Proposal to Create a College-Access Portal for Oregon

Submitted to the
Unified Education Enterprise
April 30, 2008

BACKGROUND
The first step in ensuring that students have access to college-level education is to provide clear guidance. At an early stage, students need to understand the academic preparation they will need and the general features of schools or programs that might interest them. Later, they must be able to negotiate the application process itself, including a realistic assessment of program cost in both time and money. This challenge is daunting for all students, but it is particularly so for students whose families or close associates do not have first-hand experience with it. For such students, the idea of college may be vague and the thought of being a college student remote. If Oregon is serious about meeting the goal of 40-40-20 and educating 80 percent of its young people at the community college- or university-level, it will need to start with effective communication and education that demystifies the idea of college.

Recognizing this need, several other states have created web-based resources that provide general information about college, as well as specialized information about particular programs. The most sophisticated of these websites serve as one-stop portals to all public post-secondary institutions in the state and even communicate differentially to students of varying ages and interests.

In August 2006, the Oregon Department of Education, on behalf of the Oregon PK-20 Redesign Initiative, investigated the wisdom of developing such a portal for Oregon.\(^1\) Key findings included the following:

- While much college access information is available from national websites, there is important information that is and must be state-specific and thus cannot be obtained from national sites.
- Several states claim that one-stop college access portals are demonstrably useful to students and parents (e.g., Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Texas).
- Although Oregon’s current web resources offer some of the services typically included in one-stop sites, no single Oregon site is equivalent to the exemplary sites elsewhere.

The report recommended that Oregon develop an action plan to build a single, coordinated, collaboratively-supported one-stop college information website, and in doing so, to take particular note of the model sites in three states: Indiana, North Carolina, and Kentucky.

\(^{1}\) One-Stop Websites for College Access: Report to Oregon PK-20 Redesign (Joint Boards-Gates Initiative), Working Draft 9/30/06. Research focused on three questions: 1) What is the current status of college preparation websites to serve students in other states? 2) Could the ODE’s web page, REAL, become a useful site for the purpose of informing students about college with some adaptations? If so, what adaptations would be needed? 3) Are there other Oregon sites serving students for this purpose and if so, how adequate a job are they doing?
In December 2007, the Unified Education Enterprise (UEE) took the next step by charging staff to investigate the features of successful college-access portals in more detail, guided by these questions:

1. What information and/or services are typically offered at exemplary state college access portals?
2. Who typically takes the lead in creating and maintaining statewide college access portals (e.g., higher education system, Department of Education, K-16 or K-20 council, state scholarship commission, other)?
3. What planning stages and budgets are associated with exemplary portals?
4. What kind of social marketing should accompany portal creation to maximize its usefulness?
5. Is there evidence that state investments in college access networks lead to increased college participation?

The results in the form of a full report and executive summary were provided to UEE at its March 14, 2008, meeting. UEE requested that staff summarize the key points as a potential policy option package. That summary follows.

Potential POP to Create a State-wide College-access Network for Oregon

NEED
There is little doubt that Oregon students need the same high quality information about college and careers that students in other states do. A study of current websites shows that Oregon lacks the kind of state-level portal that provides this information in other states. While individual Oregon websites offer components of college access information and services, none is as comprehensive as the exemplary portals in Indiana, North Carolina, and Kentucky [Insert links], and none is popularly recognized as “the place to go” for students preparing for college and careers. Although there are no national studies, there is state-level information indicating that the college-seeking behavior and enrollment of resident students has increased since the introduction of college-access campaigns, including portals.

RECOMMENDATION
It is recommended that Oregon develop a college access network that includes two components: 1) a comprehensive state level Web portal to help students and their families plan for college and careers; and 2) a social marketing campaign that communicates the importance of college to all Oregonians and explains the steps students must take to prepare for and access postsecondary education opportunities.

Design of the Oregon college access network should take advantage of the successful principles and approaches that have been tested in other states. For example, Oregon should

a. Build a network that is student-centered and does not presuppose a sophisticated understanding of college.

b. Have the resources to build the network in place before beginning work on it.

c. Have a firm commitment to move forward from all key stakeholders.
d. Designate a lead agency early on.

e. Plan at initiation for ongoing maintenance and sustainability of the network.

f. Determine early on what will constitute network success – that is, identify the metrics that will be used to gauge success.

g. Target information and services to multiple age groups and populations, including adult learners.

h. Build on existing infrastructure where possible to best leverage our resources.

i. Link to other sites in order to migrate students to appropriate information and services.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Based on investigation of three premier statewide portals in Indiana, North Carolina, and Kentucky, significant resources are needed to build and maintain an effective college access network for Oregon – from $500,000 to $1 million per year. The sites in these three states are fairly elaborate, including 24-7 help desks and e-transcripts and the states are spending this amount yearly in staffing, web updates, and constant improvement for the consumer. An Oregon system might look a little different if it were to start smaller.

Oregon will need some time to convene the various players and develop a common roadmap for this project. Creation of the network will need to take place in stages and there must be consensus on both the staging and the nature of the fully-developed network. [Insert estimate of total time needed, based on other states.] Since there are many components to put into place over an extended period of time, on-going funding will be needed.

A legislative funding package should be a first consideration for core funding [What does “core funding” mean? Give an example of what will be supported by the POP $$.] Extramural funding from foundations, the private sector, and federal grants should be sought as well.

KEY RESULTS

The combination of an effective college-access portal and a marketing campaign that makes more students interested in college should increase the college/university-going rate in Oregon. Other states are using the following metrics to determine the effect of their strategies and we anticipate using comparable data in Oregon.

1) Number of student accounts created;
2) Number of admissions applications processed;
3) Number of school counselors trained to use the site;
4) Usage of the site (frequency of “hits”).

Questions for UEE:

1. Do you have sufficient information to move the recommendation forward? If not, what additional information is needed?

2. Are the key results significant and are the measures of success adequate?

3. What next step does the UEE wish to take?
If UEE were to approve this policy package, we recommend adopting the following guidelines, which are based on the accumulated experience of North Carolina. Points at which guidance by UEE would be particularly important are highlighted.

1. Education leadership must be united in support of a single, unified goal. There must exist a willingness among K-12, higher education, and state leaders to work together to achieve this important and mutually beneficial goal. **ROLE FOR UEE**

2. There is a significantly greater impact if you deliver a single message through a collaborative partnership.

3. There are key constituents/gatekeepers, such that if one gets on board, the other potential partners will follow. Find these gatekeepers and invite them first. **ROLE FOR UEE**

4. Bring partners in before you create the end product/service and let them help design it.

5. If you include end users from the beginning, there is a greater probability of success and sustainability as they become dependent on the product/service.

6. Build in a system for continuous improvement. You must be able to enhance and upgrade your service as users' needs evolve. **ROLE FOR UEE**

7. If your program serves a need, the end users should be willing to fund it. If you have the right idea, the dollars will follow.

8. Research the websites that currently exist in your state. Recognize there are likely sites already in place serving aspects of college access. **ROLE FOR UEE**

9. Determine if there is an agency to partner with or an existing website that can be expanded to include information on all aspects of attending college. **ROLE FOR UEE**

10. Determine the needs of your state based on what is now in existence. **ROLE FOR UEE**

---

2 As example, NC faced the challenge of integrated existing systems. After NC Mentor was established, an alliance was formed with state’s guarantor, College Foundation, Inc., and student loan corporation, NC Education Assistance Authority. These entities had developed a complementary web portal known as College Foundation of North Carolina (www.CFNC.org) devoted to information on financing a college education including grants, scholarships, and savings and loan programs. The College Foundation of North Carolina was a brand image to market information to the public. The CFNC and NC Mentor programs were closely linked through joint marketing ventures, as well as hot links directing users across the two websites. Given the parallel mission of the two sites to increase college access and potential for consumers to be confused by which website held the relevant information, a joint decision was made by NC Mentor and CFNC to blend the websites into a single portal. Because CFNC had established a wider market presence among school counselors, educators, parents and students, the blended site retained the College Foundation of North Carolina name and existing URL of CFNC.org. The blended site was developed in a transparent manner so the user can pass between relevant materials hosted on different servers with no interruption or inconvenience. Other CFNC.org modules have been developed for specialized users including School Counselor Module, Financial Aid Administrator Module, Adult Learner, Transcripts Module, and College Redirection. The College Redirection “pool” is open from April 1-August 31 to connect students with NC colleges that still have open admission slots. Students can also study for SAT/other college admissions tests with College Test Prep, and they have the ability to “Add their Counselor,” a function which enables counselor to view student’s account. Students and families can learn about college savings plans, including NC’s National College Savings Program (529).
11. Determine if your site needs to be customized or could fit into a program that is already in use. **ROLE OF UEE—SEE FULL REPORT**

12. Research college access vendors for the following types of information:
   a. Is there a charge to either students or colleges to use the site?
   b. How comprehensive is the site?
   c. How competitive is the pricing for the services received?
   d. Seek referrals from vendors’ clients in order to check references to determine if they are satisfied with their website and the service and support they receive from the vendor.
   e. If you are considering a vendor, make a site visit to users of the vendor you are most interested in. Observe the site in action and gather information from school principals and counselors about their experience with the site and the vendor.

13. Be prepared to address concerns raised by potential users and stakeholders. Some issues will be based on misperceptions and require ongoing communication and clarity of the goals/objectives for a statewide system. Examples of concern:
   a. **Students with limited access to the Internet will be at a disadvantage.** In NC in 1999, this was a significant concern and there were two immediate responses. First, the program would include a resource center with a toll-free hotline to serve students and parents with limited Internet access. Second, it was anticipated that access to the Internet would continue to grow and in time would become a diminishing issue. In addition, the training of school counselors, librarians, and college access professionals (e.g., TRIO and GEAR UP advisors) on how to use the system would increase avenues for students to gain access.
   b. **Cost to users.** This concern became a moot point because unlike many online services, there would be no cost to a university to receive an application and no cost to a student to send an application.
   c. **Resistance of college admissions offices to applications from a statewide system.** Admission officers raised a number of concerns. First, a number of colleges created or contracted for their own customized admissions application on their college’s home website. Their preference is to have students complete their applications because they are likely to be programmed to go directly into their student information system and, therefore, it is easier for the college. However, when the issue is discussed from a student perspective, where the student’s preference is to be able to auto-populate multiple applications, admissions officers tend to become more open to participating in a statewide system, as long as there is an upload solution into their student information system. Second, the college’s investment in a unique online application needs to be justified by the admissions office. This has not proven to be an issue in North Carolina. All 110 colleges and universities accept the Mentor-based online application and 95 of those schools use CFNC.org as their exclusive source for online applications. NC’s objective was to develop a student-centered website and, by focusing on student needs, NC created a system which benefits the institutions of higher education.
   d. **The web portal will promote online student advising and usurp the role of the school counselor.** The concern of some school counselors when the idea of a
web portal was introduced was that the interactive nature of the site might replace the role of counselor. It became readily apparent to the counselors that the website would actually allow them to save time and streamline paperwork, particularly with online application and transcript processes, thereby allowing them to spend more time counseling and advising students. The NC Department of Public Instruction has provided a school counselor liaison to train other counselors to use the Mentor web site. The liaison position has done much to allay concerns and create a constructive working relationship with school counselors in NC.