

July 9, 2014

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Regents

FROM: David L. Buhler

SUBJECT: State Systems Transformation Co-creation Participation

Background

In March, we announced that the Utah System of Higher Education is one of 12 states selected to participate in the State Systems Transformation co-creation project with The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to pursue a project that will “advance the planning and implementation work of public state college and university systems seeking to dramatically improve access and success for underserved students.” This selection by Gates includes a small grant of \$200,035 to pursue an initiative that is meaningful, transformative and additive and has the vision and ability to move to scale quickly.

Since that time the core leadership team comprised of Commissioner Buhler, Elizabeth Hitch, Associate Commissioner for Academic and Student Affairs, and Melissa Miller Kincart, Assistant Commissioner for Outreach and Access, who is working as the Project Liaison, has worked with the Foundation as well as the consulting firm Monitor Deloitte in an extensive vision and alignment process with site interviews, and participated in a two day co-creation workshop in Washington DC. Upon the completion of these convening exercises, Assistant Commissioners Greg Benson and Spencer Jenkins along with Director of Utah Scholars and Completion Initiatives Christie Fox, were added to the leadership team to further evaluate project opportunities and assist in a discussion around possibilities at the May Chief Student Service Officer and Chief Academic Officer’s meeting. In considering the best use for this grant, we have decided we will use this opportunity to **study the feasibility of a USHE-wide application portal and ways to improve the application process**. Potential benefits, each of which require additional and thorough vetting among USHE institutions, could include cost savings by leveraging a shared platform, standardized data entry/reporting, and increased access to statewide pipeline data from K-12 and other sources.

Several recent events have brought this to the forefront:

- **College Application Week:** In fall 2013, USHE held a pilot event, *Utah College Application Week*, during which more than 1,500 college applications were submitted online (91% to USHE institutions) from eight high-need high schools in Utah. A number of issues were raised about college applications not being as user friendly as they might be.

- **K-12 Interest:** At the Complete College Utah event in April 2014, attended by representatives from each USHE institution, we heard a specific plea from K-12 district leaders raising similar issues and concerns regarding our current applications and the possible negative effects, especially for first generation prospective students.
- **Timing:** At least four USHE institutions schools have licensed or plan to license software in the near future that integrates with the Banner ERP to enhance the admissions management process through more granular reporting, improved recruiting, and customizable online applications. This shows recognition on the part of institutions to make improvements and also raises the possibility there might be an opportunity to leverage this common interest for a better quality, less costly solution for all USHE institutions. The feasibility study (proposed completion date of December 2014) would help make this clear. If institutions are planning such an upgrade it might be worth considering a short delay while the feasibility study is completed.
- **Legislation:** Finally, state statute requires an ability for individuals to “apply for entrance to multiple schools without having to fully replicate the application process” (UCA 53A-1-409), albeit never funded or implemented. This issue surfaces from time to time with some legislators. A feasibility study would better prepare us to respond to this issue regardless of the outcome.

Given the above, we believe it would benefit the entire system to engage an outside consultant, to conduct a feasibility study to fully understand **whether a system-wide application portal is feasible financially and educationally, as well as advisable**, with a particular focus on first-generation students. The plan is to have a preliminary report by December 2014 which will then be shared and vetted with the Council of Presidents. The Commissioner has notified the Presidents of this desired direction and a working group has been formed with representatives from each institution who will work with the Office of the Commissioner leadership team and the consultant throughout the feasibility study.

Issue

The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) seeks to conduct an extensive feasibility analysis across the USHE system to better understand extant application practices, processes, and infrastructures, and to identify the benefits, cost, and feasibility of implementing a College Application Portal (CAP). Data collected will provide USHE with a more comprehensive understanding of how a system-wide college application portal could:

- Streamline the college application process for students by creating a standardized application that requires a single entry of information and that pre-populates the application form for easy completion.
- Increase the number of first generation students enrolling in postsecondary education.
- Provide stakeholders with easy access to student data.
- Create a powerful platform to push useful information to applicants.
- Facilitate an easy admissions process for returning adults.
- Ensure an appropriate fit for applicants.
- Facilitate student retention at USHE institutions.
- Encourage information sharing and referrals among USHE institutions.
- Encourage sharing of best practices across institutions.
- Enhance access to meaningful data across the USHE system.
- Eliminate confusion between existing application processes for concurrent enrollment.

- Provide a simple and clear process for enrollment deferment.
- Facilitate frequent and effective summer communications with students between application/enrollment and matriculation.

We believe this project to be meaningful and transformative because it has the potential to immediately impact student access and provide technological support through the enrollment process for students choosing to go to college within USHE. At the core of this project is the desire at the system level to improve and streamline the enrollment process and remove the existing barriers that are inherent in our institutional silo-based systems. We also see secondary benefits around student/college fit, system data on enrollment patterns, FAFSA and summer melt messaging, and high school feedback reporting, to name a few.

We know this to be additive as many of our eight institutions are open access and have limited enrollment management capacity. We believe that through a feasibility study, assisted by an outside consultant, there are knowledge and resource efficiencies to be gained through analyzing what is the current state of this work, the gaps, what is needed to reach the ideal through substantiated analysis regarding challenges and opportunities and leveraging a technology solution. This process we believe is critical for stakeholder engagement. Additionally, this strategy and eventual report will provide the system the information required for determining next steps in better serving Utah students.

Commissioner's Recommendation

This is an information item only; no formal action by the Board is required. However, the Board is encouraged to read and take note of the information memorandum, and note that further follow-up will be handled by the Commissioner's Office as part of the Board's Participation and Completion strategic objectives.

David L. Buhler
Commissioner of Higher Education

DLB/MMK