



The New Utah System of Higher Education

On July 1, 2020, a new system of higher education will emerge. During its 2020 session, the Utah Legislature passed [S.B. 111, *Higher Education Amendments*](#)¹—a sweeping change to higher education structure and governance that merges the Utah System of Higher Education and the Utah System of Technical Colleges. While passing the legislation only took a matter of weeks, the process leading up to the new structure took several years.

A Tale of Two Systems

In 2008, the Utah System of Higher Education included the University of Utah, Utah State University, Weber State University, Salt Lake Community College, Utah Valley University, the College of Eastern Utah ([which became part of Utah State University in 2010](#)²), Snow College, Southern Utah University, Dixie State University, and the Utah College of Applied Technology which was comprised of eight distinct campuses. Various circumstances, however, led the Legislature to separate the Utah College of Applied Technology from the System to operate on its own and provide technical education. [In 2014, the College of Applied Technology was transformed into eight individual colleges of applied technology](#)³, eventually becoming the Utah System of Technical Colleges. That meant Utah had two systems providing postsecondary education, with USHE being governed by the State Board of Regents and UTech being governed by its Board of Trustees.

Having two separate systems providing postsecondary education presented challenges for students and the institutions. One primary example is institutions in both systems were providing similar technical education but without necessary coordination or strategies. Moreover, the missions of institutions between the systems lacked clarity and—in some cases—led to competition for students and resources. Often institutions were duplicating outreach, instruction, and administrative services. Utah likely missed opportunities to provide better access and outcomes for students by treating technical education and academic education as two separate endeavors housed in two separate systems.

¹ Utah State Legislature, S.B. 111, *Higher Education Amendments*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2020/bills/static/SB0111.html>

² Utah State University Eastern, *This is Our Utah State*, <https://usueastern.edu/about/>

³ Utah State Legislature, H.B. 95, *Applied Technology College Governance*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2014/bills/static/HB0095.html>

The Higher Education Strategic Planning Commission

The Legislature recognized that the current higher education structure may not be adequate to navigate the coming changes to higher education and the workforce over the next 20 years. In 2018, the Legislature passed [H.B. 300, Higher Education Modifications](#)⁴, which created the Higher Education Strategic Planning Commission and gave it the responsibility to “develop a strategic plan aimed at meeting the future challenges of the state system of higher education.”

In August 2018, the commission contracted with the [National Center for Higher Education Management Systems](#) to develop a statewide strategic plan and make other recommendations with a focus the next 20 years. [NCHEMS issued its recommendations](#)⁵ in November 2019, including the following counsel for the commission:

- Reassess and recommit to a set of statewide goals for postsecondary education attainment
- Reform statewide postsecondary governance to ensure that expert leadership is most effectively focused on aligning investments and institutional activities with the needs of the public foremost in mind
- Address capacity needs in rural Utah. Meeting these needs will require innovative models that link capacity and funding to effective and efficient delivery mechanisms
- Address workforce and career readiness through purposeful policy and coordination with related state agencies
- Take steps to address affordability now and its preservation into the future, including establishing an affordability standard, greater transparency in aid programs (including requiring the FAFSA as a condition of eligibility and creating a common statewide application for financial aid), making a commitment to providing needed financial support to adult learners, and by developing and growing earn-and-learn financial aid programs

The commission decided to start immediately with reforming statewide postsecondary governance and to address additional findings of NCHEMS after a new governance structure was in place to lead on those efforts. The commission chairs subsequently sponsored [S.B. 111, Higher Education Amendments](#)⁶.

Two Systems Merged into One

⁴ Utah State Legislature, *H.B. 300, Higher Education Modifications*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/HB0300.html>

⁵ Utah System of Higher Education, Utah System of Technical Colleges and Utah System of Higher Education Statement on Governance, https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/agendas/20191115/TAB_D_2019-11-15.pdf

⁶ Utah State Legislature, *S.B. 111, Higher Education Amendments*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2020/bills/static/SB0111.html>

In broad terms, S.B. 111 merges the Utah System of Technical Colleges with the Utah System of Higher Education, creating a joint Utah System of Higher Education⁷, with one Board, the Utah Board of Higher Education, to govern. The new Utah Board of Higher Education will be comprised of 18 members, including two student members.

The unified Utah System of Higher Education will be made up of 16 institutions, including eight technical colleges, two community colleges, four regional universities, and two research universities.

Merging the systems creates more benefits than just structural change, however; some prominent advantages include:

- Allowing for more comprehensive strategic planning that encompasses the full spectrum of higher education
- Increasing accessible, affordable opportunities within higher education
- Creating seamless education pathways from certificates to degrees
- Improving collaboration between institutions
- Meeting the rapidly changing needs of a growing workforce

To seize these advantages, the new System must embrace the view that technical and academic education are not mutually exclusive options for students, but are, in fact, educational opportunities that can complement and build on each other, can provide pathways to better access and outcomes for all students from all backgrounds, and can lead to partnerships within the System that will make higher education more efficient and effective for students moving forward.

The Utah Board of Higher Education Takes the Reins

Changing the governing structure, by itself, will not result in an innovative vision and strategic path for higher education. The System must have strong leadership, and that leadership must be empowered to act. To that end, the Legislature granted the new Board of Higher Education the following duties and authorities:

- Governing the Utah System of Higher Education
- Establishing a statewide vision and goals
- Setting policies to achieve statewide goals
- Establishing performance metrics
- Collecting, analyzing, and coordinating System data
- Establishing and overseeing institutional roles
- Setting criteria for program approval
- Appointing and evaluating institutional presidents

⁷ Although legislative and educational leaders discussed alternative names, they determined the Utah System of Higher Education was the most accurate and positive name for the new combined system.

- Creating a strategic financial plan that includes performance funding, facilities, and setting tuition
- Creating a seamless, articulated education System
- Establishing shared administrative services
- Delegating oversight to institutional boards of trustees
- Delegating institutional management to presidents

The breadth of the Board’s authority and duties is paramount to its success. The Board now possesses the ability to truly impact the course of higher education through comprehensive strategic planning and leveraging the merits of a statewide System for the benefit of students.

The Board officially begins governing the new System on July 1, 2020, and its list of tasks is long. Among the top priorities will be electing the Board’s leadership; setting a statewide vision, and developing a strategic plan with goals and performance metrics; establishing the institutions’ missions and roles; and delegating the appropriate responsibilities and authorities to each institution’s board of trustees and presidents to ensure the System is efficient, effective, and delivers world-class instruction and research.

In all of this work, the Board will strengthen public and private partnerships by working with leaders from the Utah State Board of Education on K-12 alignment, industry, and economic and workforce development to progress on a shared vision, coordinated strategies, and common outcomes to position Utah as a leader in economic growth and quality of life.