

Southern Utah University and Southwest Technical College Dual Enrollment Partnership: A Case Study

INTRODUCTION

During an August 2018 presentation to the Utah State Legislature Subcommittee for Higher Education Appropriations, Rep. Derrin Owens, the House Vice-Chair of the subcommittee asked Scott L Wyatt, President of Southern Utah University, the following question regarding the dual enrollment partnership between Southern Utah University and Southwest Technical College: “. . . I love what I see . . . but why has it taken us until 2018 to get a model like this that really serves students of every background and need? Why has it taken so long?” President Wyatt responded, “Well, we’re in two different worlds, and it is too easy to say ‘we might lose tuition money, or we might lose students.’ So, if you were to look at each of our institutions, it is probably not in our best interest, but it is in the best interest of students - - so it’s hard!” [laughter]¹

Although the last three words of this sentence were spoken in jest, it is in fact a great challenge to create a dual enrollment agreement between two institutions that, despite being members of very similar governmental agencies with very similar purposes, do in fact operate in “two different worlds.” This brief article will detail some of the creative solutions and new processes used in overcoming the obstacles faced in this “enrollment merger” between Southern Utah University and Southwest Technical College.

Institutional Background and Initial Discussions

Southern Utah University (SUU), a member of the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE), and Southwest Technical College (STECH), a member of the Utah System of Technical Colleges (UTECH) are both located in Cedar City, Utah, a community of approximately 30,000 residents in rural Southern Utah, about 2.5 hours north of Las Vegas. Both institutions have independent, local Board of Trustee oversight, and are funded through taxes paid by residents of the state. The current student enrollment for Southern Utah University is approximately 11,000 students in undergraduate and graduate programs. The current enrollment for STECH is approximately 2,000 students distributed among certificate and non-certificate instructional programs.

During the late fall of 2017, President Scott Wyatt (SUU) and President Brennan Wood (STECH) held meetings to discuss measures that could be taken between the two institutions to benefit students and help with retention and completion. These discussions led to a proposed dual-enrollment partnership between the two institutions to tentatively commence in August of 2019. As part of their presentations during the 2018 legislative session, both presidents touted the benefits of dual enrollment, particularly for students in the local service area, and each individually proposed that funding be provided to assist with the planning and approval phase. As a result of these efforts, ongoing legislative funds were committed to STECH specifically for the establishment of the new program, and additional funds were made available to SUU by the Governor’s Office in support of the course articulation process. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the two institutions on March 23, 2018, officially marking the beginning of the planning and development process.

NWCCU Assistance and Approval

At the beginning of the planning process, a group of administrators from both SUU and STECH traveled to Redmond, WA to discuss the proposed partnership with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). The NWCCU leadership in the meeting generally indicated support of the concept, and offered suggestions for success, especially in making certain that the agreement lined up with the mission, core themes, and strategic plans of both institutions. Throughout this phase of the project the staff at NWCCU were particularly helpful and supportive. Approval of the partnership was granted by NWCCU on January 17, 2019, and as this was the last official step in the approval process, both SUU and STECH are now ready to fully implement the dual enrollment partnership.

¹ Utah State Legislature, Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee, August 14, 2018. Audio transcript of the proceedings, on the Internet: <https://le.utah.gov/asp/interim/Commit.asp?Year=2018&Com=APPHEd>

THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

While SUU was founded in the late 19th century (1897), STECH is a product of the early 21st century. The Utah System of Technical Colleges began as the Utah College of Applied Technology (UCAT) in June of 2001, having been created by the Utah Legislature. The 8 campuses of UCAT offer non-credit, competency-based education and training across the state of Utah. Shortly after its founding, the UCAT system joined the USHE, there was an immediate desire for students to be able to matriculate between the UCAT and the USHE programs. Since UCAT was a non-credit, clock hour-based system, and USHE was a credit-hour based system, conflicts arose due to difficulties and complications in articulating classes between the two.

When the legislature removed UCAT from the USHE system, articulation efforts continued, but became even more complicated. Little progress was made until 2011, when the Utah State Board of Regents passed Policy R473, which addressed articulations between USHE's credit-based Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and non-credit instructional (clock-hour) programs. Although this provision opened up a number of articulations for completed certificates of 900 hours or more, very few course-to-course agreements were established. This left the majority of UCAT students without a clear pathway into USHE programs.

In 2017, the legislature reorganized the UCAT Colleges into the Utah System of Technical Colleges (UTECH). Although their certificate programs remained non-credit and clock-hour-based, a renewed effort was made to articulate programs and courses. Minor changes were made to Policy R473 that encouraged expanding program agreements, allowing for more course-to-course articulations. These operational and policy changes led SUU and STECH to propose a dual enrollment agreement that would feature (for the first time in the history of the state) significant course-by-course articulations between the two institutions.

A Student-Centered Model for Dual Enrollment

Previous USHE/UTECH partnerships have occurred, but always in the form of either a merger of a larger USHE and smaller UTECH institution, or through "mission expansion" of a tech college to become a university. However, the cost of these changes has been high: students paid higher USHE tuition for the credit they received (typically about 5-7 times higher than UTECH tuition rates); the class schedule went from a flexible "open entry" system to a traditional three-semester model. In addition, institutional mergers often resulted in some downsizing of redundant services, and the social and economic impacts associated with employee layoffs.

It is important to note that the partners have worked hard to allay concerns in the community that the university was in some way "taking over" the technical college. For example, through the dual enrollment process, students enrolling at STECH are given the option to be simultaneously, dually enrolled at SUU, receiving credit at both institutions without having to pay any additional tuition or transfer fee – a process clearly different from the negative impacts of previous mergers described above. Additionally, SUU students can take courses covered under the articulation agreements at STECH, pay significantly lower tuition, and receive SUU credit. This occurs while both institutions remain as separate entities, maintaining operational and administrative independence. The advantages of this model are clear: students from STECH receive university credit not currently available to them, using the flexible, open entry scheduling model already in place, while paying the much lower UTECH tuition rate. Meanwhile, SUU students can also enroll in STECH courses for significantly lower tuition and fee costs, have access to instructional programs not currently offered at SUU (e.g., welding and culinary arts) and still receive university credit for their study at STECH. The benefits to students at both institutions are significant, and the lack of a merger of the two institutions causes less angst in the community.

REACHING AGREEMENT

The planning and approval process for the new agreement began in April 2018, shortly after the MOU was signed. Steve Meredith, Assistant to the President for Planning and Effectiveness (and SUU's Accreditation Liaison Officer) was assigned the task of coordinating the effort, with assistance from Gary Wixom, retired Associate Commissioner for Higher Education, and James Sage, Associate Provost. Because of the complexity of the process, a number of employee task forces were formed, including task forces for Articulation, the Dual Enrollment Process, Marketing and Orientation, Shared Benefits, and Student Fees. The work of these individuals and groups was vital to the success of the agreement. A brief description of their work follows.

The Articulation Task Force

During the Summer 2018, faculty from both institutions worked collaboratively to review curriculum and assemble course-by-course articulation agreements between nine programs:

- Accounting
- Agriculture
- Art and Design
- Business
- Culinary Arts
- Engineering Technology
- Graphics and Media
- Information Technology
- Nursing

In many ways, these agreements fulfill the original intentions of Policy R473 and represent a major step forward by providing meaningful academic pathways and stackable credentials for students to transition between UTECH and USHE institutions.

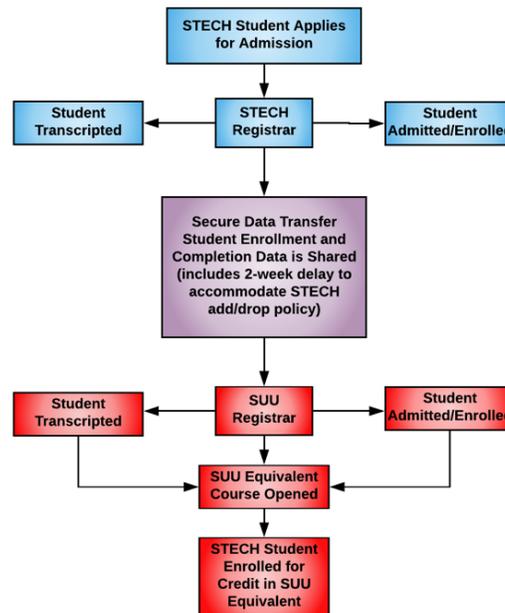
The Dual Enrollment Process Task Force

Leaders from both institutions met as a committee to discuss the various processes that need to be in place to create and facilitate the new dual enrollment model. The meetings of this committee centered primarily on the “nuts-and-bolts” strategies and processes through which the creation of a new dual enrollment model could be accomplished. Because of the significant differences that exist between the two institutions, a large number of items had to be discussed at considerable length, including:

- Differences in academic scheduling
- Financial Aid Management
- Enrollment Tracking and Reporting
- FERPA Laws and Secure Information Sharing
- Creating a Dual Enrollment Model

Ultimately, the determination was made to create a “rolling SUU transcript” for STECH students that could allow for the simultaneous admission and enrollment of STECH students at both institutions, while not necessarily being tied to a traditional semester length. This process is outlined in the chart below.

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As the chart indicates, students enrolling at STECH are admitted and enrolled in the usual manner, but under the new agreement they have the option for dual enrollment at SUU. After a delay of two weeks to account for the “add/drop” period for courses at STECH, a student transcript is started at SUU through a secure data transfer between the two institutions. The Registrar’s Office at SUU also creates “STECH sections” of the SUU courses that are part of the articulation agreement for that particular academic program and places STECH students in these sections. Students enrolled in (and successfully complete) an STECH course with an articulated, equivalent SUU course will receive SUU credit along with their clock-hour credit and certification from STECH.

Marketing and Orientation Task Force

Meetings of this group have centered on the creation of orientation and marketing materials that provide marketing support for the new agreement, and inform STECH and SUU students of the benefits of the partnership. As part of these materials, an orientation video has been created and can be seen at the following link: <https://youtu.be/yrFJSUd6CWE>. Additional marketing and informational materials will be created during the 2018-19 academic year in anticipation of the start of the partnership in August of 2019.

Shared Employee Benefits Task Force

This group discussed the benefits that might be shared between the employees of SUU and STECH with regards to the “perks” of employment. It was the feeling of the leadership team that creating an agreement in this area might be the most effective way to guarantee a strong and full implementation of the dual enrollment plan. The assumption here was that the more personally invested employees at both institutions felt in the agreement, the greater the likelihood of success.

After consideration, the group agreed to the following benefits:

Tuition:

- Full-time employees, spouses, and dependents at both institutions receive a 50% waiver for in-state tuition when attending the other institution

- The tuition waiver covers up to 30 clock hours per week at STECH, and no limit on credit hours at SUU
- Part-time employees receive a 50% waiver for in-state tuition, for the employee only, and for a limited number of credits

Other Agreed-Upon Benefits:

- Co-branded employee identification cards, with home institution as the top or pre-eminent logo
- STECH employees to receive SUU employee admission at athletic events (minus football)
- STECH employees to receive SUU employee admission to fine arts events
- STECH employees to receive SUU employee admission benefits at SUU Fitness Center

Student Fees Task Force

This group of student leaders and administrators was convened to discuss the idea of shared student benefits. The desired outcome for this task force was to give students at both institutions the sense that they truly were enrolled at both places, both academically and socially. It is an important facet of this of this agreement that students at both institutions feel that they can easily make academic “lane changes” and pursue SUU degrees or STECH certificates as their interests dictate, but also that they share a sense of institutional involvement with student colleagues as desired.

After considering various options, the group arrived at a two-tier solution that provided an option for STECH students to be dually enrolled with no student fee, but also provided them with an additional option to participate in some of SUU’s fee-sponsored student events:

Tier 1 - No Student Fee

- STECH students will have access to the SUU Student Portal, student email account, library, transcript, and access to SUU advisers and other student services typically provided when a student is admitted to SUU
- STECH students in this tier will not have access to SUUSA, athletics, fine arts, fitness center, or other student fee-sponsored events
- As they do for other community organizations, SUU Athletics may provide complimentary tickets for events that can accommodate the additional crowd, but this is on an "as-available" basis, and no guarantee of tickets for a specific event is made

Tier 2 - Limited Student Fee (\$50.00)

- STECH students will have access to the SUU Student Portal, student email account, library, transcript, and access to SUU advisers and other student services typically provided when a student is admitted to SUU
- As they do for other community organizations, SUU Athletics may provide complimentary tickets for events that can accommodate the additional crowd, but this is on an "as-available" basis, and no guarantee is made
- STECH students in this tier have access to a limited number of SUUSA student fee-funded events including:
 - STECH students will have access to SUUSA and SPB-sponsored events, including dances, concert events, holiday parties and other social or educational events sponsored by SUUSA or SPB;
 - Access to the SUU Fitness Center (PE Building) and participation in intramural sports
 - Access to the climbing wall, and other SUU Outdoor Recreation activities
 - Admission to SUU Music Department Events
 - Admission to SUU Theater Arts and Dance Events
 - Access to the *University Journal* student newspaper

INITIAL ARTICULATION AND DUAL ENROLLMENT EFFORTS

During Fall 2018, students enrolled at STECH in Computer Science became the first students to be dually enrolled at SUU and STECH. The articulation agreement between SUU and STECH in Computer Science is the first fully-

integrated, course-by-course articulation agreement approved between the institutions, and it served as a template for all the agreements that followed. In discussions between the two institutions and NWCCU, it was determined that this group of STECH students would serve as a “test group” for the dual enrollment process.

In Fall 2018, a total of 26 students were enrolled at STECH in the Computer Science program that is part of the dual enrollment test. Listed below are some statistics for the 26 students in the Fall 2018 cohort:

- Number of eligible students that chose to “opt in” to the dual enrollment program: 25 out of 26 (96.1%)
- Number of students that already had an SUU student account: 18 out of 26 (69.2%)
 - This number includes students that had previously applied to SUU, had taken concurrent enrollment courses while in high school, or had attended an SUU recruitment event and applied to the university
- Number of credits awarded at no cost to STECH students: 135 SUU credits
- Number of courses taken that are covered by the SUU/STECH articulation agreement compared to all courses taken: 45 out of 58 (77.5%)
 - This number does not include 11 sections of the STECH orientation course, which is specific to STECH only, and therefore not eligible to be covered by any articulation agreement

These statistics show that the program is off to a very strong start among the STECH Computer Science test group. The secure portal for reporting academic data between the two institutions is operational and effective. The percentage of students that are choosing to participate in the program, as well as the percentage of courses generating SUU credit under the current articulation agreements is very encouraging, particularly since the Computer Science articulation agreement was written earlier than the other articulation agreements.

Project Evaluation

Because the state of Utah has dedicated funds specifically to the establishment of this partnership, regular reports have been made to the Governor’s Office of Management and Budget throughout the planning and approval process. These reports have included the establishment of goals, strategies, key performance indicators, and a timeline for each phase of the project. At the conclusion of each phase, a comprehensive report will be made to the OMB and the state legislature and this report will serve as the primary measure of the project’s success.

SUMMARY

The faculty, staff and administration of both institutions spent an enormous amount of time and energy in the planning and approval phase of this agreement. The process that was undertaken to arrive at the agreement was challenging and required creative problem-solving. However, at all times, the focus was on what would be best for students and their academic progress. Both institutions are eagerly looking forward to the first full implementation of the agreement in Fall 2019, and we anticipate that the initial successes seen in the test group will be seen among the student body as a whole.