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Elevating Post-Secondary Education

Governance Actions for Greater Access, Affordability, Quality, and Completion

ELEVATING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

GOVERNANCE ACTIONS FOR GREATER ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY, QUALITY, AND COMPLETION

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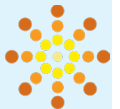
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores governance strategies for Utah's post-secondary education institutions. These institutions are the colleges and universities that provide credentials for certificates, certifications, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and beyond – all of which this report considers "college."

The report focuses on four key goals: completion, quality, affordability, and access. The Utah Board of Higher Education can address these goals with the help of various tools, which might include performance funding, program reviews, budget alignment, and student support services. The appropriate interplay of the four key goals are crucial to shaping the future success of Utah's post-secondary education system.

The System

Being a unified system is vital as times change and as post-secondary education is forced to rise to meet new challenges. However, this means that the Utah System of Higher Education must operate as a "system." In other words, the Utah Legislature, the Utah System of Higher Education, the Utah Board of Higher Education, the state's 16 public colleges' presidents and boards of trustees, and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education must work together. An essential ingredient to having a cohesive system is that Utah has offerings to meet student and workforce needs while following the statute-defined mission and roles of the institutions. The Utah Board of Higher Education can direct this system with a handful of valuable levers to enact change toward common goals.



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The Utah State Board of Education should determine whether performance funding can be adapted to encourage adherence to the state's post-secondary goals.
- The Board should enforce its statute-defined mission and roles policy consistently, working to reduce competition and increase coordination among post-secondary institutions.
- The Board should maximize all post-secondary options by embracing the Utah Legislature's commissioned report from the National Center for Higher Education Management System, which focuses on better utilization of Utah's community colleges.
- The Board is restricted in directly affecting many policy levers, but it can advocate for certain policies – such as college advising, wraparound services, and broader educational alliances – among stakeholders and policymakers to benefit Utah's post-secondary system and students.

The Goals

Completion. College experience carries a much higher benefit when a credential or degree provides evidence of skills. Often, that evidence is shown by the completion of a program. If designed well, performance-based funding may incentivize completion and quality. Though the Board has no direct control over funding, it can recommend performance goals to the Utah Legislature. Completion rates would also likely benefit from program review, credit stackability, transfer pathways, and bolstering wraparound services for students.

Quality. Higher completion rates cannot be the sole goal. Without a quality education, certificates and degrees will have questionable workforce value. Through rigorous program review and adherence to academic standards, the Board can ensure that Utah's institutions are delivering high-quality education. Faculty development initiatives should be incentivized to ensure that educators have the skills to engage students effectively. These measures will ensure that Utah's colleges provide the quality education necessary to meet the state's workforce needs. In addition, the Board should push for training that expands collaboration across the system.

Affordability. The system primarily relies on taxpayer funds and student tuition. Ensuring that the system remains affordable will benefit both taxpayers and students. Other levers affecting affordability include reducing duplicity at the student level with stackable and transferable credits and degrees, reducing duplicity at the system level, coordinating shared services among system participants, and fully utilizing affordable colleges such as technical or community colleges.

Access. College does not feel like it is within reach of many Utahns. Student affordability is a key component of accessibility. The Board should advocate for policies that address socioeconomic disparities and expand transfer pathways. In addition, effective college advising and career counseling services are essential, particularly in giving students an understanding of the alternatives to four-year degrees. Ensuring that students are aware of and can access these resources is vital, which may benefit from a stronger kindergarten-through-college educational alliance.

The Future

There are tradeoffs across these four goals. For example, an increase in completion or quality might come with a decrease in affordability or access. The right balance among the goals will need to be decided collaboratively by the various parts of the system. The Utah Board of Higher Education can wield its role as a governing body to coordinate system alignment now and for the future of education in Utah.

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COLLEGE GOVERNANCE SERIES

This is the second release of the Utah Foundation’s College Governance Series. The first report is a resource designed to deepen readers’ understanding of post-secondary education governance in Utah. That report also delves into strategies for effective policy formulation and implementation. This second report envisions Utah’s educational future and suggests governance tools that should be considered to achieve the state’s shared goals.

INTRODUCTION: WHY WE SHOULD FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Utah's post-secondary education system has changed immensely over time.¹ This will continue. It is impossible to know what post-secondary education will look like in the future and, perhaps more importantly, what it needs to look like. Although it is clear that there is a need for post-secondary education, there is some question as to what percentage of the population will need credentials.²

At the same time, as the population in Utah is projected to grow, the growth in school-age and college-age populations is projected to slow.³ College-aged Utahns between 18 and 24 are expected to make up a smaller proportion of the population in the coming decades – even decreasing in total numbers by 2040.⁴ (See Figure 1.) This demographic shift makes some post-secondary education officials nervous, wishing they could predict the future. Utah's colleges may lose enrollment as the college-age population decreases.

Instead of predicting the future, Utah stakeholders can work to make the post-secondary education system as responsive to future needs and balance the goals of affordability, completion, quality, and access. The future might require more or less education. In the face of this reality, it is possible that the status quo will not suffice. More system-wide coordination, balance, optimization, and collaboration will undoubtedly be needed. The system will need to be nimble and coordinate to create the best outcomes for students and society.

This report is geared toward all post-secondary education stakeholders. It focuses on the future of post-secondary education, detailing ideas and tools to help key players address the state's future needs. The report focuses mainly on post-secondary system governance, broadly focusing on several possible approaches and policy levers. The Utah Board of Higher Education – referred to in this report as the Board – and the Utah System of Higher Education – referred to as the System – play substantial roles. For this report, college includes any additional formal education after high school.

1 Marshall-Cantor, Ashley, "A Primer on Utah's Post-Secondary Education Governance System," *Utah Foundation*, March 2025, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/reports/a-primer-on-utahs-post-secondary-education-governancesystem/>.

2 Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, and Michel C. Quinn, "After Everything," 2021, *Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce*, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>.

3 Bateman, Mallory, Heidi Prior, Andrea Brandley, and Charley Hart, "Utah's School- and College- Age Populations," *The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute*, 2022, <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/SchColAgeFS-Dec2022.pdf>.

4 Ibid.

THE SYSTEM

The first report in the series includes a discussion about what the Utah Board of Higher Education does.⁵ The main tasks of the Board are to establish and promote state-level vision and goals, monitor and collect data about those goals, oversee each college's mission, assess each college's performance in line with that stated mission, assess whether colleges should add additional programs such as master's degrees, and appoint college presidents.

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education supports many of these tasks. In addition, Board members work closely with the Utah Legislature, the governor, all 16 public degree-granting and technical college presidents, and each of the 16 college's boards of trustees.

The role of the Utah Legislature is significant in that it allocates funding to the 16 colleges. The Board plays a crucial role in advocating for funding while maintaining budget alignment with the state's strategic goals. The Board does all this while keeping in mind the key goals of post-secondary education: competition, quality, affordability, and access.

⁵ Marshall-Cantor, Ashley, "A Primer on Utah's Post-Secondary Education Governance System," *Utah Foundation*, March 2025, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/reports/a-primer-on-utahs-post-secondary-education-governance-system/>.



Photo Credit: UVU Marketing and Communication

THE GOALS: COMPLETION, QUALITY, AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS

Completion

Completion is an essential goal for post-secondary education. College experience carries much higher benefits when a credential or degree provides evidence of skills.

The Utah System of Higher Education tracks the percentage of students who complete – or graduate – within 1.5 times the length of a typical degree.⁶ This means that a student who obtained a bachelor’s degree in six years, an associate degree in three years, or a technical certificate and certifications in three years or less would be considered timely completion. In 2024, timely completion for certificates, certifications, and degrees measured 41% for the System’s schools – up over four percentage points from 2019.⁷

Looking at two-year and four-year degrees only, 55% of Utah students completed timely, compared to 58% of their national counterparts. This ranks Utah 36th among states. This combined metric obscures the differential rates of timely completion between four-year and two-year degrees. Looking specifically at four-year degrees, Utah ranked 46th in the nation with 59% of students completing timely. This is substantially below the national average, with 71% of students completing timely. However, 46% of Utah students in two-year college programs complete timely, compared to 44% of their national counterparts. This put Utah in 19th place.⁸ These rankings do not include technical colleges and the certificates and certifications that students earn there.

The Board has several tools that can help students complete their education in a timely manner. These include thoughtfully designed performance-funding measures incentivizing completion rates, program review, credit stackability, transfer pathways, and wraparound services.

Quality

Higher completion rates cannot be the sole goal. Without a quality education, certificates and degrees will have questionable workforce value. Post-secondary education quality is reviewed by recognized institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.⁹ These nongovernmental organizations review colleges, universities, and programs.

6 Utah System of Higher Education, “Strategic Plan Attainment Goals,” <https://ushe.edu/attainment-dashboards/>.

7 Ibid.

8 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, “Yearly Progress and Completion,” 2024, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>

9 Council for Higher Education Accreditation, “Accreditation & Recognition, n.d., <https://ushe.edu/academic-program-approval-and-review-within-ushe/>

In addition, programs are reviewed by the System. The Board of Higher Education approves programs, and the Commissioner's Office reviews them, initially within two to three years and then every seven years.¹⁰ This includes metrics to determine whether programs are struggling with things such as enrollment, student completion outcomes, and faculty hiring. The Office also reviews system wide programming in certain disciplines to see whether there is unnecessary duplication across institutions.¹¹

Affordability

While affordability is a personal, household-level issue, it is also a state-finance issue. This report looks at affordability in terms of the System-wide cost of post-secondary education, considering that the state foots about one-quarter of the bill.

The System is funded by private donations, student tuition, and tax funds from Utah sales and income taxes. Making the system more affordable should help lower the costs to both taxpayers and students.

However, many solutions built to address individual affordability come at the expense of system affordability. System affordability can be addressed by reducing duplicity at the student level with stackable and transferable credits and degrees, reducing duplicity at the system level, coordinating shared services among system participants, and fully utilizing affordable colleges such as technical colleges or community colleges.

Access

One of the System's top goals is access, which is the percentage of students who graduate from a Utah high school and enroll in a public technical, associate, or bachelor's program within three years.¹² In 2022, access, which includes factors such as proximity and affordability, was at 54% across the state.¹³

Student affordability is a key part of accessibility. While Utah has the lowest per-credit cost of any state, affordability is still a considerable barrier for many to obtain a college credential.¹⁴ In addition, Utah ranks well for student loan debt, with an average of \$37,661 among those who hold student debt.¹⁵ Notably, only 10% of Utah residents have student debt, and only three states have lower student debt rates – Wyoming, Alaska, and Hawaii.

10 Utah System of Higher Education, "Institutional Roles & Program Approval," n.d., <https://ushe.edu/academic-program-approval-and-review-within-ushe/>.

11 Ibid.

12 Utah System of Higher Education, "Strategic Plan Attainment Goals," <https://ushe.edu/attainment-dashboards/>.

13 Ibid.

14 Education Data Initiative, "Average Cost per Credit Hour," 2024, <https://educationdata.org/cost-of-a-college-class-or-credit-hour>.

15 Davis, Maggie, Dan Shepard, and Xiomara Martinez- White,, "Student Loan Debt by State," *Lending Tree*, 2023, <https://www.lendingtree.com/student/student-loan-debt-by-state-study/>.

Nonetheless, there is still room for improvement when it comes to affording post-secondary education. With rising tuition and cost of living, it may still feel costly to the average Utahn student.¹⁶ Increasingly, education revenue for public colleges is dependent on student tuition.¹⁷

GOVERNANCE APPROACHES

Being on the Board provides a platform for members to discuss the future of education and create a culture of excellence and accountability within post-secondary education. Members should use their position to advocate for their strategic plan instead of just being reactive to the changing world of education. This requires being intentional about strategically governing the System into the future.

Along with strategically governing an education system, a handful of valuable levers are available to a governing system. The Board can use these levers to directly or indirectly enact change toward common goals. This section of the report details 10 levers that the Board can use.

The Board has many tools at its disposal to steer the system of higher education

Figure 1: Governance Approaches and Primary Goals Affected, by the Direction of Impact

	Completion	Quality	Affordability	Access	Board influence
Performance-based funding	positive				high
Program review	positive	positive			high
Stackability & transfer pathways	positive		positive	positive	medium
Community Colleges			positive	positive	high
Duplicity		positive	positive	negative	high
Wraparound services	positive		negative	positive	low
Academic and college advising			negative	positive	low
Shared services			positive		medium
K-16 alliance				positive	medium
Training for collaboration		positive	positive		high

¹⁶ Department of Workforce Services, "CPI and Cost of Living Comparisons," 2023, <https://jobs.utah.gov/wi/data/library/wages/costofliving.html>.

¹⁷ State Higher Education Finance, "State Profile: Utah," 2023, https://shef.sheeo.org/state-profile/utah/?start_fy=2003&inflation=unadjusted.

Performance-Based Funding

The standard funding model for public colleges is to receive government funds and tuition based on how many students are enrolled. The goal of performance-based funding is to award government-based funding on factors other than enrollment. This could be tied to completion, quality, affordability, access, or any other goal. When colleges meet these goals, they receive additional funding.¹⁸

Performance-based funding is one of the few ways for the Utah Board and the Utah Legislature to incentivize goals for the state's colleges. Some former USHE board members recommend that the Board collaborate with college presidents and design an incentive structure that rewards schools that comply with the System's five-year plan.¹⁹

However, it is important to note that the Board has no real control over performance-based funding – or any other funding. The Board can only recommend funding levels to the Utah Legislature. Additionally, performance-based funding – as implemented – has not always worked as intended.²⁰ A review of more than 50 studies from 1998 to 2020 found that that performance-based funding, at best, produces modest results and, at worst, does not impact institutional performance while creating adverse side effects.²¹

Research suggests that it is most successful for community colleges and technical colleges.²² However, many studies conclude that it is a weak policy lever and does not always work.²³ In fact, it has been shown to create winners and losers, sometimes benefiting high-resource institutions at the cost of low-resource ones.²⁴

18 Utah Foundation, "Steps Forward in Higher Ed," 2014, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/rr725.pdf>.

19 Utah Foundation talks with Previous USHE Board members including, former Board Chair Lisa Michelle Church.

20 Whinnery, Erin and Tom Keily, "Paying for College," *Education Commission of the States*, 2024, <https://www.ecs.org/paying-for-college-the-latest-trends-in-performance-based-funding/>.

21 Ortagus, Justin C., Robert Kelchen, Kelly Rosinger, and Nicolas Voorhees, 2020. "Performance-based funding in American higher education: A systematic synthesis of the intended and unintended consequences." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, No. 42(4), p 520-550. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>.

22 Shin, Jung-Cheol, Hyun-Ki Shim, Su-Jin Kim, and Pyung-Gu Lee, 2024. "A Systematic Review of the Impact of Performance-Based Funding in the US," *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 37, p. 392-417, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00309-0>; And Hillman, Nicholas W., Alisa Hicklin Fryar, and Valerie Crespín-Trujillo, 2017. "Evaluating the Impact of Performance Funding in Ohio and Tennessee," *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 144-170, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217732951>.

23 Umbricht, Mark R., Frank Fernandez, and Justin C. Ortagus, 2015. "An Examination of the (Un)Intended Consequences of Performance Funding in Higher Education," *Education Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 5, p. 643-73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614398>. Ochs Rosinger, Kelly, Justin Ortagus, Robert Kelchen, Alexander Cassell, et al., 2022. "New Evidence on the Evolution and Landscape of Performance Funding for Higher Education," *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 93, No. 5, p. 735-68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2022.206626>.

24 Prince Hagood, Lori, 2019. "The Financial Benefits and Burdens of Performance Funding in Higher Education," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 2, p. 189-213, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373719837318>; And Ortagus, Justin C., Robert Kelchen, Kelly Rosinger, and Nicolas Voorhees, 2020. "Performance-based funding in American higher education: A systematic synthesis of the intended and unintended consequences," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p 520-550. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>.

However, performance-based funding is an extremely flexible tool. The Board can examine examples of how it has not worked in other states and choose a design that may better meet their goals without the negative side effects. The Board could begin piloting among technical schools and community colleges – where performance-based funding has seen the most success in the past. This tool may increase completion rates while maintaining accessibility. However, it will need to be used better than in the past.

Program Review

The Board is responsible for ensuring that colleges operate in the public interest and are good stewards of public resources.²⁵ Through rigorous program review, the Board can ensure that Utah's institutions are delivering a high-quality education and adhering to academic standards. This includes accreditation processes, program assessments, and faculty development initiatives.²⁶

The board can regularly evaluate college programs, policies, and practices to identify areas for improvement. This could involve conducting periodic audits, soliciting stakeholder feedback, and benchmarking against best practices in other states or countries. With necessary adjustments, colleges can keep up to date on best practices and reduce waste from programs that are not contributing to the system's goals.²⁷ Program reviews can help increase quality, but to the degree that high-quality programs introduce a higher expectation of academic rigor. It may come at the cost of completion rates and accessibility.

25 Tandberg, David A. and Rebecca R. Martin, "Quality Assurance and Improvement in Higher Education," *SHEEO*, 2019, https://sheeo.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/05/SHEEO_QualityAssurance.pdf.

26 NCHEMS, "The Community College Mission in Utah," 2023, <https://nchems.org/wp-content/uploads/CC-Services-Report-Final-Draft-10.3.23.pdf>.

27 Watermark Insights, "A Comprehensive guide to conducting academic program reviews in higher education," 2024, <https://www.watermarkinsights.com/resources/blog/academic-program-reviews-guide#:~:text=The%20importance%20of%20program%20reviews&text=The%20benefits%20of%20academic%20program,to%20higher%20student%20retention%20rates.>

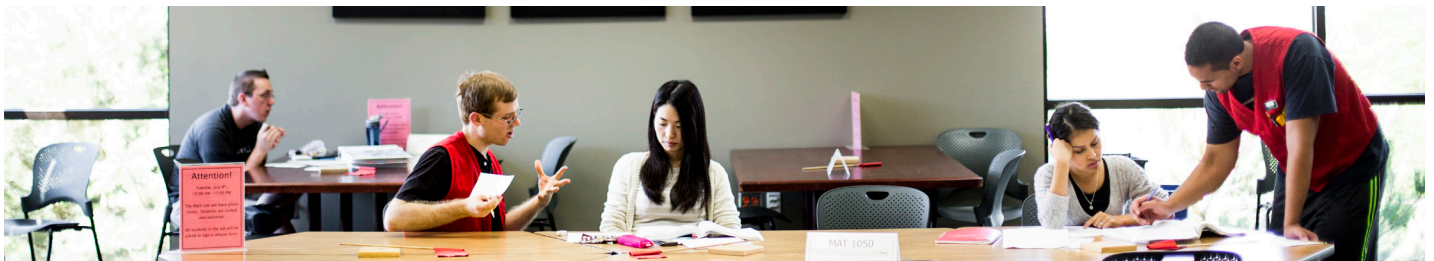


Photo Credit: UVU Marketing and Communication

Stackability and Transfer Pathways

Stackable credentials seek to prevent students from losing college credits or degrees earned at one school by being unable to transfer them to another school. For example, after earning a certified nursing assistant certificate, the certificate can be used to waive the overlapping requirements of a nursing bachelor's degree. Another benefit of these stackable pathways is that students' education may be more affordable by incrementally working through credentials and degrees. The System, Board, and college presidents can work together to ensure these pathways stay nimble and change as post-secondary education changes.

Related to stackability, the System has sought to increase student access by creating streamlined transfer pathways between different types of post-secondary institutions, such as from community colleges to four-year universities. These pathways aim to create seamless student transition opportunities to increase student success, completion, access, and career readiness.²⁸

To facilitate the highest level of transferability of credits between colleges, the System created the Statewide Articulation Committee to ensure that courses with similar names, common numbers, and equal credits can transfer to other institutions.²⁹ Using common course numbering helps students transfer between colleges without losing their hard work. This is not a stagnant system. Course articulation across the System is ongoing work.

The Northern Wasatch Collegiate Coalition is one example of colleges working together to promote student success. This coalition comprises Davis Technical College, Ogden-Weber Technical College, and Weber State University.³⁰ This partnership allows for streamlined pathways between these institutions, starting in high school. All high school seniors in Davis, Morgan, Ogden, and Weber school districts are now automatically admitted to these three colleges. Students can also start their general education credits at Weber State while attending either tech college at a reduced cost. These additional supports aim to increase student access to post-secondary education.

The Board can advocate for policies that ensure access to post-secondary education for all residents, regardless of socioeconomic background, race, or geographic location. This could involve strengthening credit stackability and transfer pathways, expanding the use of prior learning assessments, and addressing affordability. This could help make various levels of higher education more accessible for individuals by lowering the cost – but also making the system overall more affordable for the same reason. However, the cost savings from students using the system more efficiently may be reduced by the cost of higher levels of coordination among institutions.

28 Utah System of Higher Education, "Pathways," 2023, <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2023/pdf/00001062.pdf>

29 Ibid

30 Weber State University, "Northern Wasatch Collegiate Coalition," n.d., <https://weber.edu/nwcc>.

Community Colleges

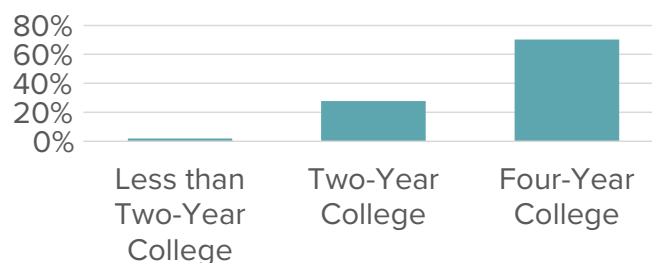
Increasing community college offerings could save students who are seeking certificates and two-year degrees from paying university prices at dual-mission institutions.³¹ Nationally, community colleges enroll 28% of all undergraduates.³² Community colleges provide accessible and affordable educational opportunities to students who might not have the means or academic background or are not traditional college students.³³

There are only two community colleges in Utah. Instead of separate institutions, Utah is unique in that most of its “community college” offerings and services are offered by a mixture of dual-mission institutions, technical colleges, and university satellite locations.³⁴

The Board must set expectations for what each dual-mission institution should do as part of its community college mission.³⁵ Ultimately, community colleges are an important resource. The Board can do a lot to maximize community colleges’ role, such as supporting the Utah Legislature’s commissioned report from the National Center for Higher Education Management System, which focuses on better utilization of Utah’s community colleges.³⁶ Better utilization of community colleges makes higher education more accessible to Utahns and makes the system itself more affordable. It may result in lower levels of completion.

About a quarter of college students attend a community college nationwide.

Figure 2: Number of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Institutions by Institution Type, Nationwide, 2023



Source: IPEDS.

31 NCHEMS, “Prepared for the Utah System of Higher Education,” 2023, <https://nchems.org/wp-content/uploads/CC-Services-Report-Final-Draft-10.3.23.pdf>.

32 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2023, “Student Enrollment: How many students enroll in postsecondary institutions annually?”, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/app/answer/2/2?sideid=5-%7C1%7C2%7C3>.

33 Lumina Foundation, “Community Colleges,” n.d., <https://www.luminafoundation.org/topics/todays-institutions/community-colleges/>.

34 NCHEMS, “The Community College Mission in Utah,” 2023, <https://nchems.org/project/the-community-college-mission-in-utah/>.

35 NCHEMS, “The Community College Mission in Utah,” 2023, <https://nchems.org/wp-content/uploads/CC-Services-Report-Final-Draft-10.3.23.pdf>

36 Ibid.

Duplicity

To minimize waste, the Board should discourage unnecessary program duplication across institutions.³⁷ However, deciding which duplication is necessary – and which is unnecessary – is a difficult balance. All universities should cover basic math, science, and writing classes that build up core competencies across a variety of fields. Many universities may provide similar or exactly the same program as other universities because they serve different geographies. However, as programs become larger and more exclusive, the balance begins to shift more toward efficiency. For example, Utah does not need a second university with a medical school. Medical schools represent an enormous investment and a very specialized education. This is an excellent example of where the Board can get involved.

Many colleges and universities want to be responsive to their communities' needs, and often different communities still have similar requirements from their local university. Yet this can put a strain on taxpayer dollars when programs are unnecessarily duplicated. Colleges and the Board can encourage collaborations that create efficiency but balance access to needed education in all parts of the state, especially rural Utah, where education opportunities can be limited. While decreasing duplicity can make the system more affordable, it can also make the system less accessible to less urban or centralized geographies.

37 Utah Foundation talks with former USHE Board Member, Jesselie Anderson, 2023.



Photo Credit: UVU Marketing & Communications



Photo Credit: UVU Marketing & Communications

Wraparound Services

Wraparound services include resources such as effective academic advising, career counseling, and mental health services. Wraparound services can significantly improve student retention and graduation rates.³⁸

Former System Commissioner Richard Kendell emphasized the importance of support services and having quality advisors in every school. Calling every student who did not finish their program and finding ways to get them to graduate is the “high touch” approach that Kendell wants all colleges to adopt.³⁹

However, many students do not even know what resources exist, or if they are aware of them, they do not know how to access them.⁴⁰ Colleges should more effectively advertise these supports. These services also help foster a sense of belonging for a wide range of students.⁴¹

The Board cannot mandate such services, but it can encourage colleges to provide support services and provide training for college presidents and boards of trustees as additional resources are shown to be effective. This allows colleges autonomy to meet the needs of their students while staying up to date on data-driven approaches. This can help higher education become more accessible and result in higher completion rates. However, wraparound services represent an additional layer of support that decreases the affordability of the system.

38 Lumina Foundation, “Student supports only work if student know they exist,” 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/student-supports-only-work-if-students-know-they-exist/>.

39 Utah Foundation talks with Richard Kendall, 2023.

40 Sedlak, Wendy, “Student supports only work if student know they exist,” *Lumina Foundation*, 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/student-supports-only-work-if-students-know-they-exist/>; Shaw, Catherine, Ria Bharadwaj, Gates Bryant, Kerry Condon, et al., “Driving Toward a Degree,” Tyton Partners, 2023, <https://tytonpartners.com/app/uploads/2023/07/TytonPartners-Driving-Toward-a-Degree-2023.pdf>.

41 Lumina Foundation, “Driving Toward a Degree,” 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/driving-toward-a-degree-2023/>.

Academic and College Advising

The Board can ensure college academic advisors have reasonable workloads. When academic advisors spend time with students, they can discuss their goals and help them take steps to meet those unique goals. This bottom-up approach allows students to create their own pathway to success and meets them where they are.⁴²

In addition to advocating for academic and career support in the public education system, the System has supported advising through the Utah College Advising Corps program. This program was established to increase the number of Utahns who face barriers – such as being a first-generation student or being from a low-income household – enroll in college.⁴³ These college advisors do not recruit for any particular college, but discuss what is the best fit for students. They also guide students through finding scholarships and filing FAFSA. This program has shown an increase in college applications submitted, financial aid requested, FAFSA completed, and family members engaged in the college planning process.⁴⁴

The Utah College Advising Corps program is winding down in 2025 due to a discontinuation of funding from the Utah Legislature. However, the System is working with K-12 to replace the program.⁴⁵

Working with Utahns considering higher education opportunities can increase the accessibility of higher education. But similar to wraparound services, it creates lower levels of affordability for the system overall. To the degree that these programs bring in students less likely to attend college, it may also decrease completion levels overall.



42 Stand Together, "The future of postsecondary education: 3 ideas for reform," n.d., <https://standtogether.org/news/the-future-of-postsecondary-education-and-ideas-for-reform/>.

43 Utah System of Higher Education, "Utah College Advising Corps: Statewide Expansion-Pilot Update Report," 2023, https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/agendas/2023/20231103/Utah_College_Advising_Corp_Memo.pdf.

44 Ibid.

45 Utah Foundation talks with Utah Commissioner of Higher Education Geoff Landward.

Photo Credit: UVU Marketing & Communications

Shared Services

A 2022 performance audit of the Utah System of Higher Education highlighted that the System should monitor its performance measures of operational efficiency and innovate to save money.⁴⁶ One such solution might be shared services. This can result in streamlined human resources, benefits and payroll, and IT services, leading to cost savings across the System.⁴⁷

Utah incorporates shared services across the System and is working to implement more shared services every year. This push has focused on commercialization efforts, Title IX support, IT services, and administrative support. There are performance-based funding penalties for colleges that do not join this effort.⁴⁸

A management consulting group highlighted how new technology paired with shared services can help reduce costs for the whole system, not just individual units.⁴⁹ Some politicians have advocated expanding shared services to use taxpayer dollars more efficiently.⁵⁰ However, centralization may diminish the flexibility, accessibility and applicability of services at each institution. Shared services are likely to make the system more affordable, but may have limited impacts on other higher education goals.

46 Office of the Legislative Auditor General, "A Performance Audit of Utah's System of Higher Education Governance," 2022, <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2022/pdf/00003988.pdf>.

47 Collins, Rachele, "The ABCs of SSCs," ADP, 2023, <https://www.adp.com/spark/articles/2023/04/the-abc-of-sscs-shared-services-centers-explained.aspx#:~:text=Shared%20services%20are%20different%20>.

48 Utah System of Higher Education, Shared Services Update, 2024, https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/agendas/2024/20240712/Shared_Services_Update.pdf

49 Yaeger, Laura, Kurt Dorschel, and John Heniff, "Unite technology and Service Delivery to Elevate the Higher Education Experience," *Huron*, n.d., <https://www.huronconsultinggroup.com/insights/technology-service-delivery-elevate-highereducation>.

50 SB 146 House Education Committee Hearing, Feb. 16, 2023, <https://le.utah.gov/av/committeeArchive.jsp?timelineID=226079>.



Photo Credit: UVU Marketing & Communications

K-16 Alliance

It is not just the technical colleges that need to interact with the universities, nor is it just Utah's legislators that need to interact with the Board. K-12 needs a seat at the table. Richard Kendall, a former superintendent and Utah System of Higher Education commissioner provided an excellent example of collaborating with K-12. When Kendall was a school superintendent, he regularly talked with the state's K-12 public education board and the USHE Board. Kendall's K-16 Alliance included the governor, the state superintendent, the State Board of Education chair, the Commissioner, and the System board chair. These players all have common goals and can benefit from coordinating with each other. However, as key players have changed roles, this specific K-16 Alliance no longer exists.

There is a current K-16 alliance in Utah County: the Mountainland K-16 Alliance. This Mountainland K-16 Alliance brings K-12 school districts, charter schools, technical colleges, and public higher education together to help students succeed in post-secondary education, life-long learning, and becoming responsible citizens.⁵¹ These schools align their pathways and programs and engage students, which allows schools to work more efficiently. However, a formal relationship with boards and politicians in charge of education governance could help further expand these alliances across the state.

K-12's Utah State Board of Education and post-secondary's Board seem like obvious partners. However, there are complications from political maneuvering in both systems. Voters elect the state's public school board, while the governor appoints the post-secondary Board. Both approaches have pros and cons based on whom the board members are accountable to. Both systems of appointing board members require some level of politicking. In 2020, the state's K-12 board members could run as partisan candidates, unlike their predecessors, who ran as unaffiliated candidates.⁵² Numerous stakeholders with whom the Utah Foundation spoke said that this introduction of partisan elections impedes collaboration.

A K-16 alignment could help K-12 in preparing students for post-secondary success that does not just start when students graduate high school. It begins long before then. Higher levels of coordination with the K-12 education system can increase access. Increased coordination could reduce costs with higher levels of efficiency, or it could increase costs because of the costs of coordination and integration.

A recent example of this type of alignment is the First Credential Program, which was signed into law in 2025. It codifies a K-16 approach in Utah, linking high-school students to post-secondary opportunities.⁵³

51 Utah Valley University, "About the K-16 Alliance," n.d., <https://www.uvu.edu/k16/about/index.html#initiatives>

52 Senate Bill 78, 2016, <https://le.utah.gov/~2016/bills/static/SB0078.html>. And Marjorie Cortez, "For first time, there are partisan State School Board candidate on Utah's general election ballot," 2020, <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2020/10/27/21519559/utah-election-state-school-board-candidates-now-partisan-first-time/>.

53 House Bill 260, 2025, <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0260.html>.

Training for Collaboration

The Board cannot work alone. The Board is just one part of the larger System. Members rely on every other part of the system working together toward shared missions and goals. One of the Board's responsibilities is to continuously train each institution's board of trustees, college presidents, and themselves.

Each college has a board of trustees that helps oversee the college with the president. They manage and coordinate day-to-day matters, in addition to some long-term planning matters such as developing the college mission, strategic goals, and programs.⁵⁴ This critical role requires alignment with the System's mission and goals.

There may be a difference of opinion regarding who best understands the needs of Utahns. For instance, the Board is a step removed but can likely see a broader scope, while institutions are tied to their communities and receive copious amounts of local feedback. Ultimately, the best results will likely come through collaboration rather than fiat from above or strong institutional pushback.

College presidents play an integral role in the functioning of the post-secondary education system. The hiring and firing of college presidents falls to the Board and is no minor task. The president sets the scene for their respective institution and works as an advocate to the Board, Commissioner, and Legislature for their students. Presidents, therefore, need to buy into the concept of working in a system from the beginning. So, when looking at potential college presidents, the Board needs to ask itself which candidate will be a team player and work toward the goals that the Board sets for the system.

In Utah Foundation talks with Utah's college presidents, one stated that the key to success is to "Get to know your presidents personally and support their leadership; they are the key to your success as a board." Another noted, "The differences among the missions of the various institutions are to be celebrated; don't assume that what may be best for the U or USU is also best for the other institutions." Collaborating among the Board and across all parts of the System is crucial for success.

Another group that carries the responsibility of executing the direction set by the Board is the Office of the Commissioner. They play a significant role in hosting training for new Board members as the longevity of the Commissioner and their staff should help retain institutional knowledge.

⁵⁴ Price, Nick, "The Roles and Responsibilities of a Board of Directors for a College or University," *Board Effect*, 2018, <https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/roles-responsibilities-board-directors-college-university/>.

CONCLUSION

There are four crucial goals for the future of Utah's post-secondary education: quality, affordability, access, and completion. Timely completion ensures students have a degree as evidence of their training. Rigorous quality assurance measures can ensure that post-secondary institutions meet academic standards and deliver high-quality education. System affordability benefits taxpayers and students. A key to access is emphasizing better utilization of Utah's community colleges, partly by embracing the Utah Legislature's commissioned report from the National Center for Higher Education Management System.

Certainly, there are tradeoffs across these four goals. For example, an increase in completion or quality might come with a decrease in affordability or access.

However, the right balance among quality, affordability, access, and completion will be bolstered by aligning institutional goals and operating under the statute-defined mission and roles of the institutions. Using its role as a governing body, the Utah Board of Higher Education can ensure system alignment now and for the future of education in Utah.



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