



UTAH SYSTEM OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION

# MEMORANDUM

January 9, 2025

## Commissioner Review of Higher Education Space Utilization – SmithGroup Analysis 2024

The state Division of Facilities Construction and Management (DFCM) engaged the SmithGroup to conduct a comprehensive space utilization study of Utah's higher education institutions. This study aimed to assess and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of space usage within the state's public colleges and universities. SmithGroup's efforts focused on analyzing current space allocations, usage patterns, and overall facility needs to identify areas for potential optimization. The study includes an in-depth look at classroom and lab utilization, office space requirements, and common area functions to evaluate alignment with educational and operational demands.

In its November 21, 2024, meeting, the Board heard a presentation from the SmithGroup on primary study findings, limitations, and corresponding recommendations. Since then, the Commissioner's office has reviewed the final SmithGroup report and developed the following takeaways for Board consideration:

### **Commissioner Responses to SmithGroup Recommendations**

**Continue to invest in centralized data collection and validation:** USHE should continue to work with institutions to review and refine room codes, definitions, and taxonomies to ensure that space utilization data is as robust and reliable as possible. USHE should consider increasing institutional training offerings and performing additional quality reviews.

*The Commissioner agrees with these recommendations and OCHE is in the process of incorporating related changes into its space utilization analytical operating practices.*

**Maintain current utilization guidelines for degree-granting institution space needs analysis and planning, but convert to a single efficiency metric:** USHE should retain current Room Utilization Rate (RUR) and Seat Occupancy Rate (SOR) targets of 75% and 66.7% for degree-granting institutions. However, USHE should blend RUR and SOR into a single metric of classroom efficiency for ease and accuracy.

*The Commissioner agrees with these recommendations and OCHE will include a single efficiency metric for each institution in its annual space utilization report.*

**Convert current utilization guidelines for technical colleges to a capacity-based**

**framework:** USHE should move away from RUR and SOR measures for technical colleges and instead apply capacity-based guidelines that contemplate assignable square foot per full-time equivalent student.

*The Commissioner agrees with these recommendations and OCHE will report space utilization metrics for technical colleges using a capacity-based measure.*

**Expand types of space evaluated for utilization:** USHE should collect data necessary (such as on-campus FTE and faculty by institution location) and report utilization metrics for non-classroom and non-lab spaces, focusing on common metrics such as total space occupancy, workstation occupancy, and desk-to-employee ratios.

*The Commissioner agrees with these recommendations and OCHE will explore methods for collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data necessary to fully capture institutional space utilization by space type.*

**Commissioner Analysis of SmithGroup Study Limitations**

While the Commissioner agrees with numerous recommendations contained in the SmithGroup report, several limitations to the SmithGroup analysis have gone under-recognized. The most acute study shortcomings generally relate to SmithGroup analyses underlying the claim that the preponderance of USHE institutions are projected to have a surplus of space over the long-run (i.e. 10-year forecast horizon). The Commissioner's office recommends that this claim be treated with a high degree of uncertainty for the following reasons:

**The SmithGroup finding that available space data and reporting processes preclude a high-confidence reporting of current space utilization rates does not comport with a finding that institutions will generally have surplus space over the next decade:** As the SmithGroup qualified in its report, "The accuracy of facility inventory data and effective space management practices varied across institutions. Space guidelines may underestimate or overestimate actual space needs based on the accuracy of these data." The SmithGroup report includes point estimates for 10-year space needs by degree-granting institution and low/high estimates for 10-year space needs by technical college, but does not include a sensitivity analysis for the variance of point estimates related to data availability or reliability. As such, it is difficult to assess the robustness of the SmithGroup's reported 10-year space need projections by institution.

**SmithGroup space utilization analysis does not address condition, suitability, or configuration of space:** As the SmithGroup also caveated in its report and presentation to the Board,

the analysis used to project 10-year space needs does not take into account the status of current structures on campus. In fact, numerous USHE institution 2024 dedicated and non-dedicated project requests are intended to meet institutional space demands on the basis of repair and replacement needs (e.g. USU Spectrum and MAIDAC requests, UTU McDonald Building Renovation & Addition, UU Community & Family Health Building, etc.).

**SmithGroup space utilization projections are particularly sensitive to FTE growth assumptions and do not contemplate institutional strategy or policy levers that may**

**effectuate growth trends:** The Office of Research and Data Science and Finance and Facilities teams evaluated the SmithGroup full-time equivalent 10-year student enrollment projections for institutions and determined that, in many cases, the baseline enrollment projections are low when compared to Utah’s projected college-age population and future K-12 student enrollment. Moreover, as institutions pursue initiatives such as expanding career and technical education opportunities to secondary students, increasing access for adult learner reskilling/upskilling, and various other workforce-centric strategies, new and replacement capital facilities will be necessary to accommodate attendant growth in FTE enrollment, which is not reflected by the SmithGroup study.

**Commissioner’s Recommendation**

This is an information item only, and the Commissioner will move forward with the proposed recommendations at Board discretion.