



UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

March 21, 2024

Program Review Processes

Institutional Roles and Program Approval Authority

Utah code defines particular roles for the institutions within the Utah System of Higher Education and broadly outlines the types of academic or instructional programs that may be offered within those institutional roles. State code requires the Utah Board of Higher Education to clarify each institution's primary role and mission by determining:

- the level of program and types of degrees that the institution generally offers based on institutional role;
- broad fields that are within the institution's specific mission; and
- any special characteristics of the institution, such as the type of students it serves.

Institutional boards of trustees have the authority to approve instructional programs that fall within those roles and parameters defined by the Board of Higher Education through its Policies [R312, *Institutional Roles and Missions*](#); [R315, *Designation of Geographic Service Regions*](#); and [R401, *Approval of New Programs, Program Changes, Discontinued Programs, and Program Reports*](#).

Geographic Service Regions

State code also requires the Board to “develop strategies for providing higher education, including career and technical education, in rural areas” ([53b-1-402](#)). As a result, the Board has encouraged a system of robust colleges and universities across multiple geographic regions to fully meet the state's needs.

The Board assigns geographic service regions to each institution (Policy R315) and gives institutions the primary responsibility for ensuring broad and adequate access to higher education within their regions. USHE institutions are not allowed to offer programs within another institution's region unless approved by the Board, except for technical colleges, whose service regions overlap with degree-granting institutions. Institutions may receive permission from the Board to provide programs outside their service area if the primary institution is unable or unauthorized to provide a specific type of program or if the institutions are working in partnership to jointly provide a program. Online education is not constrained by geographic regions and is available to students throughout the state.

Academic Program Approval

[Board Policy R401](#) outlines the basic structure of certificates and degrees that degree-granting colleges and universities may offer. The policy will soon be updated to include parallel definitions and processes for technical certificates.

The policy currently defines the credit range allowed for academic certificates, degree types, and considerations like shared general education components as required by state law. It defines the process for seeking approval for new programs.

Creating new academic certificate and degree programs most often begins within an academic department. Then, it moves through various levels of internal review at an institution, usually including the dean, a general education committee, an institutional-level curriculum committee, the provost's office, and the budget office. Once a program has passed its institutional review, it is forwarded to the Commissioner's office via a template based on [Policy R401](#), which asks the department to provide detailed information about:

- institutional capacity, such as faculty, lab space, and other resources,
- budget/fiscal costs and potential revenue of the program,
- equity and access considerations,
- local, regional, and state needs that the program will address,
- workforce demand,
- economic impact,
- duplication of programs at other institutions,
- possibility of partnering with existing programs at other institutions,
- national disciplinary norms and expectations,
- special program accreditation requirements, and
- transferability with other institutions in USHE.

The Commissioner's office determines fit within institutional role, performs an assessment of the program, and sends the proposal out for peer review by sister USHE institutions. The Commissioner's office records the feedback from these reviews and its assessment of the program to the institutional boards of trustees to use in their deliberations on approving the program. Once the board of trustees has approved a program, it is forwarded as an information item in the General Consent Calendar to the Board of Higher Education.

A parallel process provides a more extensive review for out-of-role programs that require approval by the Board rather than institutional trustees.

Cyclical Program Review

Once a program has been approved by either the institutional trustees or the Board of Higher Education, it must undergo regular cyclical program reviews to ensure it is performing adequately. There are two cyclical reviews called for in state code [53B-16-102 \(6\)](#).

- 1. Cross-system disciplinary reviews:** State code requires the Board to conduct “a qualitative and quantitative review of academic disciplines across the system, including enrollment, graduation rates, and workforce placement, ensuring that the Board conducts a review of all disciplines within the System at least once every seven years.” A possible outcome of these cross-system disciplinary reviews is to help the Board determine where there may be detrimental, unnecessary duplication of programming or to identify programs that may not be justified in light of enrollment, completion, or workforce placement patterns.
- 2. Individual program review:** State code also requires the Board to conduct a more qualitative review of “each program of instruction at an institution of higher education, including a program of instruction funded by a gift, grant, or contract.” These more extensive reviews include internal institutional assessments based on criteria established by the Board; institutions are also required to solicit and forward evaluations performed by external evaluators from non-USHE institutions and any special reviews required by program accreditors. In 2021, the Commissioner’s office established more stringent responses to programs struggling with enrollment, student completion outcomes, faculty hiring, specialized accreditation, or other difficulties. The new process includes working with the provosts of sponsoring institutions to place struggling programs on probation and identifying clear benchmarks that must be reached and reported on to the Board of Higher Education within a specified period of time (generally one year). If the program has not met the required benchmarks by the established deadline, the program will be discussed by the Board, which may require its termination. Programs that are performing adequately are listed on the Board’s General Consent Calendar. Programs that institutions have decided to discontinue as a result of cyclical reviews are also listed on the General Consent Calendar. Legislation in 2023 changed the timeline of these individual program reviews to every seven years. The Commissioner’s office is working with institutional chief academic officers to create a calendar to reflect the new seven-year cycles.

Recommendations on program oversight

Programs that are in high demand by students, employers, and communities across that state are, of necessity, offered at multiple institutions to provide students with access to comprehensive education, broad access to high-yield and high-demand programs that offer a wide range of employment opportunities, and a careful balance of more specialized programs with specific, less widely available, or geographically-focused employment outcomes. In 2019, the legislature commissioned the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to guide principles that could guide cyclical program reviews in light of the merger of technical colleges with degree-granting institutions in one system. The report encouraged the Board to carefully consider regional demand in its strategic efforts to

address higher education program capacity. It notes that Utah's rapid population growth has been uneven across the state, leading to some regions facing "serious shortages in postsecondary capacity" and areas where higher education needs may be "neglected" (4). It also noted that occupational needs may be clustered in particular geographic regions rather than widespread across the state. It emphasized the critical need in rural communities for broadly trained workers, as through traditional liberal arts programs, rather than being focused too narrowly on specific occupational skills. It suggested that "programs should strike an appropriate balance between the specific and the general, reflecting the fact that occupations in remote locations are likely to demand a broader range of skills, knowledge, or expertise from fewer workers, as opposed to highly specialized occupations in more populated areas." The report also highlighted the state's demand for academic programs that will help individuals grow and build small businesses (NCHEMS 30).

In addition, the report encouraged the Board to address the flat production of certificates and sub-baccalaureate associate degrees (NCHEMS 4; 19). It encouraged the Board to more clearly distinguish between "technical education" certificates and academic certificates, address duplication of technical certificates at degree-granting institutions to ensure the best use of state resources and affordability for students through the technical education tuition programs, and simultaneously increase the production of academic certificates and associate degrees at degree-granting institutions (NCHEMS 21-22).

Cyclical program reviews will provide the Board with the data needed to meet its statutory responsibility to ensure an appropriate range of program and degree offerings at USHE institutions, thereby providing Utahns with access to comprehensive educational offerings wherever they may live.

Commissioner's Recommendation

This is an information item only; no action is required.

Attachment

NCHEMS Utah Final Report