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MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Regents

FROM: David L. Buhler

SUBJECT: USHE College Application Portal Feasibility Study (Gates Grant)

Background

Since March, the Office of the Commissioner has been working alongside twelve other state systems in the 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.” In working with the Foundation and the consulting firm Monitor Deloitte in the extensive vision, alignment and blueprinting process we learned we were required to pursue an initiative that is meaningful, transformative and additive, and has the overarching vision from the beginning to move to scale quickly.

In our July Board meeting, we shared that in considering the best use for this grant, we have decided to capitalize on this opportunity given to us by the Gates Foundation to study the feasibility of a USHE college application portal and ways to improve the application through enrollment process. Potential benefits, each of which require vetting among USHE institutions, the K-12 community, and parent and student stakeholders could include a cost savings by leveraging a shared platform, standardized data entry/reporting, improving the student experience through use of technology, and provide enrollment support through predictive analytics to increase the number of first-generation and underserved students who enroll in college.

Since July, the Office of the Commissioner’s Gates Grant Leadership Team has contracted with a local consulting firm, Education Direction. Education Direction is a Cicero Group company dedicated to improving the efficiency and productivity of educational institutions in both higher and K-12 education. Our executive leadership team on the feasibility study includes David Doty, Aaron Andersen, Allison Miller, and Ben Wilson, all of whom have expertise in education research, strategy consulting, and higher education experience and will deliver the highest quality results for the Utah System of Higher Education on this project.

Issue

Utilizing a Gates Foundation grant intended to promote innovative college access initiatives, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) has initiated an extensive feasibility study to better understand current best practices, policies, and infrastructures related to the college application process nationwide, and to identify the potential benefits, costs, and feasibility of implementing a shared College Application Portal (CAP) for all USHE institutions. Data collected will provide USHE with a comprehensive understanding of



whether a system-wide college application portal would be an effective strategy to increase the number of underserved students applying to, and enrolling in, Utah's public colleges and universities.

This project is meaningful and transformative because a shared application portal could, as one piece of a comprehensive college access initiative, positively impact student access by making it easier for first generation students to navigate the application process and enroll at USHE institutions. At the core of this project is the desire at the system level to improve and streamline the application process by removing barriers that may be impeding disadvantaged students from considering college because of difficulties with the "gateway" step of application. We also see potential secondary benefits around recruiting, student/college fit, system data on enrollment patterns, FAFSA and "summer melt" messaging, and high school feedback reporting, to name a few.

In short, this research study will provide the Office of the Commissioner, the Council of Presidents, and the Board of Regents with critical insights regarding the current state of application processes in USHE institutions, elements of those processes that pose specific challenges for underserved students, and feasible strategies that might be pursued to make the application process more easily navigable for underserved students. Moreover, the study will provide a data-rich framework for a broader discussion on the future of state-wide college access initiatives that are critical to expanding the USHE applicant pool among Utah's diverse communities.

The study includes three phases of research:

1. Secondary Research

The project began with the collection of data surrounding the state of the common application process in states/systems that currently use, or have used, such a process. This testing and learning process will capture successes and challenges in other states, key operational and logistical data, and provide the foundation upon which the researchers will engage USHE and K-12 stakeholders in discussions about a USHE college application portal.

Researchers will determine/examine:

- States and systems that currently use, or have used, a common application process (e.g., Hawaii, North Carolina, Texas, SUNY, Colorado, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana)
- Start-up and operational costs of a system-wide common application portal
- Financial, technology and business practices supporting the common application process in the systems where the process has been implemented

2. Primary Research: Stakeholder focus groups and interviews

The collection of qualitative data from USHE stakeholders will provide insights into the current college application process in Utah. In addition to the focus groups outlined below, the researchers will also conduct individual interviews with key USHE stakeholders.

Researchers will conduct focus groups and group interviews with the following groups:

- Parents of high school students
- K-12 administrators, counselors, and staff
- Current college students
- Non-traditional college students
- College admissions officers, financial aid staff, recruiting staff, enrollment managers, IT personnel, and outreach staff, from each USHE institution

- Utah State Office of Education representatives

Key Questions that will guide the collection of data are:

- What are the expectations of college and university staff regarding the current application process?
- What are the limitations and constraints of each of the current application processes in USHE?
- What are the perceived benefits and hurdles associated with a shared application process?
- What is the optimal college application process?
- What are specific institutional needs that currently exist with the application process?
- What existing technologies and systems currently govern the institution's college application process?
- What challenges do underserved applicants have with the current application process?
- How are such challenges currently addressed?
- What existing outreach efforts are being implemented to recruit underserved students to apply to, and enroll in, USHE institutions?
- How effective are such efforts and how do we know?

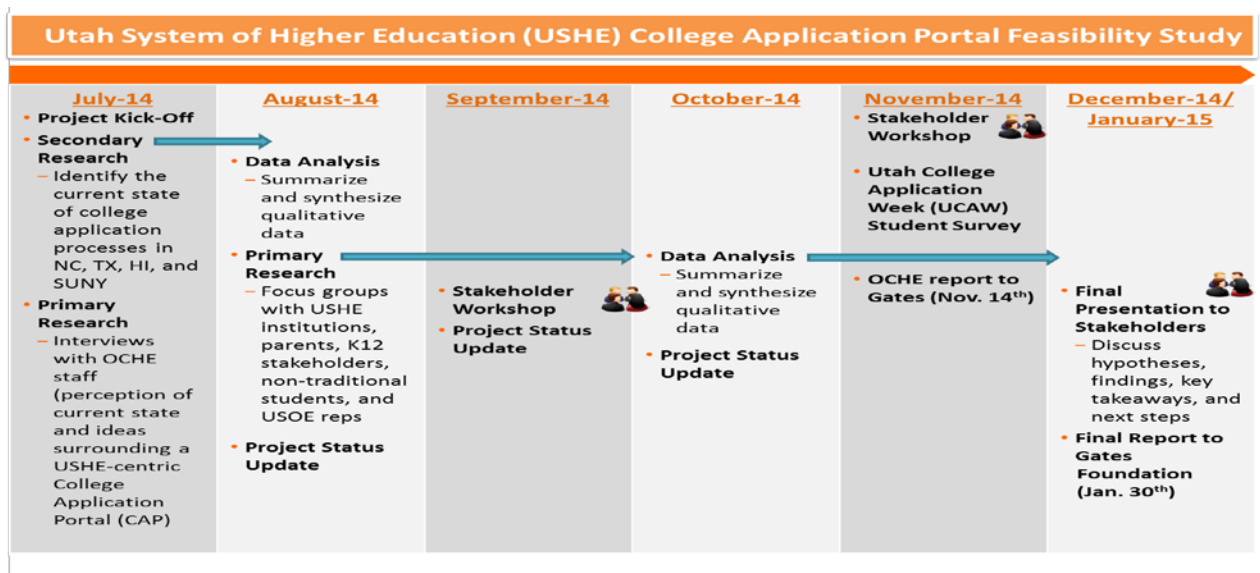
3. Primary Research: Quantitative survey with high school students who complete the application process during Utah College Application Week in November.

The collection of quantitative data from underserved students who attempt to complete the application process will provide insights into the current college application process in Utah. It is expected that at least 500 prospective students will complete the survey.

Key questions that will guide the collection of data are:

- What were your expectations for the college application process?
- How would you rate the ease of the process?
- What could be done differently to make this process easier? What were the main hurdles?

Over the next month the consultants will work to complete focus group research with USHE institutions and gather feedback and data from other stakeholders, specifically K-12 representatives, minority advocates, parents, and non-traditional students. The graphic below is high level overview of the study and timeline.



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