

To: Chair Lisa Michele Church, Vice Chair Jesselie Anderson, and Commissioner David Woolstenhulme

From: President Taylor Randall, President Noelle Cockett, President Brad Mortensen, President Mindy Benson, Interim President Stacey McIlff, President Biff Williams, President Astrid Tuminez, President Deneece Huftalin, President Brennan Wood, and President Clay Christensen

Date: September 2, 2022

Subject: Counterproposal to USHE Online

As a united group of presidents, we appreciate the invitation that came on July 1 to offer a counterproposal to the USHE Online plan that was presented last spring. We believe there is a more financially prudent, efficient, timely, and effective method to fulfill the Access, Completion, and Workforce Alignment goals of the Utah Board of Higher Education 2021 Strategic Plan than developing a new USHE Online managing unit to duplicate existing efforts.

In summary, our counterproposal includes the following four components:

- The board requests a report of **existing innovations and ongoing creative efforts** already occurring or in place at USHE institutions to provide a fuller understanding of the breadth, quality, and impact of these innovations. Such a report is currently being pulled together and if desired can be presented.
- A request that the board establishes systemwide and institution-specific **targets for increasing completion among the some college, no degree (SCND) population**. The same methodology could be used that established access targets for the number of students enrolling within the first three years of high school graduation. Although not currently included as part of the performance funding plan, these targets could be used to measure the effectiveness of institutional innovations to serve this population through both technologically enhanced and in-person programs.
- The establishment of a **USHE Job & Degree Portal** that markets opportunities to potential SCND students and helps them navigate pathways available at institutions. See Appendix 1 for a full description.
- A charge to develop the **USHE Online Collaborative** (led by the USHE Chief Academic Officers) to launch in the 2023-24 academic year as a solution for sharing and enhancing online programs that includes but is not limited to:
 - Expanding the availability of affordable online offerings, including credentials at all levels, that are aligned with industry workforce needs,

- Identifying flexible options for students to cross-register among institutions in order to promote timely completion,
- Incorporating prior learning to simplify and streamline degree pathways, and
- Sharing instructional design, quality assurance, e-learning, flexible scheduling, and other best practices to provide the best outcomes for the students.

In addition, please understand that we have numerous concerns with the Cicero Group's report, *USHE Online Concept Validation Study* and subsequent *Market Sizing Assumptions and Context*. In reviewing the study, we found that its conclusions about the overall market for SCND students, job placement guarantees, the feasibility of low-cost options, and assumed market advantages in terms of cost, quality, and flexibility render the study less useful than we had hoped. Furthermore, it also does not account for the number of SCND students being served by USHE institutions currently. A full explanation of our concerns with the Cicero *USHE Online Concept Validation Study* and *Market Sizing Assumptions and Context* can be found in Appendix 2.

As a group, we are united to provide additional online and technology-enhanced solutions for all of our students, and also increase the number of SCND who return to finish their credentials. If the board supports our proposal, we ask for consideration of including a budget request in the 2023-24 Utah Board of Higher Education legislative request to provide resources to establish the Job & Degree Portal and launch the USHE Online Collaborative.

We look forward to discussing this proposal with you in greater detail at the September 7 Executive Committee meeting of the board and beginning the collaborative process with the board, USHE staff, and presidents to make decisions on how to proceed.

CC: Geoff Landward, Julie Hartley, and Scott Wyatt

Attachments:

- Appendix 1 - COP Proposal for SCND Utah Students
- Appendix 2 - Response by USHE Presidents to USHE Online Concept Validation Study by Cicero Group

USHE Job and Degree Portal

Online is a vehicle for SCND students who want to finish what they started but may not have the means to attend in person. We will, through a system approach, target these students with customized information about their degree progress in relation to existing online offerings, highlight the gaps/remaining requirements, and help students take the next steps to return and finish their education or add additional skills for new employment opportunities.

What system-based actions will support us?

SCND and any returning student have a few basic questions they want answered.

1. How much will this cost- the first question we get consistently is can I afford this?
2. What jobs are available or what might I do with the degree?
3. How long will this take? (Relates to cost and overall perception of ROI)
4. I already have some credits so how will those help?
5. Can I get credit for things I have done or skills I have developed (PLA/CPL) and then how long will it take for that to be evaluated and how much will it cost?

In short, they want to know what jobs are available, how long will it take to obtain the required degree, and how much will it cost?

The system, with cooperation amongst the institutions, can be *the* mechanism by which SCND students are informed about market needs and job opportunities, get answers and results to their PLA/CPL questions, and identify and enroll back into programs that best meet their needs. How would this work?

Proposal

We would propose a **robust marketing** effort from the state/system targeting these students that drives them to a ***Job & Degree Portal*** which connects them with a person, the ***Navigator***.

Imagine someone who at 2 am says “I need to get back into school....” From there....

1. The student enters the Job & Degree Portal and begins interacting with a Chatbot that guides them through their various questions (some from above and others).
2. Most importantly the student can understand what job options look like for them (ties into state systems and provides job outlooks for 1, 3 and 5 years), a path to the degree they need for those options, the USHE institutions offering that online degree, a sense of time and cost, and actions they can take the next morning based on what they have learned. So.....
3. The Navigator reaches out to the student to initiate a dialogue about the student’s interests, experience, etc. and guides to next steps in the process.

4. Depending on what the student can submit immediately or gather quickly they will have that evaluated and a path to degree completion presented to them from the possible institutions.
 - a. This evaluation would include-
 - i. Prior courses completed (transcripts needed- we can support that process).
 - ii. Possible challenge exams they might consider depending on their experience that has been gleaned from their questions and other interactions. You can also schedule a place and time for the exams here or take them from that site.
 - iii. Portfolio or other evidence-based assessments they would submit for credit (2–3-minute video tutorials available).
 - b. The results of these assessments must be available quickly (days at most) for the student, so they know what the path to completion looks like.
5. The student now knows their path forward, how long it will take and a sense of cost.
6. The system would then connect the student with possible funding sources (these have been shown earlier) and how a student would qualify for those resources.
7. The system described here is the more “automated” version for students comfortable with that format. A second format will be required which has a more human touch (the Navigator). In other words, at each level the student must be able to contact a “living” person if they have questions. Our experience and the research clearly show this as a critical option for this population.
8. The goal is this- the student who started at 2am on a Tues morning has a strong sense of what is possible by Wed. afternoon and even if they have complex portfolios for review, or need refreshers for challenge exams, they will know exactly what will be required for a degree within one week if they submit the material (with our help). They also have a human point of contact (the Navigator) if they have more questions.
9. How will things like portfolios be reviewed as this is the most labor and time intensive part of the process?
 - a. The majors’ committees would be charged with establishing what the PLA/CBE standards for each of the 4-5 most likely challenged courses would be. These standards will then be accepted across the system for transfer needs.
 - b. Students will submit portfolios into a system level portal. Think of this as a PLA/CBE Clearinghouse.
 - c. Once submitted the portfolio will be evaluated by faculty who are compensated for their review but must turn around the review in 72hrs.
 - d. The review is based on the agreed upon standards from the majors committee and so credit is then awarded and is transferable to all system institutions.

There are further details required, but our purpose here was to lay out enough detail for a basic model that the system could pursue that would then support the institutions in their ability to serve the needs of the SCND population in Utah with an online platform.

The key is the system supports the student's efforts to re-engage in their education and the institutions then assist the student in fulfilling their goals. Students, once they are informed, choose the institution that best meets their needs. This encourages institutions to build on online offerings they already have and pursue even more innovative solutions and options for the SCND population coming through the state portal. This furthers the value of the investment in the portal as the state continues to innovate in the higher education sphere.

In short, we propose a statewide campaign targeted at the SCND population which directs them to a web presence that allows them to explore job opportunities, assesses where they stand relative to the degrees needed for jobs they are interested in, employs a clearinghouse model that facilitates the rapid evaluation of their educational preparation, and finally provides them with a personalized path to completion *at the Utah institution that best meets their needs*. This would place Utah, nationally, at the forefront of delivering high quality educational opportunities to the SCND population.

Appendix 2

Response by USHE Presidents to USHE Online Concept Validation Study by Cicero Group

September 2, 2022

President Randall originally raised the idea of an external study in a Council of Presidents meeting in order to understand the market for online programs as well as the demands and interests of the “some college, no degree” (SCND) population in Utah. The study that Cicero conducted appears instead to focus on validating the USHE Online Concept. It has not addressed core questions, including: 1) What is the problem we are trying to solve? 2) What is the credible size of the addressable market or population? 3) What are the USHE institutions already doing to solve the problem? And 4) Why is a new, online institution the answer to all this?

We would like to highlight other limitations of the study.

COSTS RELATIVE TO WHAT CURRENT INSTITUTIONS HAVE ON OFFER

- The SCND market would be attracted to a “low cost” option. A new online institution cannot offer a lower price point without requiring heavy state subsidies for setup, infrastructure, and student support services that are already available at existing institutions. It is, in fact, likely to make higher education in Utah more expensive for students and taxpayers.
- The assumptions behind the “Base to Best Case” and “Base to Realistic Case” scenarios demonstrate a high preference for a new institution if it is given significant market advantages in terms of cost, flexibility, etc. These factors are held constant at the USHE comparison institutions. Would it not be an option to explore the impact of those same cost and flexibility variables at existing institutions? Given the same market preferences, we believe our already **accredited**, brand-recognized programs and increasing number of online offerings could have the same or higher impact on the target student market segments.
- Interestingly, the study finds that 75% of individuals indicate that a more affordable option would be most attractive if they decided to return to school. While three in four seems like a high number, we’re surprised it isn’t much higher and find it interesting that 100% of respondents would not prefer a more affordable option. This undermines the suggested magnitude and credibility of other findings.
- Technology is constantly changing. By the time sunk costs are made in a new online institution (to compete with other institutions that have massive, first-mover advantage like WGU, ASU and SNHU), technology and other innovative entrants to the education space might make well make this new online institution an uncompetitive option.
- The Cicero study makes claims about affordability that are not accompanied by data. The study defined cost as “price per course (after financial aid),” not as “sticker price.” The presumption of the study is that only a new institution could have such a price point. A better understanding of the actual price per course after financial aid at each existing

institution offering completely online programs (including completely online general education) would inform the pricing findings.

- The study does not point to any reasonable comparable institution. Even WGU is charging ~\$7K per year, which is already higher than the “sticker price,” for example, for online programs at certain USHE institutions.

NATURE AND SIZE OF MARKET

- The data from the Cicero that reviews the size of the SCND market indicates that general interest in degrees is low, and the likelihood of SCND folks resuming their education is even lower. Nearly 75% of respondents indicated that they are less interested in pursuing a degree program in the next two years, and one in three (32%) indicated they have a good job and do not need a degree.
- The target market, as shown in Cicero’s follow-up *Market Sizing Assumptions and Context*, is really beyond Utah’s borders to regional and national audiences. Is that what the Utah Board of Higher Education and interested legislators want? How will they compete with other national online behemoths like WGU, SNHU, and ASU?
- Students tend to favor institutions with which they are already familiar and that are close to them. 87% of Some College No Degree participants in the Cicero study identified existing institutions as their preference - the U (22.4%), SUU (19.7%), UVU (17.3%), and USU (16.8%) were individually preferable over a new public/state online university (12.7%). Nationally, 66% of online undergrad and 63% of online grad students live within 50 miles of their institution. (Source: Education Dynamics [Online-College-Students-2021.pdf](#). Section 5, Page 51) This implies that current online offerings at the USHE institutions would be a faster and cheaper way to meet Utah online needs.
- The report fails to note how many SCND students USHE schools are already serving. For example, WSU enrolled 1,872 returning SCND students in Fall 2021. This lack of clarity or definition about the SCND market segment will lead to cannibalization of existing efforts within USHE institutions for these students. This is counter to Marketing 101 -- do not introduce products that will unintentionally displace existing products because it has the impact of hurting other revenue streams.

JOB PLACEMENT

- Many students want “guaranteed” job placement or pay raises before they begin or return to a college/university to earn a degree. We should engage our industry partners for their perspectives on this. Obviously, a job is not something any institution can guarantee, including a new online institution.

MODALITY

- Surveyed persons expressed strong interest in self-paced courses. Strong evidence exists that students are most successful when the faculty sets the pace. Some

restrictions also exist because federal laws require engagement with faculty. A fully “work at your own pace” correspondence model would not be accredited.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- See pages 17-19: Why did Cicero exclude Utah Tech, Salt Lake Community College, and Snow College as options for earning online degrees? In the case of Utah Tech, they have 13 online degree programs. In the case of the two-year institutions, it tilts the respondents to think only in terms of four-year degrees and not two-year or certificate options. Excluding these institutions affects the overall analysis.
- The study does seem to validate the importance of affordable, flexible, asynchronous online programs to attract and serve SCND populations interested in pursuing a degree.
- Overall, we would like to have the degree-granting institutions given the opportunity to solve perceived issues instead of always hiring a consultant and then creating a system solution. We are all part of the system and thus should be granted the ability to address those needs together.