

# Shaping Texas' Tomorrow:

## The Strategic Development of 'My Texas Future' for Education and Careers

### Introduction

In my role at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), I was deeply involved in actualizing the vision of a "Talent Strong Texas." Central to this vision were two ambitious goals: ensuring that 60% of Texans aged 25-64 achieve a valuable postsecondary credential by 2030 and facilitating the completion of higher education credentials for 550,000 students annually. Amidst this, legislative mandates like Senate Bill 8 tasked us with comparing higher education institutions across Texas, providing a clear directive for our work. Within this legislative and mission-driven framework, "My Texas Future" was conceived—a tool designed to illuminate pathways for Texans seeking to navigate the complexities of higher education and the job market.

### Background

Navigating the intricate and often misleading terrain of higher education and career planning can be daunting. In an era where the job market constantly evolves, many in Texas find themselves at a crossroads, wondering about their next steps. "My Texas Future" is a guiding light in this landscape, offering a comprehensive suite of tools for adult learners and younger students. This platform enables users to explore various educational and career paths, grasp their chosen careers or credentials requirements, and make choices based on solid information. It features tools for comparing career trajectories and educational programs alongside critical data such as median salaries by county, average graduate debt, and job outlook projections, all aimed at equipping users for their future endeavors.

Enhancing this suite, we have forged partnerships with select educational institutions to integrate a unique feature in My Texas Future: direct connectivity with institutional advisors. This integration allows students to reach out to advisors from their chosen institutions easily. In turn, advisors gain access to the

students' course histories and profiles, enabling them to provide more personalized and practical guidance. This synergy between students and advisors within My Texas Future simplifies the advisory process. It enriches the educational journey, ensuring students receive tailored advice that aligns with their academic and career aspirations.

## Product Strategy

Our strategy was multifaceted, anchored by legislative adherence, data transparency, and user empowerment. We leveraged the data institutions are legally bound to provide, ensuring that "My Texas Future" met state requirements and served as a bridge between potential students and higher education advisors. We partnered with the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Workforce Commission to furnish users with the most accurate and actionable information.

Targeting adult learners seeking to reskill or upskill, we embarked on a discovery phase that included hundreds of interviews and surveys. We unearthed a desire among this demographic for a tool to elucidate various institutions' offerings and their potential impact on life quality.

Through our research, we identified several pain points:

### **Adult Learners:**

- The intimidation of starting anew in a career or field.
- The frustration of navigating disjointed information across multiple platforms.
- The need for educational pathways that accommodate existing life responsibilities.

### **Agency Partners:**

- The challenge of engaging students effectively.
- The redundancy of conveying state requirements.
- The inefficiency of starting from scratch with each student interaction.

### **Institutional Advisors:**

- Dependence on proactive engagement from adult learners.
- Encountering students unprepared for the complexities of applying, enrolling, and seeking financial aid.

- The cumbersome process of credit transfer and course equivalency determination.

## Development Process

Adopting an Agile framework, we organized our work into 2-week sprints, punctuated by bi-weekly design reviews and user testing sessions. This iterative approach allowed us to integrate feedback directly into the development cycle, ensuring each feature met and exceeded user expectations.

Our feature prioritization was guided by the MoSCoW method, with input from product owners and stakeholders. This collaborative prioritization ensured that our MVP would resonate with users while satisfying legislative directives.

We honed in on features that directly addressed user pain points, utilized our data effectively, and strengthened our ties with institutional and state agency partners. While other features were considered, we determined that a solid institutional and career field information foundation was paramount for our initial launch.

## Challenges and Solutions

In developing our pioneering tool, designed to utilize proprietary data for guiding users in exploring diverse careers and educational institutions, we faced the significant challenge of scope creep. This was particularly pronounced due to the project's innovative nature, being the first of its kind, and senior leadership's high level of interest. The tool's novelty meant that new functionalities and requirements emerged as we progressed, expanding the project's scope beyond its initial framework. Additionally, the involvement of top-tier leadership, while bringing valuable insights, also introduced a range of new expectations and feature requests.

To manage this scope creep, we employed several vital strategies. Clear definition and regular revisiting of project objectives were crucial to ensure any scope expansion aligned with the tool's core goals. Prioritizing features based on strategic importance and feasibility was essential, distinguishing between 'must-have' features for immediate implementation and 'nice-to-have' features for future

consideration. Effective stakeholder engagement and expectation management were vital, particularly with high-level leadership, to set realistic expectations and strategically incorporate their feedback. Furthermore, adopting an agile development methodology allowed us to adapt to changes in a controlled manner, integrating essential updates iteratively to keep the project focused and manageable.

Navigating the complexities of scope creep in this high-stakes, innovative project required a combination of strategic planning, clear communication, and flexible project management. It was a testament to our team's ability to adapt and evolve in a dynamic environment, maintaining a clear vision for the tool's development while balancing innovation with practicality.

## Results and Impact

Following the launch of our tool, which was carefully designed to meet stakeholder specifications while maintaining user-friendliness, we embarked on a thorough post-launch user testing phase. This involved conducting interviews and surveys to gauge user reactions and gather feedback. The results were overwhelmingly positive, with users frequently expressing high satisfaction and finding the tool extremely helpful. This positive reception extended to our institutional partners, who have enthusiastically adopted the tool for their potential students.

During the user testing, we also identified a desire for more detailed and in-depth information among users. These insights align with our product roadmap, and we plan to address these needs in the next iteration of the tool, slated for release in 2024. This feedback underscores our commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness to user needs, ensuring that our tool remains a valuable resource in the educational landscape.

## Lessons Learned

In managing future projects, I've learned the importance of balancing stakeholder expectations with the realities of the development process, especially when

dealing with highly invested parties. To achieve this, several strategies have proven to be essential. Firstly, clear communication of the project roadmap and priorities is crucial. This involves outlining the objectives and timelines and explaining the rationale behind prioritizing certain features. Regular stakeholder engagement through scheduled meetings is vital for keeping stakeholders informed and involved, providing a platform for ongoing dialogue and feedback.

Setting clear boundaries and managing expectations from the outset is another critical strategy. Considering the project's scope, timelines, and budget, being upfront about what is achievable is essential. Educating stakeholders on the consequences of scope creep helps them understand the impact of their decisions on the project's success. Implementing a formal change control process is also crucial to managing scope creep effectively. This process should involve evaluating the impact of proposed changes, seeking necessary approvals, and updating the project plan accordingly.

Utilizing visual tools like Gantt charts can make the project timeline and the effects of any changes more tangible for stakeholders. Prioritizing transparency in all communications ensures that potential setbacks and challenges are openly discussed. Finally, establishing regular feedback loops and iterative reviews allows for early detection and management of scope creep, enabling continuous project refinement based on stakeholder input and evolving requirements. These strategies collectively contribute to a more controlled project environment, ensuring successful delivery while maintaining strong, collaborative relationships with stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the journey of developing "My Texas Future" at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the project is a testament to the power of strategic planning, user-centric design, and agile development in educational technology. This initiative, born out of a legislative mandate and a mission-driven approach, has successfully navigated the complexities of higher education and career planning, providing Texans with a valuable tool for informed decision-making.

The development process, marked by a careful balance of stakeholder expectations, legislative requirements, and user needs, highlights the importance of adaptability and strategic prioritization in project management. The successful implementation of "My Texas Future" demonstrates how a clear vision, combined with a robust development strategy, can lead to a product that meets and exceeds the expectations of its users and stakeholders.

The positive reception of the tool post-launch, coupled with the valuable feedback for future enhancements, underscores the project's impact and the ongoing commitment to improvement. The lessons learned from this experience, particularly around managing scope creep and stakeholder expectations, are invaluable. They provide a blueprint for future projects, emphasizing clear communication, boundary setting, and a proactive approach to change management.

In conclusion, "My Texas Future" is a shining example of how technology can empower individuals in their educational and career pursuits. It is a beacon of innovation in the Texas higher education landscape, contributing significantly to the state's mission of creating a "Talent Strong Texas." The journey of its creation and implementation offers rich insights and strategies for anyone involved in the complex yet rewarding field of educational technology and product management.

## Appendix

- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (n.d.). Talent Strong Texas. Retrieved November 7, 2023, from <https://www.highered.texas.gov/our-work/talent-strong-texas/>
- Texas House of Representatives. (2023). H.B. No. 8. 88th Legislature, Regular Session. Retrieved from <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/billtext/pdf/HB00008F.pdf#navpanes=0>