TAB I

UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION
Building a Stronger State of Minds

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MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Regents

FROM: David L. Buhler

SUBJECT: Report on USHE College Application Portal Feasibility Study and Recommended Next
            Steps (Gates Grant)

Introduction

In March 2014, the Office of the Commissioner began working with twelve other state systems in the
Transformation/Co-creation Project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Gates funding was
directed to state systems with the idea that a systems approach might be able to advance planning and
implementation of a project to "dramatically improve access and success for underserved students" with
greater effect than could occur at an individual higher education institution level. The goal of the study was
to work with USHE institutions to identify ways to improve the college application process in order to
encourage greater participation among students from traditionally underserved populations. From the
results of this study it seems clear some significant improvements can be made even without adopting a
common portal.

Background

At the July 2015 Board meeting, the steering team for the project was identified and it was decided that the
best use of this opportunity from the Gates Foundation was to study the feasibility of a USHE college
application portal and ways to improve the student experience from application through enrollment. This
decision was greatly influenced by pilot work with the The American College Application Campaign
(ACAC), which is a national intiative of the American Council on Education (ACE) to increase the number of
first-generation and low-income students who pursue a postsecondary education. The purpose of the
ACAC initative is to help high school seniors navigate the college admissions process and ensure each
participating student submits at least one college admissions application during the school day during the
designated week. In November 2013, eight Utah high schools in three school districts joined 39 states and
the District of Columbia in participating in the American College Application Campaign. In 2014 the Utah
College Application Week program (UCAW) expanded to 48 high schools in 15 school districts and one
charter school.

Over the past nine months, the Office of the Commissioner's Gates Grant Leadership Team has worked
with local consulting firm Education Direction in understanding the history, evolution, and implementation of
a college application portal in eight other states, with focus on the work in Texas and North Carolina (where

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common application portals have been in place over time). In addition, Education Direction engaged more than 100 participants, including USHE Chief Academic and Student Services Officers, Enrollment Managers, Admissions, Financial Aid, IT and data staff, K-12 state and district leaders, minority advocates, parents of graduating high school seniors, and non-traditional students in 15 in-depth interviews (focus groups) regarding the institutional purposes of admissions applications and obstacles Utah students, and especially students and families with little or no college attendance experience, face when applying to USHE institutions. Additionally, these focus groups discussed potential benefits and cost savings that could be achieved by leveraging a shared platform for high school transcript upload and standardized data entry/reporting. One benefit of the shared platform is that technology can be used to "follow" students through the application and enrollment process and provide targeted support throughout, so that students stay on track, successfully enroll, and attend the institution of their choice. In addition to this qualitative research, Education Direction collected quantitative research regarding the student experience from the 1,721 seniors from 20 Utah College Application week partner high schools who responded to an on-line survey. The survey was designed to identify students without a family history of college experience (48 percent of the students responding).

<u>Issue</u>

Over the last 15 years, enrollment at USHE institutions has grown at roughly the same rate as population growth in the state of Utah, suggesting that the accomplishment of our ambitious higher education attainment goals in Utah will require additional systemic efforts to increase access and participation. A 2015 study at the University of Maryland found that there are five important steps in order to enroll in college. The last of these steps is actually submitting a college application. The study found that this can be a substantial obstacle to enrolling in college. Because of this, many states have looked to a Common Access Portal.

A Common Access Portal unifies elements of the application process in order to streamline it across institutions. Some portals are comprehensive, making the entire application uniform, while others only bring together a few elements of the application process. Data from Texas suggest that the rate of enrollment growth increased substantially across all student populations, especially minority, after the introduction of ApplyTexas in 1999. Data from North Carolina suggest a similar increase in enrollment rate across the general population and minorities with the implementation of their common access portal, CFNC, in 2001. While it is difficult to isolate and compare costs of processing an application on a per-institution basis, common access portals have the capacity to substantially reduce per application costs shouldered by the institutions, though the one-time build costs for a portal must be accounted for. Beyond these two states, a number of other states have taken different approaches to the establishment and utilization of application portals to simplify the application process and coordinate access initiatives.

The feasibility study demonstrated that applications to USHE institutions seem to be meeting the multiple internal needs of our institutions and most students are able to complete our applications *with assistance*. During UCAW, students receive individualized and real-time assistance and survey results suggest more than 71 percent of students needed help completing an application. There is no single particular area where help is requested most often, but many students struggled with:
- personal identifying information (such as social security number);
- high school transcript questions;
- technical/navigation issues; and

- residency information.

In addition, 30 percent of students who started an application during UCAW did not finish. Given that most USHE institutions do not have selective admissions, it is worth considering whether all of the questions asked on the applications are necessary as length itself may be a barrier (40 percent of surveyed students indicated that fewer questions would improve the process). Finally, the application fee was identified as a major barrier to students from underserved populations submitting the application.

<u>Recommended Next Steps</u>

Nine months ago when the Gates grant started, the questions shaping the project included the benefits of a college access portal, and streamlining applicant experience through shared data reporting and technology. With the findings of the feasibility study in hand, it appears most productive to focus next on working with USHE and K12 stakeholders on methods to improve the student experience and increase the institutional benefit beyond the admissions application in the following areas:

1) **Electronic Transcript Upload:** Develop a system to upload high school transcripts so that applicants can easily link them to their application at time of submission. Additionally, work with K12 leaders on making sure transcript data is coded properly and is true and accurate.
2) **Common Residency Determination:** Standardize residency procedures and requirements. Additionally, develop a centralized hub so that applicants only need to submit documentation once.
3) **Concurrent Enrollment:** Standardize the concurrent enrollment application process and change of status process (to degree-seeking) for applicants across USHE institutions. (Some standardization will be required by S.B. 196 adopted by the 2015 Legislature.)
4) **Social Security Number:** Allow applicants to move through and submit an application without the SSN. My understanding is that the SSN may be an optional, but not required field. If institutions still plan to ask this *optional* field on the application, considering using a disclaimer such as the University of Utah's. (*The University confidentially maintains your **social security number for routine uses**, such as: facilitating document matching, verifying your identity, and expediting your enrollment and financial aid. **Disclosure of your social security number is voluntary.** Failure to provide your social security number may delay the processing of your application and once admitted could result in delay or **loss of federal and state financial aid, tax credits,** student loan deferments, veterans benefits and other benefits provided by law.)*
5) **Application Fee Waiver**: Develop a standardized process and provide fee waivers for applicants with demonstrated need.

In order to begin addressing the five areas identified above and to try to operationalize some of the most pressing areas where technology can streamline the application process, the University of Utah has agreed to work on a Common Application and Transfer Model Project over the next year with $300,000 one-time federal grant monies and state appropriations from the Outreach and Access Department in the Office of the Commissioner. The University of Utah will also engage with Salt Lake Community College in identifying how the streamlining of processes can assist in student transfer. The goals of this project will be to develop and implement a technology-based solution to retrieve applicant ACT scores from a centralized ACT database (thus relieving students and parents from requesting individual scores from ACT and relieving Admissions staff from having to match scores), and a "push button" electronic high school transcript upload, based on an applicant-initiated request to be replicable to other USHE institutions. This work will coincide

with collaboration among all USHE institutions to establish a common standard for determination and coding of state residency.

We believe this feasibility study has been meaningful in opening up the dialogue around how to improve the college application process for all students. The outlined next steps 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.

<u>Commissioner's Recommendation</u>

<u>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 Affordable Participation and Timely Completion strategic objectives.</u>

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David L. Buhler
Commissioner of Higher Education

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