

Ohio Department of Higher Education

Performance Audit Summary

WHAT WE LOOKED AT

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE or the Department) is responsible for overseeing Ohio institutions of higher education which encompasses all public colleges and universities in the state. The Department administers numerous programs which are designed to improve access to higher education. In order to effectively administer these programs, the Department collects a significant amount of data regarding the operations of colleges and universities including data on enrollment, program offerings, and facilities.

The Department has historically collected facilities data from all public colleges and universities for capital budget purposes. This information is still collected by ODHE, but is no longer used for budget allocations. However, this data provides valuable insight into the types of spaces owned and maintained by public institutions. With increased access to technology and changes to educational delivery models, this information is of critical importance as policy makers and institutional leadership seek to optimize the use of available resources, particularly as it relates to costly capital improvement projects.

Facilities related data from ODHE is not routinely published, and the audit was conducted in order to provide a transparent overview of the spaces owned and maintained by public colleges and universities. Both state officials and institutional leaders should have this information available to them so that data-driven decisions can be made regarding how existing spaces are used as institutions adapt to new challenges.

WHAT WE FOUND

In Ohio, there are 14 public universities, 24 regional campuses, 23 community or technical colleges, and one agricultural research center. Each year, these institutions are required to submit certain information to ODHE regarding the facilities they use for operational purposes. This includes facilities that are both owned and leased by an institution and reflects the status of areas based on the 15th day of the fall term. The data which is submitted contains detailed information regarding how space within the facilities is used, such as residential purposes, classroom purposes, or office space. Because the agricultural research center does not have students, it was excluded from our analysis and we instead focused on Ohio's public colleges and universities.

The Department provides instructions on how and when to submit this information. While data is supposed to be submitted annually, we found that there were gaps in submissions beginning in 2017, when seven institutions failed to submit the inventory data. For

purposes of this audit, which began in 2021, ODHE determined that the most recent year of data complete enough for analysis was from 2018, meaning that the best available data was three years old.

Because not all institutions submitted data in 2018, we had to use alternative years of data for some institutions. Further, once we began to conduct analysis, we found inaccuracies in the data that were easily identifiable, such as an institution reporting no classroom space in a given year. The inaccuracies indicate that ODHE does not conduct regular data verification of the information submitted by institutions. For those institutions with inaccurate data, we used the 2019 data, which had corrected the existing errors.

DATA TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is a necessary component of government and public institutions. Having access to data and information regarding the operations of public institutions is codified in law, and overseen, in part, by the Auditor of State. The data used for this audit is valuable information regarding the facilities used to operate Ohio's public colleges and universities located throughout the state. This audit provides detailed observations regarding the inventory of facilities reported by institutions based on data collected during the fall of 2018 academic term. Using facility and enrollment data, we also were able to make high-level observations regarding the utilization of space on a per student basis at each institution.

Key Observation 1: Ohio's public colleges and universities maintain a variety of spaces. The breakdown of area types is influenced by the type of institution and the institutional mission. This makes comparisons between institutions difficult without a nuanced understanding of how space is utilized at an institutional level. Due to scope and time limitations, OPT reviewed space utilization by institution at a high level.

Key Observation 2: Online enrollment at public colleges and universities in Ohio has steadily risen over the past decade. While total enrollment remained relatively flat, the number of online students rose significantly between 2012 and 2018. This shift to online learning was accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to remain high in 2021 based on preliminary data from ODHE. Because total enrollment remained relatively flat and online enrollment increased, the number of students on-campus has declined in the past decade, which impacts how an institution's space is utilized. The data used in our analysis is from the years prior to the pandemic. However, based on enrollment data collected by ODHE, it appears that the trend of increased online enrollment will continue.

Key Observation 3: Until recently, the Department did not collect detailed online enrollment data from public colleges and universities, which limits the Department's ability to understand institutional needs for facility space or to determine the efficiency in

how existing facilities are used in a timely manner. This type of data has been collected for several years by the United States Department of Education, however it is not made publically available in a timely manner. The continued collection of timely online enrollment data beyond the COVID-19 pandemic by ODHE, when paired with robust facilities data, can provide valuable insight to policy makers when determining how best to allocate limited resources.



Online Data Dashboard

The data contained in this report focuses primarily on high-level, aggregate information. To view and interact with the data in more detail, two online dashboards were created and are available. The first dashboard allows the user to select an institution and view its facility and enrollment data, while the second dashboard provides high-level comparisons between institutions based on this data. These dashboards allow for a better understanding of what space exists and how it is allocated at each institution and. [Click Here](#)

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Prior to FY 2013, capital allocations were distributed to colleges and universities based on a formula which took into consideration the age of an institution’s facilities, enrollment numbers, and the amount of infrastructure the institution needed to maintain. In order to submit a budget request, ODHE collected facilities and enrollment data from institutions. While the formula is no longer used to allocate funds, data is still collected by the Department; however, the data is not collected in a timely manner and is not routinely verified by ODHE. This leads to stale and potentially inaccurate information being reported. The Department should work to ensure that all institutions report data by a specified date and it should develop and follow internal data verification methods. Accurate information relating to facilities is an important tool for both policy makers and institutions when making decisions relating to allocations and investments as well as future educational needs.

Recommendation 2: Collecting timely and accurate data is especially useful when it is used in a transparent manner. Once ODHE implements procedures to ensure the timely collection of data as discussed in **Recommendation 1**, it must also provide this information in a timely manner so that policy makers can make informed decisions relating to necessary changes in the state operating and capital budgets. This information could be provided to stakeholders and published in a dashboard similar to the one available on our website.

Recommendation 3: Beginning in 1966, there have been several strategic planning documents created with the goal of advancing higher education in Ohio. These plans provided goals and a roadmap for the future of public higher education in Ohio. The most recent document from ODHE was a ten-year plan published in 2008. The Department should develop a strategic plan for higher education, with a focus on facilities. Due to the aging nature of existing facilities and declining demographic and enrollment trends, institutional leadership and policy makers will need data-driven guidance as they determine how to best address future facility needs.

Issue for Further Study: Total enrollment at Ohio’s public colleges and universities has remained stable for most of the past decade. However, during that timeframe there has been a steady shift in how individuals attend courses –students are increasingly opting to enroll online rather than attend courses on campus. Policy makers should be aware of how students are accessing education as increases in headcount do not always mean that there are more students attending class on-campus. This information is important for policy makers so that they can make informed decisions regarding future capital projects.

Understanding the operational choices being made at these institutions is an important step to knowing the impact of focusing on online enrollment. Providing online courses requires technology infrastructure in order to support students. This infrastructure can be costly and requires planning to be adequately prepared. Additionally with the increase of online enrollment come questions regarding the quality of education being offered and potentially issues around accreditation.

During our audit we identified several institutions that, over a short period of time, significantly increased online enrollment. While online enrollment is increasing across all public colleges and universities, Eastern Gateway Community College, had enrollment increases that warranted further review. Total enrollment at this institution grew from 4,527 in 2016 to 40,036 in 2020, an increase of nearly 785 percent during the time frame.

This increase occurred exclusively through distance learners and, during the course of the audit, the institution was placed on probation by its accrediting body, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). While growth through online education can be done successfully, considering the rate of expansion associated with EGCC’s online enrollment, monitoring is needed to ensure quality is not sacrificed when student quantity is pursued.