CASE STUDY

Utah System of Higher Education Transformation:

One System, Shared Metrics—Accountability that Moves Resources

rpk GROUP | MGT

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This case study is part of the rpk GROUP | MGT System Transformation Toolkit, which provides public higher education systems and institutions with tools and examples for undertaking system reform in ways that leverage system-level advantages and strengthen financial sustainability.

As states look for ways to make higher education more connected, workforce-responsive, and easier for students to navigate, the Utah System of Higher Education (Utah) offers an example of system transformation driven less by crisis than by proactive coordination across technical, two-year, and four-year institutions.

Utah's on-going higher education transformation is a planned, multi-pronged effort to help a diverse set of institutions operate more like a coherent higher education system, while preserving the differentiated missions of its colleges and universities. The core building blocks of this transformation are:

- **Building a more coherent system framework across technical, two-year, and four-year institutions,**
- **Annually aligning resources with workforce needs and student outcomes, and**
- **Strengthening student mobility and internal efficiencies.**

Rather than responding to acute fiscal crisis, Utah used a 2020 integration of multiple governance structures, sustained legislative support, and a workforce-centered agenda to initiate a transformation. It prioritized coordinating technical colleges and degree-granting institutions around shared goals, improved program alignment and credit mobility opportunities, and increased accountability for student and labor-market outcomes.

Since the merger, Utah has paired system-building infrastructure, such as common course numbering and statewide transfer policies, with other innovations around transfer credit, including one program that allows students to transfer tech college credits into associate degrees accepted across Utah's four-year institutions.

QUICK FACTS & KEY STRATEGIES

System: The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE), which is overseen by the Utah Board of Higher Education (UBHE), has governed technical colleges and degree-granting institutions under a single statewide structure since 2020.[1]

Scale: Sixteen public institutions—eight technical colleges, two community colleges, four regional universities, and two research universities—now operate under one statewide structure following the 2020 merger.

Signature structural change: The combined governance of degree-granting institutions and technical colleges under one board and one system created a common framework for workforce planning, transfer policy, and shared accountability.

Student success indicator: A 52.1% statewide timely completion rate, reflecting efficient progress to credential, and a 76.3% high-yield awards metric, alongside initiative-specific workforce targets.[2]

Affordability strategy: State aid, including the Utah Promise Grant, is paired with legislative seed funding and reinvestment incentives intended to expand affordable pathways into high-demand programs and work-based learning.[3]

Cross-campus access strategy: Common course numbering, statewide transfer policies, aligned technical-college curricula, and the Utah Transfer Guide, reinforced by concurrent-enrollment pathway redesign and emerging statewide career-mapping tools.[4]

The system has also made strategic reinvestments in workforce development and provided targeted grant funding intended to shift capacity toward programs that demonstrate greater demand.

Utah's strategy emphasizes regional collaboration to reduce institutional competition and focus on capacity-building for in-demand programs like engineering and artificial intelligence. The focus is also on improved resource efficiency, as demonstrated by two universities that agreed to split responsibility for undergraduate and graduate cybersecurity programs.

Work remains to encourage and actualize deeper collaborative efforts. Plans include more consistent benchmarks—in addition to those detailing the number of students in programs and graduates employed in aligned industry—for workforce programs and workforce entry. A gradual move toward shared services, as well as stronger data connectivity across K-12, workforce, and higher education systems point toward Utah's commitment to student-centered and resource-responsible transformation.

Background

Utah has operated under a unified governance framework since 2020, using a single board and system structure that incorporates both technical colleges and degree-granting institutions. This statewide framework makes it easier to coordinate policy, planning, accountability, and support tools for students across all types of schools. The combined setup also provides state leaders with a more straightforward way to bring together college presidents, set expectations, and shift from individual campus negotiations to broader, systemwide actions.

For performance and return on investment (ROI), Utah treats student outcomes and workforce connections as collective system duties. Instead of strict mandates, the state relies on incentives, transparency, and ongoing reviews. Institutional success is measured by timely graduation, valuable credentials, and whether programs are sustainable for institutions, beneficial to employers, and helpful for students.[5]

Strategic reinvestment is used as a policy tool. Utah expects colleges and universities to move resources toward higher-priority areas as institutions engage with annual targeted legislative funding incentives, align with benchmarks for initiative success, and regularly evaluate their progress. In practice, this approach has led to investments in expanding engineering programs, apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, and other workforce-development offerings, while encouraging the system to avoid unnecessary duplication and improve adaptability.[6]

Opportunities Created by Transformation

Utah's approach highlights several practical ways systems can use statewide coordination to improve student mobility, align programs and resources with workforce needs, and strengthen long-term efficiency and accountability. Utah's approach points to five system-level opportunities:

1. **Use labor market demand and opportunity data to communicate ROI.** Utah uses labor-market demand and the high-yield credential frame to make workforce relevance more visible and measurable, helping clarify opportunity pathways for students and strengthening the state's ROI narrative. That orientation also supports regional differentiation: not every campus needs to offer the same AI or engineering program if statewide demand can be met more effectively through coordinated expansion and specialization.
2. **Reinvest strategically to expand, redesign, collaborate on, or phase down programs.** Focused resource allocation functions as both an academic-portfolio and student-success lever, pushing institutions to reassess which programs merit expansion, redesign, collaboration, or phased reduction. For example, Utah Valley University and Southern Utah University are sharing resources by splitting undergraduate and graduate cybersecurity program responsibilities and co-hosting events. Legislative seed funding, matching requirements in selected initiatives, and initiative-specific benchmarks give Utah practical tools to shift resources toward programs with stronger employer demand, work-based learning opportunities, and clearer employment payoff.
3. **Improve academic efficiency by removing barriers and improving coordination.** Timely completion treats unnecessary time-to-credential as a statewide performance issue, but Utah's efficiency agenda is broader than speed alone. For example, innovations such as Snow College's "Tech Connect" program allows students to transfer credits from technical education certificates into associate degrees which are in turn accepted across Utah's four-year institutions. [7] Aligning program standards across institutions and making more credits transferable along with normalizing concurrent enrollment contribute to improved student mobility and reductions in credit loss. Together these create more coherent pathways from high school through certificate, associate, and bachelor's attainment.

4. **Sequence shared services so integration strengthens (not strains) campuses.** Utah positions shared services as a quality-and-efficiency lever where coordination can improve consistency and reduce duplication. The near-term opportunity is to sequence implementation carefully, beginning with areas such as benefits administration and then moving toward broader enterprise systems, so service integration strengthens campus operations rather than overwhelming institutional capacity.
5. **Cross-system coordination introduces efficiencies that smooth Utah's transfer and pathway infrastructure.** Initiatives such as common course numbering, statewide transfer policies, aligned curricula, career-mapping tools, and shared language around concurrent enrollment, positions credit mobility as a system feature rather than a campus-by-campus exception. Stronger data sharing with workforce and K-12 partners could further connect education decisions to employment outcomes.[8]

Challenges and Tradeoffs

Utah's experience also underscores the practical tensions that come with system transformation, particularly as leaders work to balance coordination, evidence, trust, and access.

01 **System coordination versus institutional autonomy.** A governance merger creates the potential for stronger coordination, but it does not guarantee it. Utah's institutions still want room to exercise local discretion, especially around program design and implementation, so system leaders must continually balance statewide workforce priorities with campus identity, mission, and operating autonomy.

02 **Data maturity and program-level ROI measurement.** Strategic reinvestment depends on credible evidence related to program costs, market demand, completion, transfer, and workforce outcomes. Utah currently has more initiative-level targets than fully integrated system data, and disconnected platforms across higher education, K-12, and workforce agencies make it harder to benchmark performance consistently or act quickly on emerging demand signals.

03 **Disruption, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust.** The state has legislative support and a collaborative style, but culture remains a real constraint on the pace of change. Performance funding can draw attention, yet the harder work is building a norm of continuous improvement, transparent criteria, and recurring review so institutions experience change as student-responsive rather than purely top-down or budget-driven.

04 **Regional access and focus.** A statewide system must avoid concentrating high-demand programs only in a few places, even when duplication is inefficient. Utah's interest in regional hubs, shared delivery, and differentiated program arrays helps manage this tradeoff, but it also requires careful decisions about where students can start, transfer, and complete without losing access or clarity.

Lessons for other Higher Education Systems

Utah's experience suggests that durable system change depends not just on structure, but on sustained practices that connect governance, student pathways, resource decisions, operational integration, and stakeholder trust.

- **Start with governance clarity, then build system muscle.** Governance change can be a necessary first move, but it is not sufficient. Utah's experience suggests that merged authority should be followed by an annual convening, recurring review, shared definitions, and clear expectations for how institutions will act on system priorities.

- **Make credit mobility a statewide promise.** Utah shows the value of starting with aligned program standards and then building transferable credit pathways, common terminology, and stronger student-facing navigation tools. Credit mobility works best when it is treated as a designed statewide feature across technical, two-year, four-year, and high-school-connected pathways.
- **Pair performance metrics with a real resource strategy.** Utah connects performance framing to dollars, but the more important lesson is that benchmarks must be realistic, initiative-specific, and revisited regularly. Formula funding alone does not change behavior; metrics matter most when they are linked to concrete investments, accountability routines, and evidence that programs are actually effective.
- **Treat shared services as a service-quality strategy.** Define what will be shared, in what sequence, and at what service standard before centralization begins. Utah's gradual approach, sequenced around contract timing and platform diversity, underscores that shared services succeed when implementation capacity matches ambition.
- **Use disruption carefully: transparency and voice matter.** Multi-year reinvestment and program differentiation can unlock value, but stakeholder buy-in is critical. Utah's approach highlights the importance of framing decisions as wins for students, institutions, and employers without signaling that some pathways are lesser.

CONCLUSION

Utah's transformation combines unified governance, workforce-centered incentives, and statewide transfer infrastructure with a strong emphasis on culture change and accountability. The transferable insight is practical: systems build greater systemness through aligned pathways, recurring performance review, regional collaboration, and student-centered tools that make movement across institutions more transparent and more valuable.

Notes

[1] Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). The new Utah System of Higher Education.
https://ushe.edu/the-new-utah-system-of-higher-education/

[2] Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). Attainment dashboards.
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[3] Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). State scholarships & aid programs.
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[4] Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). Utah transfer guide. https://ushe.edu/utah-transfer-guide/; Utah System of Higher Education. (2025, November 20). Utah System of Higher Education achieves major milestones in timely completion and high-yield awards and advances student success.
https://ushe.edu/utah-system-of-higher-education-achieves-major-milestones-in-timely-completion-and-high-yield-awards-and-advances-student-success/

[5] Utah System of Higher Education. (2024). 2024-27 strategic plan.
https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/strategic_plan/2024-27_Strategic_Plan.pdf

[6] ibid, Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). USHE institution performance funding model, goals & appropriations [Utah Board of Higher Education training materials].
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[7] Snow College. (n.d.). Tech connect.
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