

July 22, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Regents

FROM: David L. Buhler

SUBJECT: Completion Strategy Five: Reverse Transfer and Stackable Credentials

Background

In July 2013 the Board of Regents unanimously passed a resolution to “Implement Strategies to Increase Completion Rates” in support of the state’s 66% attainment goal. This resolution acknowledged that the Utah State Board of Regents is committed to improving the completion rates of students who enroll in an institution within the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) by ensuring a quality, cost-effective educational experience and awarding meaningful education credentials that will help students find gainful employment and life-long success. The Presidents and their administrations and faculty have taken seriously the Board’s charge and have been implementing these strategies.

The five specific recommendations in the resolution are:

1. *Establish 15 credits hours per semester as the normal full-time course load for students.*
2. *Set plateau tuition levels with a focus on 12 to 15 credit hours to help students maximize their tuition dollars and their time.*
3. *Create semester-by-semester degree program maps with specific recommended courses each semester and make them available to current and potential students.*
4. *Encourage students to enroll in an appropriate mathematics course in their first year of college.*
5. *Explore the feasibility of implementing reverse transfer/stackable credentials.*

With support from USHE, institutions have worked hard and made good progress on these strategies, in particular, strategies 1-4. The fifth strategy is challenging and merits further focus to help increase the number of Utahns who complete a college degree or meaningful certificate.

Issue

According to the most recent Lumina Foundation report, *A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education*, the number of Utahns with “some college but no degree” has risen from 27% to 28.1%. Providing a way for these adults to complete their education is essential for the State of Utah. The final strategy of the July 2013 Completion Resolution directly addresses some best practices to help adult students complete a credential, and asked Chief Academic Officers, Chief Student Services Officers, and institutions to explore

specific strategies to make it easier for students to achieve credentials, including reverse transfer, automatic awarding of associate degrees, and stackable credentials.

In 2014, through a newly formed Adult College Completion Working Group and Complete College Utah, USHE addressed these issues, with the following results:

- Institutions have made it easier for students who have completed the requirements for an associate degree to receive that degree.
- More stackable credentials have been created and the number of students completing certificates has risen.

However, more work remains to adequately serve and graduate adult students. The practice of *reverse transfer* has started to attract national attention for the potential to help students achieve benchmarks on their way to a degree and to help students whose plans change leave institutions with a credential.

Some students who transfer to four-year institutions do so before completing an associate degree at the two-year college. *Reverse transfer* is a process where students can transfer credits from the four-year institution back to the sending institution to satisfy the requirements for the degree. Reverse transfer recognizes the student's achievements and the associate degree can serve as encouragement for students to complete an additional credential.

- Students with an associate degree are more likely to stay in school and finish a four-year degree program.
- Graduates will have two degrees on their résumés, more accurately reflecting their skills and training over time.
- Students who do not complete a four-year degree will still have a credential on their résumés, helping with career goals. If they decide to return and complete a bachelor degree later, transferring will be easier and they will move more quickly towards completion.
- If the associate degree is in a more technical or applied area than the bachelor's degree, this can be attractive to a future employer who is looking for someone with experience in the hands-on and theoretical aspects of a given field.
- Two-year colleges will benefit from a more accurate reflection of the time and resources they have invested in these transfer students, and will gain credit in their completion outcomes.

#### Next Steps

During the next year the Commissioner's Office will seek heightened public visibility of initiative number five, which directly addresses the success of adult students. The ultimate goal is to increase the graduation rates of adult students and decrease the number of Utahns with "some college but no degree."

Commissioner's Recommendation

The Commissioner recommends the Board discuss these issues and reaffirm their commitment to improving services to and graduation rates of adult students. The Board further directs the institutions to work collaboratively with the Commissioner's office to develop a workable reverse transfer policy that can be presented to the Board for action and then implemented statewide.

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David L. Buhler  
Commissioner of Higher Education

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