How We Strengthen Higher Education: The Convergence of the Interstate Passport Initiative, Tuning USA, and the Quality Collaboratives

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Introduction

The Utah System of Higher Education is engaged in three regional/national projects: the Western Interstate Passport Initiative, Tuning USA, and the Quality Collaboratives. All three projects have the potential to change how we engage in higher education, specifically what and how we teach to foster depth in student learning. Externally funded, all three projects share similar characteristics and converge in their processes and expected student learning outcomes, thereby promising to positively impact higher education.

In addition, all three projects contribute to state goals: The Utah Higher Education 2020 plan aims to have 66% of Utahns ages 25 to 64 with a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2020; The Salt Lake Chamber’s initiative, Prosperity 2020, has as its goal to strengthen Utah’s economy by investing in education, as does the Utah Governor’s Education Excellence Commission.

This brief paper will describe the three projects and the processes and outcomes on which they converge.

The Interstate Passport Initiative, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and coordinated by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), includes five western states (California (CSU system), Hawaii, North Dakota, Oregon and Utah), pairing from each state one or more community colleges with one or more universities. The faculty collaborate to assure that successful completion of the lower division general education core will transfer within the five cooperating western states. (Utah is including all eight of its system institutions.) Students successfully completing the lower division general education core will earn a Passport. The core includes oral and written communication and quantitative literacy, all based upon the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and employers nationally. Sending institutions will have assessed the competencies expected for completion of the core and awarded the Passport to eligible students. Receiving institutions will accept the core from Passport holders who will not need to repeat courses that map to general education expectations. This two-year project will track students who transfer with the Passport to determine how well they perform in their subsequent courses and in what timeframe they graduate (to the extent that additional funding allows).
**Tuning USA**, funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education, is a process of faculty collaboration, within an academic discipline, that identifies student learning outcomes and competencies expected through each degree level – associate, bachelor, and masters’ degrees. In Tuning, faculty determine not only the learning outcomes and competencies at each successive level of depth, but the methods that students may use to demonstrate attainment of competencies. These methods include high impact practices such as e-portfolios, group projects and written research papers. The process is transparent and clearly communicates to students, parents, employers and policy makers what students are expected to know, understand, and do at each degree level. In Utah all system institutions are involved as are three private institutions.

**The Quality Collaboratives**, funded by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) through a Lumina Foundation grant, pair a community college with a university to improve transfer/articulation between the two- and four-year institutions and determine assessment of student learning outcomes. The Quality Collaboratives address general learning, as in the Passport, field-based learning, as in Tuning, and the relationships between them. Utah has paired Salt Lake Community College and the University of Utah (U of U) to address lower division courses in Business, specifically the Associate of Science in Business degree (ASB). The U of U has changed its requirements in its lower division business program, so transfer/articulation issues must be addressed to avoid disadvantaging transfer students. The Utah project will use the Degree Qualifications Profile and the Essential Learning Outcomes as frameworks to foster integration between general learning outcomes and specific field-based competencies. The entire system’s business program faculty will participate in a statewide meeting in April to assure that all institutions understand and adjust curricula so that students will be able to transfer seamlessly into a business major. In addition, the faculty will work with e-portfolios to assess student learning outcomes.

**Convergence**

These three projects have the following elements in common: First, faculty working collaboratively across institutions are expected to determine student learning outcomes and competencies. As faculty work together, they develop trust with their colleagues across institutions (Tuning and the Quality Collaboratives), state systems (Tuning, Passport) and across five western states (Passport). This means that faculty will accept one another’s assessments that demonstrate students have met the agreed-upon competencies.

Second, learning outcomes and competencies make us rethink credit, courses and seat time which have served traditionally as proxies for student learning. None of the projects is expected to challenge accepted practices with regard to credit and courses – at least, not yet.

Third, the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) form the basis for what students are expected to know and demonstrate in all three projects.
Fourth, all three projects support transfer and articulation to either additional general education courses or to academic major programs. All three expect that departmental faculty will inform their colleagues, department chairs, deans and chief academic officers of the projects and their benefits to the teaching/learning relationship.

Fifth, all three projects ultimately should be accepted into the academic fabric of participating institutions. All of the projects, particularly Tuning and the Quality Collaboratives, support high impact assessments on student learning, thus demonstrating accountability to the higher education community, employers and policy makers.

Policy Issues and the Utah Board of Regents

Raising the level of performance of Utah’s students through intentional and collaborative work of faculty enhances the efforts of the USHE to reach its 66% graduation goal and, at the same time, provides Utah students with an education that prepares them for the future. Changes in policy can be informed by all three projects and support both completion and a quality education.

1. Emphasis on Quality and Outcomes
Tuning USA and the Quality Collaboratives create processes of student engagement that have been shown to contribute to completion. Applied practices by students better prepare them for the workplace and citizenship. And the movement away from multiple choice tests to actual student demonstrations of learning through high impact practices has implications for accountability as parents, students, policy makers and employers will be aware of what students know, understand and are able to do at each degree level. Thus, Regents’ policies might reflect examples of engaged practices from USHE institutions that lead to completion and provide a quality education to our students.

2. Focus on Acquisition of Competencies
Because of the transparency of the process, particularly in Tuning, institutions will be able to articulate what each academic degree expects of its graduates. Thus, the Regents will have definitions for associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees in each academic discipline that has been tuned. With emphasis on depth of learning, as the projects continue and classroom practices change, the Regents’ policies might be adapted to support depth of competency development with less emphasis on seat time. Approval of new programs should be predicated on the identification of learning outcomes and competencies rather than solely on course title.

3. Leadership Focused on Learning
Regents should include a teaching and learning focus when interviewing candidates for Commissioner and institutional Presidents. Each institutional leader must create an environment where students can learn and faculty can practice supportive teaching/learning strategies that produce not only retention and completion, but also a quality education for all students. Regents can play a major role in expanding engaged
learning and teaching by hosting a series of symposia by national experts for Utah faculty and administrators.

Conclusion

All three projects will require time and energy to integrate their processes into faculty thinking and practice. Faculty need time to communicate with one another, to build mechanisms to identify competencies and modify systems to accommodate new learning. Thus, student learning will improve over time as more faculty become involved and various high impact assessment systems are developed.

These projects have great potential to strengthen higher education today as our faculty adapt new ways of teaching and learning into their classrooms. All three projects clarify our enterprise and our values: The education of all students at levels of depth that prepare them to succeed as contributing employees, entrepreneurs and as citizens. The Interstate Passport Initiative, Tuning USA, and the Quality Collaboratives promise to change the landscape of higher education with exciting new practices in teaching and learning in this, the 21st century.