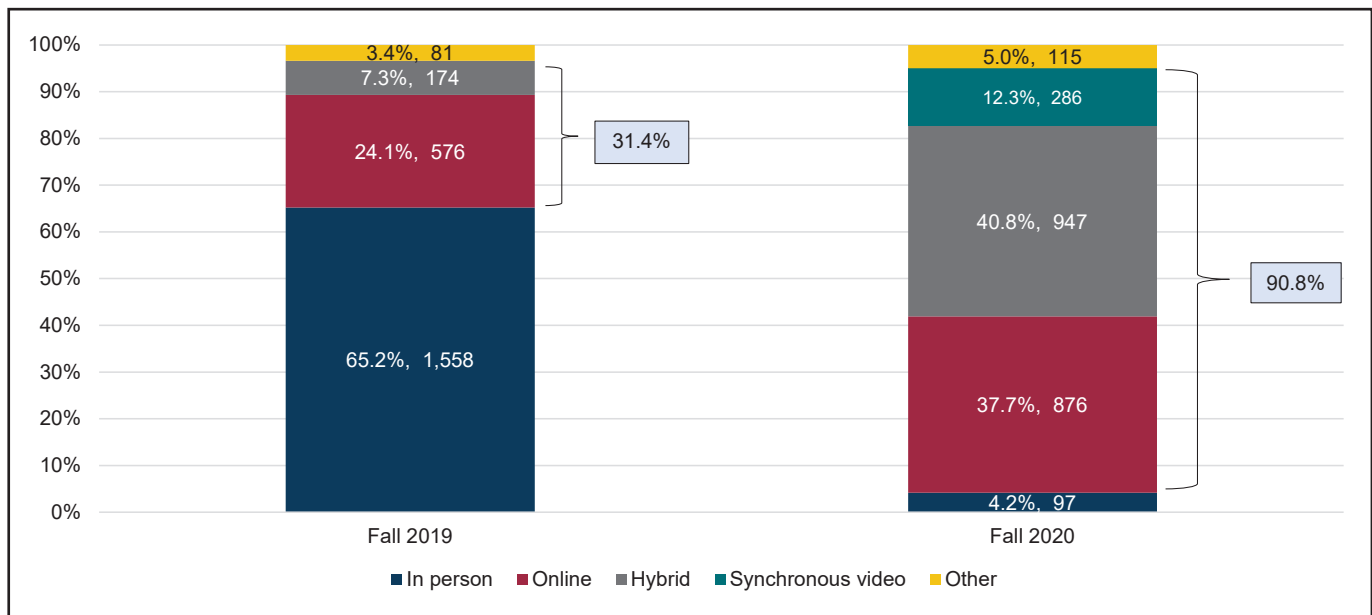
Exhibit 12: MTSU | Undergraduate courses by delivery method | Fall 2019 and fall 2020



Notes: (1) Online format includes hybrid, fully online courses, remote synchronous, TN eCampus, and videoconferencing. (2) Other includes clinical, independent study, other nonconventional media, student teaching, field study, co-op, and study abroad.
Source: OREA analysis of data provided by MTSU.

In fall 2020, APSU offered significantly more courses, about 90 percent, in an online, hybrid, or synchronous video format, compared to a little over 30 percent in the previous fall semester.

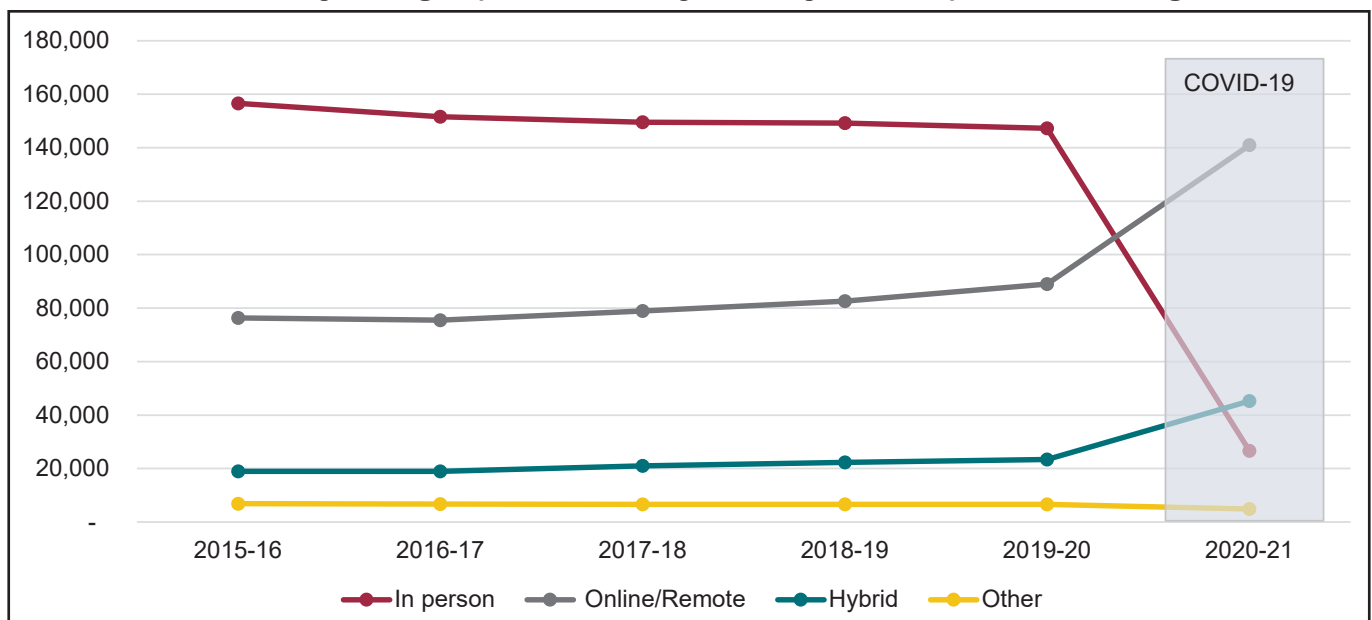
Exhibit 13: APSU | Undergraduate courses by delivery method | Fall 2019 and fall 2020



Note: Other includes course sections coded as clinical, independent study, nonconventional media, and student teaching/field supervision/co-op.
 Source: OREA analysis of data provided by APSU.

A greater proportion of community college students enrolled in online courses in 2020-21 compared to previous academic years. From 2015-16 through 2019-20, about 43 percent of community college students enrolled in at least one online course each semester, compared to about 83 percent in 2020-21.

Exhibit 14: Community colleges | Enrollment by delivery method | 2015-16 through 2020-21



Notes: (1) This exhibit represents a duplicated headcount, meaning students are counted once within each course category in which they enroll. For example, if a student enrolls in a combination of in-person and online courses, they are counted once in both categories. (2) The academic year includes preceding summer, fall, and spring terms. For example, academic year 2015-2016 includes data from summer 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016. (3) Online/remote category includes web-based courses and courses delivered via video broadcast, desktop video conferencing, other computer-based instruction, and TN eCampus. (4) Other category includes internships, cooperative experiences, independent study, and clinicals.
 Source: OREA analysis of data provided by TBR.

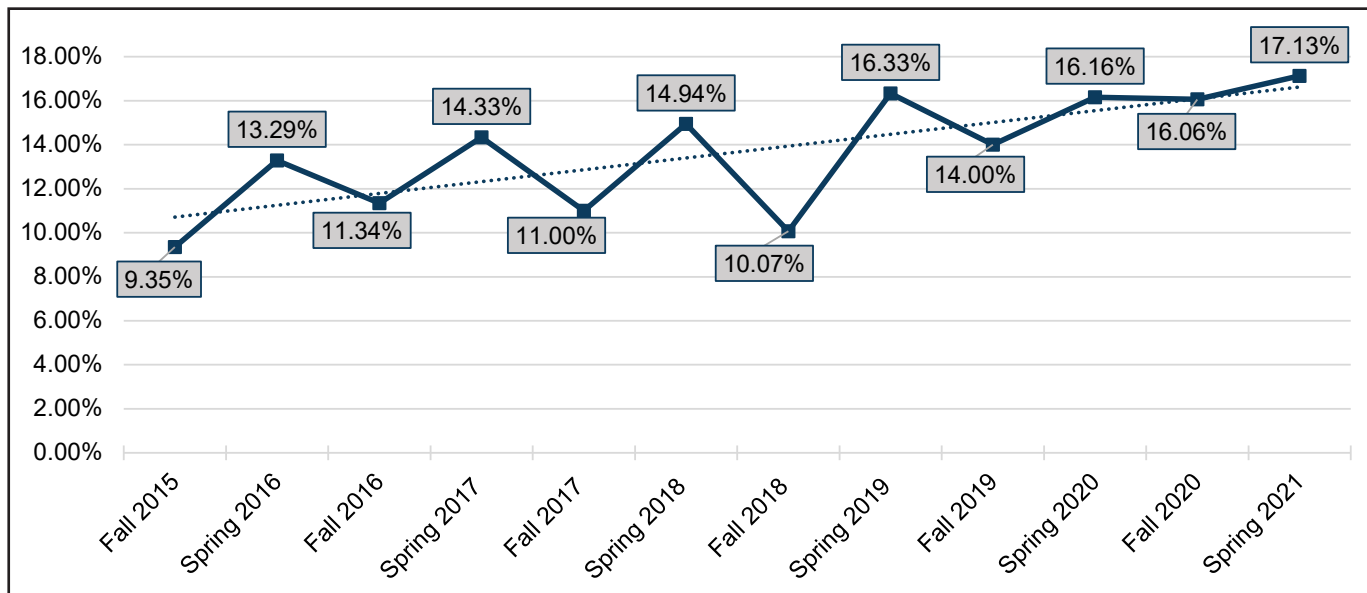
The future of online learning in higher education

Online courses anticipated to continue increasing, a trend that began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

Some institutions said that the transition to online instruction during the pandemic was relatively smooth because they had already developed the infrastructure to deliver online courses and had been increasing the number of courses offered online yearly to meet student demand.

For example, ETSU has steadily increased online course offerings by about 1 percentage point each semester over the past six years, as shown in Exhibit 15.

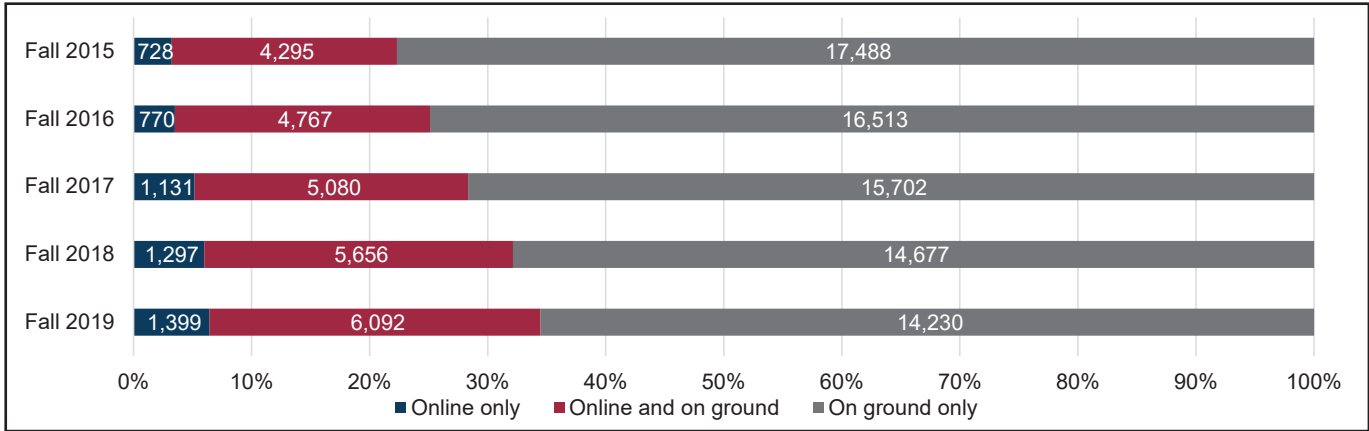
Exhibit 15: ETSU | Percentage of undergraduate courses offered online | Fall 2015 through spring 2021



Source: OREA analysis of data provided by ETSU.

The number of students enrolled in online courses at MTSU was increasing by approximately 10 percent each year prior to the pandemic. Exhibit 16 shows the increase in students at MTSU who enrolled entirely online, entirely in person, or in a combination of the two formats over the past few years. The percentage of students who enrolled entirely online or in a combination of online and in-person courses increased each year from 2015 through 2019. In the two fall semesters immediately preceding the pandemic (fall 2018 and fall 2019), over 30 percent of MTSU students enrolled in at least one online course.

Exhibit 16: MTSU | Enrollment (unduplicated) by course delivery method | Fall 2015 through fall 2019



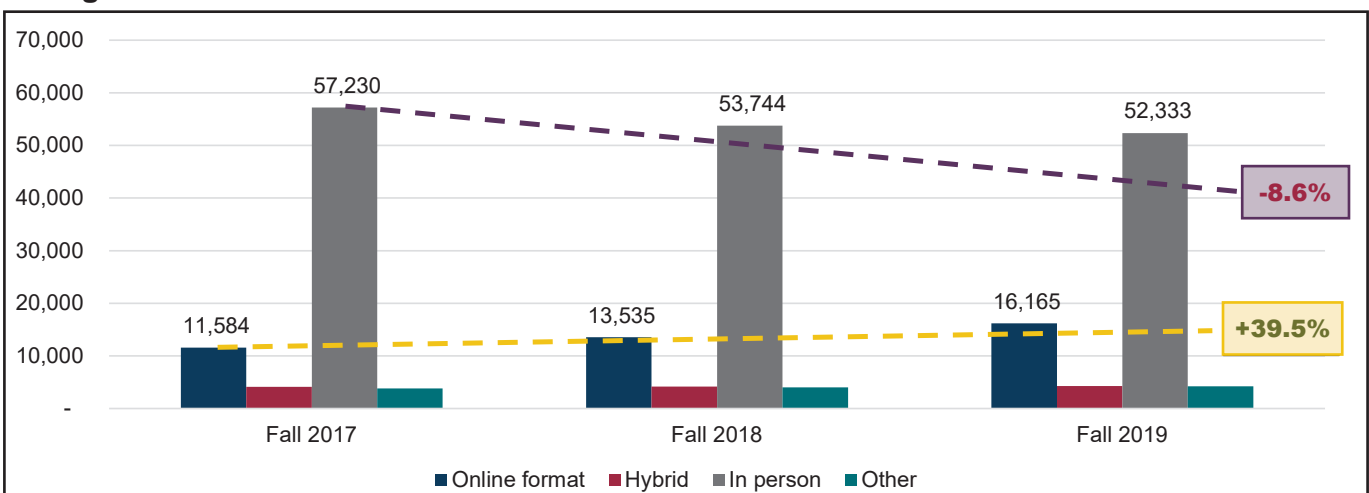
Notes: (1) This exhibit represents an unduplicated headcount of students who enrolled in courses online only, in a combination of online and in-person courses, or exclusively in in-person courses. (2) All undergraduate and graduate students are included. Source: OREA analysis of data provided by MTSU.

MTSU anticipates these trends will continue in the future and recently hired a Chief Online Learning Officer, funded by the university’s online course fee, to lead the online course delivery initiative. An MTSU administrator stated:

Even students who are not enrolled in completely online degree programs have come to expect to be able to access online courses as a part of their degree completion plans. . . It seems clear that once the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a threat to public health, online education will become increasingly more important to educate students in an evolving higher education ecosystem.

UM has also reported yearly increases in the number of students choosing to enroll in online courses, as shown in Exhibit 17. From fall 2017 to fall 2019, enrollment in online courses increased by about 40 percent, while in-person course enrollment declined by about 9 percent.

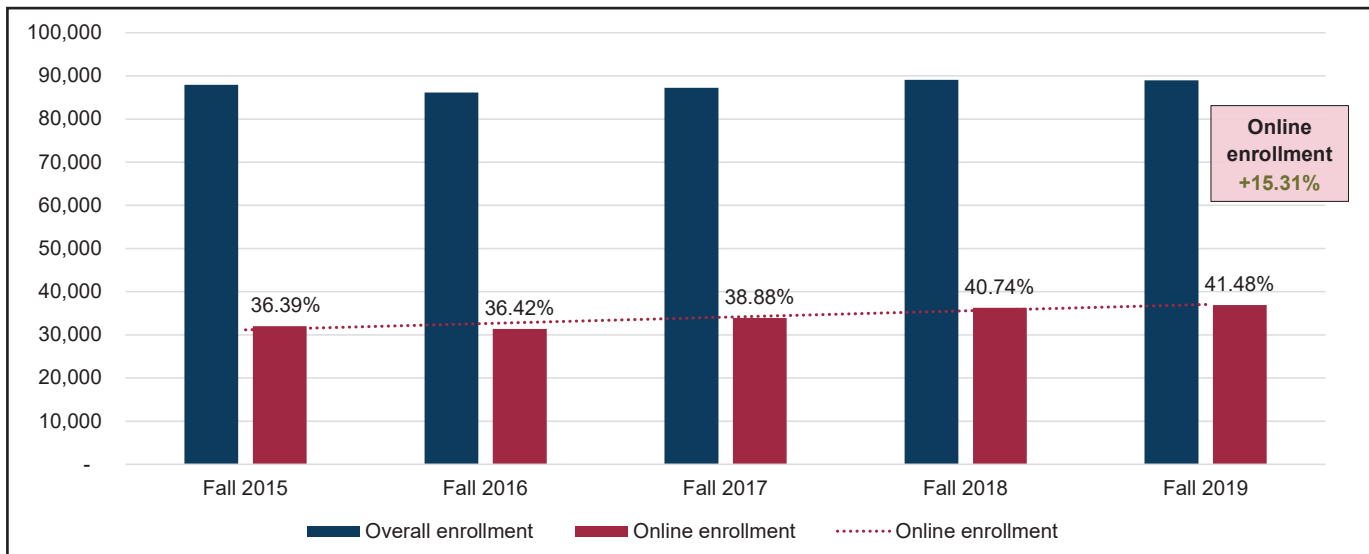
Exhibit 17: UM | Undergraduate enrollment (duplicated) by course delivery method | Fall 2017 through fall 2019



Notes: (1) This exhibit represents a duplicated headcount, meaning students taking more than one course are counted as many times as they are enrolled within each course category. For example, if a student enrolls in three in-person courses and one online course, he or she will be counted three times within the in-person category and one time within the online category. (2) Online format includes online courses, online programs, and TN eCampus. (3) Other includes off campus courses. Source: OREA analysis of data provided by UM.

The number of community college students who enroll in online courses is also growing. From fall 2015 to fall 2019, the number of community college students who enrolled in at least one online course increased by 15 percent while overall enrollment remained relatively steady.

Exhibit 18: Community colleges | Overall enrollment compared to online enrollment | Fall 2015 through fall 2019



Notes: (1) This exhibit represents a distinct headcount of students who enrolled in at least one online course compared to total enrollment. (2) Online enrollment includes web-based courses as well as courses delivered via video broadcast, desktop video conferencing, other computer-based instruction, or through TN eCampus. Source: OREA analysis of data provided by TBR.

Some TCATs are seeking approval to continue using a hybrid delivery option

In 2020, most TCAT programs were taught in a hybrid format due to health and safety concerns during the pandemic, with colleges moving any classes that do not require hands-on learning online and conducting socially distanced and staggered hands-on instruction in person.²⁴ Prior to COVID-19, a limited number of TCAT programs were offered exclusively online or in a hybrid format, but most require hands-on elements that are central to the TCAT model. TCATs do not currently assess online course fees.

TCATs were granted a temporary waiver by their accrediting body and the U.S. Department of Education to use a hybrid delivery method during the pandemic.²⁵ Some TCATs are in the process of obtaining approval from TBR and their accrediting body to permanently add a hybrid delivery option for some programs. At the December 2020 TBR quarterly board meeting, six TCATs were approved to offer a total of 52 programs in a hybrid format. Fifteen TCATs were approved to offer 147 programs at the March 2021 quarterly meeting. TCATs must also receive approval from their accrediting body to continue using a hybrid delivery option after June 30, 2021, when the temporary waiver expires.

During a February 2021 Senate Education committee hearing, TBR Chancellor Flora Tydings said that shifting TCAT programs to a hybrid format may reduce waitlists at TCATs by creating more availability for in-person instruction. During the hearing, the chancellor confirmed that there are about 11,000 students on TCAT program waitlists statewide.

²⁴ At TCATs, a hybrid program makes available less than 50 percent of its required instructional hours via distance education.

²⁵ TCATs are accredited through the Council on Occupational Education.

THEC has facilitated conversations about campus facilities assessments and online fees

THEC has facilitated conversations with campus facilities personnel and a national architectural, design, and planning firm, DLR Group, to consider how institutions may be more flexible in meeting the needs of students who are not physically present on campus. THEC also had the Society for College and University Planning host a workshop for academic and facilities staff to begin assessing how plans may be impacted by the events of the past year, and how to think strategically about continuing improvements to program quality, program delivery methods, and ultimately, facilities and space needs.

Because the commission does not have the formal authority over online fees that it does for mandatory fees, it is unable to adopt or enforce limits. However, THEC staff monitor online fee rates and regularly talk with campus officials about the benefits and barriers to lowering online fees.

Areas for further research

This report describes and analyzes the current status of online course fees in Tennessee's public colleges and universities, including temporary changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further research, including analysis of budgets and quality control practices, would likely provide further understanding of online course fee structures (e.g., assessing a separate online fee, supporting online courses through other revenue sources, and assessing fees based on course quality). Additional research could include student success in online courses compared to in-person instruction.

Methodology

The Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) gathered information from Tennessee's public colleges and universities through email correspondence and phone interviews. The six LGIs, UT System, and TBR provided information to the Comptroller's Office for this report. OREA also reviewed policies, board meeting materials, and tuition and fee schedules that are available on each institution's website.

The research and analyses presented in this report primarily focus on undergraduate-level courses. Additionally, many analyses presented in this report exclude online courses offered through TN eCampus. Information about TN eCampus is presented on pages 16-17.

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