

*Strengthening Utah's Rural Community Colleges:
Strategic Affiliation between Snow College and the College of Eastern
Utah*

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Abstract. With the fate of the College of Eastern Utah being debated by policy makers in Salt Lake City, the authors suggest that national trends point to enhanced support for a rural community college system. Two of Utah's remaining three community colleges serve smaller populations spread across rural, often remote, counties in central and southeastern Utah. A strategic alliance between Snow College and the College of Eastern Utah holds the potential to expand affordable access for students in rural areas while making common back-office and institutional support operations more cost-efficient. This alliance would provide a realistic and equitable economy of scale for higher education in rural Utah with a degree of autonomy to which rural residents are entitled.

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Over the past eighteen months the College of Eastern Utah has been buffeted by a series of mixed and changing messages about its future. Several abortive studies and amorphous proposals, played out in the context of an escalating statewide budget crisis, have resulted in growing confusion, institutional paralysis, and declining morale. To date, little of the discussion about CEU by state policy makers has been framed in terms of the distinctive regional conditions and higher education needs of rural Utah. The rural counties served by CEU have among the state's highest percentage of residents living below the poverty line and the highest percentage of at risk minorities outside portions of Salt Lake County. The rate of college attainment in southeast Utah is the lowest in the state. Affordable access to higher education is critical to regional economic development and to the quality of life for the people of rural Utah. Higher education leaders nationwide acknowledge the importance of community colleges in narrowing the disparity in educational attainment among economically distressed and geographically isolated populations.¹ That is why state higher education policy should be designed to strengthen rural Utah's community colleges. Addressing the immediate challenges facing the College of Eastern Utah must be grounded in a strategic vision for long-term sustainability of the comprehensive community college mission in rural Utah. Decisions made now for CEU will have an impact on the direction of higher education throughout rural Utah.

Background. Over the past ten years the College of Eastern Utah has faced several critical challenges. Since 1998, the College experienced significant losses in enrollment due to a variety of factors, including declining high school enrollments in CEU's service region and the loss of several programs to the Utah College of Applied Technology. Dropping enrollment has been a serious issue, but CEU's situation is not dramatically different from other USHE schools. Enrollment at Utah State University, for example, declined nearly as steeply as at CEU (20% and 22% respectively). During a period of flat and/or declining enrollments, CEU's statistics in raw numbers mirror other Utah institutions. Furthermore, CEU's enrollment numbers and overall student profile is

¹ Sara Goldrick-Rab, et al., *Transforming America's Community Colleges* (Brookings Institution, May 2009), at http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/0507_community_college_goldrick_rab.aspx (accessed June 11, 2009); Aims C. McGuinness, Jr. and Dennis P. Jones, "Narrowing the Gaps in Educational Attainment within States," Education Commission of the States, Center for Community College Policy Paper, October 2003, available at <http://www.communitycollegepolicy.org/html/Issues/access/pdf/NCHEMSReport.pdf> (accessed June 30, 2009); "Jill Biden Shines a Global Spotlight on American Community Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education News Blog*, July 5, 2009 at <http://chronicle.com/news/article/6736/jill-biden-shines-a-global-spotlight-on-american-community-colleges> (accessed July 6, 2009).

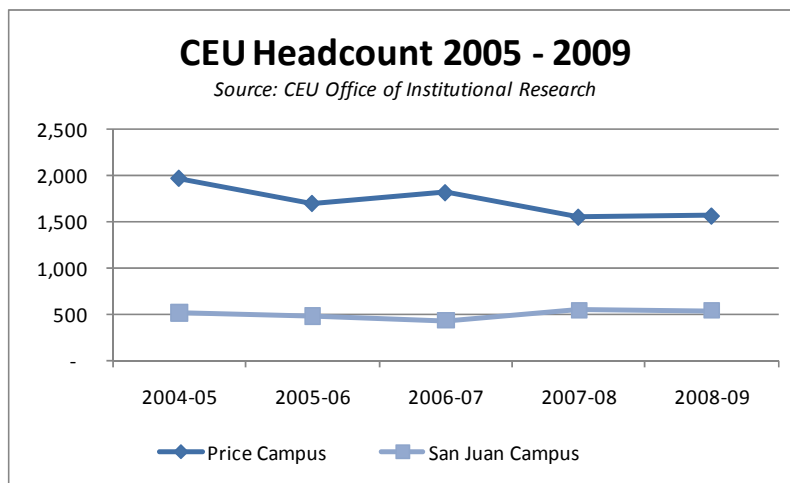
Funding Patterns 1998 - 2008			
	CEU	Snow	USU
Change in Appropriation 1998-2008	\$4,881,000	\$8,509,000	\$19,882,000
Change in Enrollment 1998 - 2008	(511)	107	826
Change in Tax Funds per FTE 1998-2008	\$5,895	\$2,944	\$762
	CEU	Snow	USU
Change in Appropriation 1998-2008	37.35%	65.02%	14.44%
Change in Enrollment 1998 - 2008	-26.52%	4.12%	5.20%
Change in Tax Funds per FTE 1998-2008	86.91%	58.50%	8.78%

Source: USHE 2009 Databook

Funding Patterns: 2004 - 2008			
	CEU	Snow	USU
Change in Appropriation 2003-2008	\$3,767,000	\$2,273,000	\$16,090,000
Change in Enrollment 2003 - 2008	(510)	(101)	(1,132)
Change in Tax Funds per FTE 2003-2008	\$5,313	\$1,096	\$1,288
	CEU	Snow	USU
Change in Appropriation 2003-2008	26.70%	11.93%	11.23%
Change in Enrollment 2003 - 2008	-24.78%	-3.75%	-6.44%
Change in Tax Funds per FTE 2003-2008	77.50%	15.50%	15.81%

Source: USHE 2009 Databook, Enrollment reflects Budget Related Annualized FTE

consistent with rural-serving community colleges nationwide.² Indications are that enrollment is stabilizing. An aggressive tuition policy for the entire college and innovative recruitment programs on the CEU-San Juan campus have flattened enrollment over the past three years.



From 1998 through 2007, CEU faced financial management as well as enrollment issues. Through a diligent effort initiated by the Office of the Utah Commissioner of Higher

² David E. Hardy and Stephen G. Katsinas, "Classifying Community Colleges: How Rural Community Colleges Fit," in *Rural Community Colleges: Teaching, Learning, and Leading in the Heartland* edited by Pamela L. Eddy and John P Murray (Jossey-Bass, 2007), pp. 5-17.

Education in 2006 and completed by CEU executives and staff by early 2008, the College now meets its obligations in relation to financial management and reporting. The CEU business office has been restructured and qualified staff now manages day-to-day operations. College financial data is as timely and reliable as it has been at any time in the College's history as noted in the unqualified opinions issued by the State Auditor and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.³ CEU has weathered the recent statewide budget crisis without firings or furloughs and is preparing for future budget reductions, as are all USHE schools, through appropriate measures such as reassessment of low-enrollment programs, incentivized retirements, and staff restructuring.

As CEU leaders, faculty and staff work to resolve these issues, some interests in the state capital suggested that the College's viability could best be ensured through a merger with Utah State University. The two institutions have an existing partnership to provide selected four-year degrees to residents of southeast Utah. In the spring of 2008 the State Legislature mandated that the possibility of a full-scale merger between CEU and USU be studied. One study effort was suspended without conclusion by the Commissioner of Higher Education in the fall of 2008. The Commissioner contracted a second study in April 2009.

At the May 2009 meeting of the State Board of Regents, Dr. Michael Petersen, hired to prepare the new study, recommended that "to ensure its future success, the College of Eastern Utah should become a quasi-autonomous institution within the Utah System of Higher Education affiliated with Utah State University."⁴ The purpose of this affiliation would be extension of a "regional university approach" to southeast Utah, thus providing greater access to baccalaureate and graduate degrees in the region. The Petersen report acknowledged that "changing the governance of CEU and broadening its mission through affiliation with USU will help but not solve a number of key challenges the institution faces,"⁵ including declining enrollments. The report offered no suggestions on how to address these challenges except to say that the "future success of CEU is in the hands of its leaders, faculty, and staff."⁶

Reactions to the Petersen report have been mixed. During recent meetings in Price, USU representatives expressed dissatisfaction with the report, but offered no alternative proposal. It remains unclear what specific configuration of a merged institution USU envisions, although the USU Board of Trustees indicated that their existing regional campus approach seemed preferable to the quasi-autonomous

³ NWCCU (2008). *Mid-term accreditation letter*; College of Eastern Utah (December 2008). 2008 Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment, p. 8. Available at <http://www.ceu.edu/community/docs/ARFE08.pdf>.

⁴ Michael Petersen (May 21, 2009). Ensuring the Future Success of the College of Eastern Utah, p. 1. Utah State Board of Regents Agenda, May 2009 – Tab EE. Accessed June 4, 2009 from http://www.utahsbr.edu/Agendas/2009/May29/Tab_EE.pdf.

⁵ Ibid, p. 1.

⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

structure outlined in the Petersen report. The paramount concern of the CEU Board of Trustees was the potential for CEU's community college services, particularly in the area of technical and workforce education, to be eclipsed by USU's four-year mission.⁷ Neither the USU nor the CEU Boards of Trustees accepted the Petersen report and the Board of Regents chose to organize its own task force rather than "endorse the basic concept inherent in Dr. Petersen's report" as recommended by the Commissioner of Higher Education.⁸ The Regent's task force will present a new proposal to the Board at its meeting on July 17.

Ensuring the future of Utah's rural community colleges. Throughout discussions of problems at CEU over the past year and a half, residents of southeastern Utah, including College staff and students, have been assured that the Regents want to see a vibrant, energetic rural community college serving the region. This assurance is based on the official policy established by the State Board of Regents affirming the value of comprehensive community colleges in Utah with notation of the special status of Snow College and CEU as public, rural-serving institutions.

Comprehensive Community Colleges: (Snow College (Snow), College of Eastern Utah (CEU), Salt Lake Community College (SLCC)) Comprehensive Community Colleges (or Associate's Colleges) generally include institutions where all degrees are at the associate's level, or where bachelor's degrees account for less than 10 percent of all undergraduate degrees. This classification excludes institutions eligible for classification as Tribal Colleges or Special Focus Institutions. Associate's Colleges are further divided by the setting and size of the College. *Snow and CEU are in the Public Rural-serving Medium category while SLCC is in the Public Urban-serving Multi-campus category.*⁹

Efforts to address the future of CEU can, and should, serve to strengthen the rural community college mission in Utah. Equal protection demands that the state provide service for taxpayers and students regardless of location. This can best be accomplished

⁷ This concern is not without precedent. In the late 1990s, studies in West Virginia determined that affiliating community colleges with 4-year institutions actually impeded delivery of post-secondary educational services to critical sectors of the population, particularly undereducated adults, because "the culture of these 'component' community colleges was strongly influenced by the priorities and culture of the sponsoring four-year institutions." Particularly significant was the fact that only the state's independent community colleges offered lower-priced access—affiliated institutions charged higher tuition. The West Virginia legislature responded by passing in 2000 a higher education act that encourages making community colleges free-standing institutions and ensuring that citizens in all regions of the state have access to community college services. See, McGuinness and Jones, "Narrowing the Gaps in Educational Attainment within States."

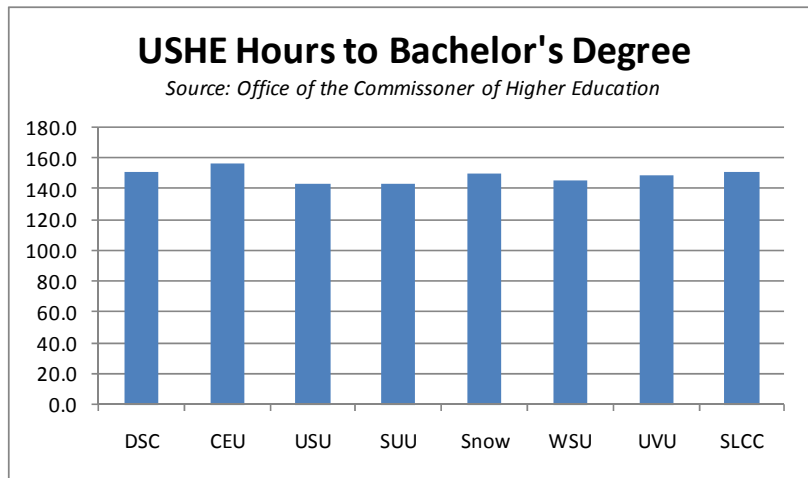
⁸ William A. Sederburg, May 21, 2009. Utah State Board of Regents Agenda, Tab EE, recommendation "a." Accessed June 4, 2009 from http://www.utahsbr.edu/Agendas/2009/May29/Tab_EE.pdf.

⁹ Regent Policy R312-4.4. Accessed 7/5/2009 from <http://www.utahsbr.edu/policy/R312.pdf> (emphasis added).

by strengthening the state’s rural colleges through policies that enable those living in the affected communities to control local institutions and guide their own futures.

An approach aimed at achieving this goal was anticipated when Commissioner Sederburg initially called for a study of “new models to make sure that CEU continues to be successful in the future.” The Commissioner identified two options, one a merger with USU and the other an affiliation with Snow College, which, like CEU, is a rural-serving community college.¹⁰ The Snow option, however, received no serious consideration in the Petersen report. Dr. Petersen did not meet with stakeholders at Snow College and dismissed the notion due to the “large cultural differences between the two institutions,” stating that a CEU-Snow affiliation “would not add significantly to the range of educational programs already available in southeastern Utah.”¹¹ The report failed to explain what was meant by “cultural differences” and did not consider if such differences might also exist between USU and CEU. In fact, Snow College and CEU have many similarities and an affiliation between the two institutions is a realistic and workable approach that has the potential to strengthen both colleges by creating cost-efficiencies through shared administrative functions, rationalizing curriculum by building on strengths while reducing redundancies, and providing a strong foundation for sustainable enrollment levels.

Snow and CEU share a common mission as medium sized rural-serving comprehensive community colleges and have many complimentary programs. Each institution offers a successful transfer program to four-year institutions for the purposes of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. As part of the Utah System of Higher Education, students at Snow, CEU and SLCC are able to transfer to four-year programs with minimal loss of credit.

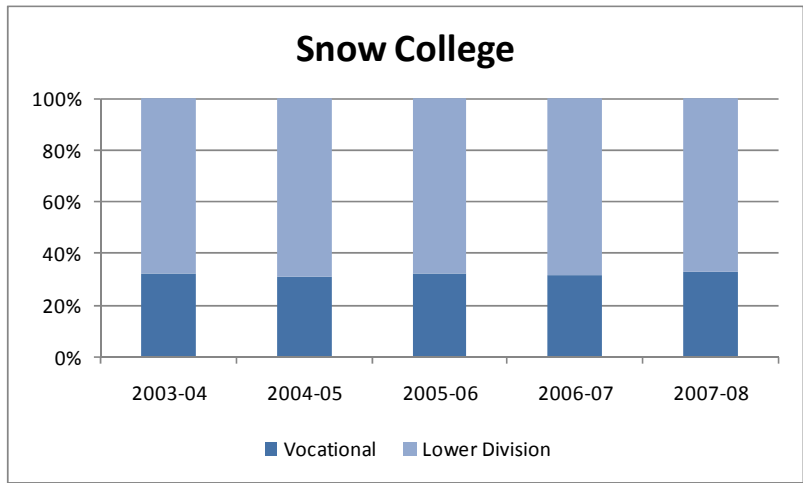
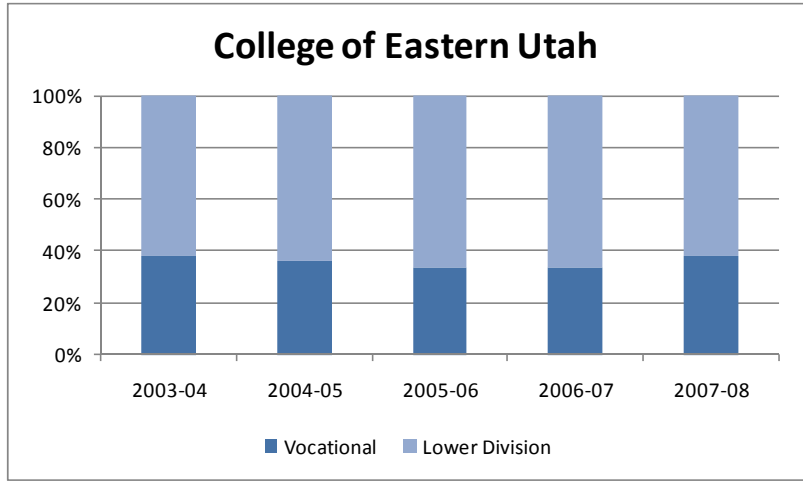


While CEU and Snow successfully educate both transfer and CTE students, the focus of programs offered at each school is substantially different. CEU maintains a stronger

¹⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (April 7, 2009). Press Release: Dr. Michael Petersen to Help Chart New Course for the College of Eastern Utah. Accessed June 4, 2009 from http://www.utahsbr.edu/PressRelease/PR_2009/PR_Apr_7_2009.html.

¹¹ Peterson, Ensuring the Future Success of the College of Eastern Utah, p. 1.

program in career and technical education (providing the region with much-needed nurses and routinely turning out national winners in welding and automotive skills competition) while Snow College has a national reputation for its arts programs (as evidenced by its partnership with the Julliard School for the Arts).



A combined effort that takes on the best of CEU and Snow holds the potential for building a strong rural community college system in which students can choose to pursue job-specific training tailored to the regional economy, complete an associate’s degree, or acquire general education credits transferable to a four-year degree school. Development of the community college baccalaureate, already planned at Snow, has the potential to further expand affordable educational opportunities in rural Utah as does the existing partnership between CEU and USU.

The nature of Utah’s rural community colleges is such that support functions are provided with minimal organizational structures – a fact long considered an issue by the State Board of Regents. An analysis presented 2007 in the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) noted the difficulties at CEU where one person held titles and responsibilities that violated control standards and that a lack of appropriate

staffing had led to significant thefts at Snow College.¹² The report noted that “CEU has taken valuable steps” to ensure that controls are in place, “separating duties once held by this single employee by creating several positions to avoid the vacuum of supervisory knowledge previously created.”¹³ Similarly, Snow College “reevaluated their distribution of financial duties and created new positions to better field the responsibilities of the business office.”¹⁴ The report concluded that no USHE institution, save the University of Utah, felt it had a staff sufficient to ensure that appropriate controls would provide security during a time of significant staff turnover.

A collaborative arrangement between the College of Eastern Utah and Snow College offers the opportunity to provide adequate staffing and separation of duties similar to what is found at larger USHE institutions. Both CEU and Snow have already enhanced controls by shifting responsibilities geographically. The College of Eastern Utah provides grant oversight and some auxiliary management from its San Juan Campus while Snow College moved accounts payable functions to its Richfield campus. This demonstrated ability to overcome geographic distance to provide substantial oversight shows that the rural college, multi-campus model is already working and can be enhanced by further collaboration.

For the past several months the Commissioner’s Office has led discussions focused on consolidating “back office operations” in a way that maximizes talent and provides system-wide efficiency. These discussions have demonstrated that a formal collaboration between CEU and Snow would provide significant benefits for both schools. The two schools are already working toward a collaborative effort in institutional research where the two schools would share resources. A similar arrangement may also provide benefits for informational technology where Snow is strong in functional staff and CEU is strong on hardware issues. These issues have been pursued vigorously by CEU staff from the business office, financial aid, student services, institutional research and information technology.

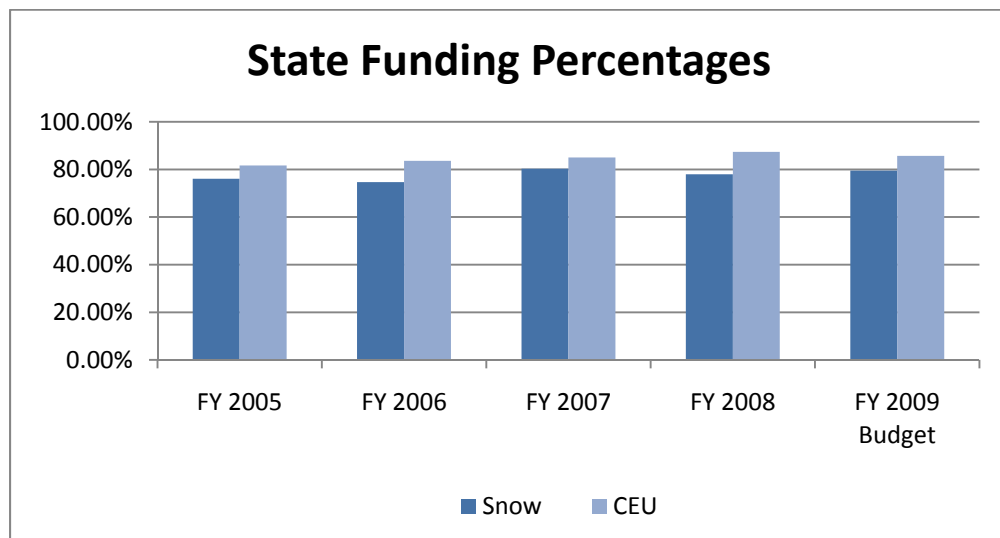
Another area in which Snow and CEU face similar challenges is enrollment and recruiting. Both institutions are very successful in attracting students from their service regions. Freshmen and sophomores from the CEU service region, for example, choose the College of Eastern Utah as their college by a margin of 8 to 2. Again, this is typical of rural colleges. Because of their high visibility within rural communities, colleges demonstrate the value of higher education for local populations, expose families to opportunities for careers and training, and serve as convenient and affordable portals into the post-secondary system. This “culture of expectations” is often more important in rural areas than any specific program or set of services offered by a college and is critical to increasing levels of educational attainment among populations with little experience of or access to higher education.

¹² Brian Foisy and Troy Caserta (2007). Business Office Staffing. Presented to the State Board of Regents.

¹³ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

Although Snow and CEU are effective in attracting local students, a drop in the region’s school age population means that the continuing viability of Utah’s rural institutions is critically linked to their ability to attract students from outlying areas, including the Wasatch metropolitan corridor. Snow College has successfully bolstered local enrollment by drawing from other parts of the state. The College of Eastern Utah has not made a similar effort to expand far beyond its service area. This has not been a decided strategy, but rather a result of prior budget crises and inadequate staffing. With finances now under control, the College has moved its focus to enrollment and worked toward a plan to draw students from other parts of the state. Recent changes to CEU’s non-resident tuition policy are helping to attract out-of-area students. Officials on the San Juan Campus have been able to take advantage of the tuition policy to expand offerings throughout the four corners region, providing service to people who are integral to the community but happen to reside across state lines. Additionally, lower tuition rates have restored historical connections to international students, with enrollment now approaching 100.

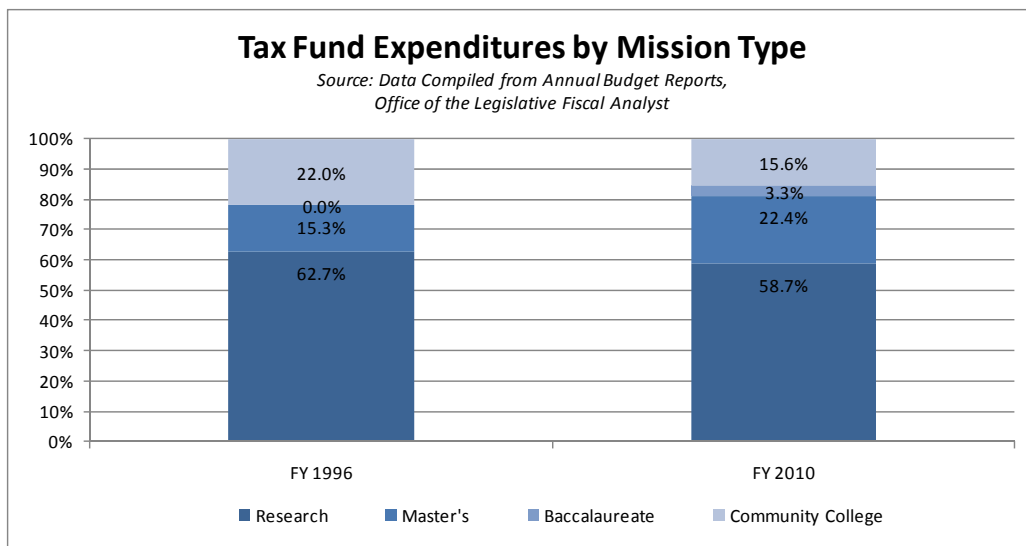


In their study of college mergers James Martin and James E. Semels conclude that the most successful affiliations occur among institutions with complimentary missions.¹⁵ As rural-serving two-year institutions, Snow College and the College of Eastern Utah share similar missions and face many of the same challenges. Also, as is true for most rural colleges, Snow and CEU each play important roles in the social and cultural life of their respective communities (Snow’s performing arts center and CEU’s prehistoric museum

¹⁵ James Martin and James E. Semels, *Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth: A New Strategy for Academic Managers* (Johns Hopkins, 1994). It is worth noting that Martin and Semels no longer advocate formal college mergers. In a 2002 article, they note subsequent studies show that mergers have not proven to be an effective mechanism for saving money or enhancing educational missions. “[W]e predict that, over the coming decade, strategic alliances will outnumber mergers by at least 20 to 1.” Instead of mergers, Martin and Semels recommend alliances that are “a fluid, temporary, focused set of understandings and covenants between two or more complementary learning institutions.” Martin and Semels, “We Were Wrong: Try Partnerships, Not Mergers,” *Chronicle of Higher Education Review* (May 17, 2002).

are good examples). In addition, Snow and CEU have similar state funding profiles. As Charles Fluharty and Bill Scaggs note in a recent assessment of rural community colleges, these institutions are more likely than their urban counterparts to rely more heavily on state appropriations and to have higher appropriated per-student costs.¹⁶ State higher education leaders need to be attentive to issues of scale-related equity when considering policies for rural colleges. The Ford Foundation’s Rural Community College Initiative notes that “state policymakers who are concerned about the health of their rural economies cannot afford to ignore ... the unique needs of rural community colleges, which stem from their size and the nature of their service areas.”¹⁷ The best response to the unique needs of rural Utah would be for the Board of Regents to encourage an affiliation between Snow College and the College of Eastern Utah.

Conclusion. At a time when higher education leaders nationwide are calling for an expansion of community colleges, Utah has been moving in the opposite direction.



Nationally, nearly half of all students seeking post-secondary education are enrolled in two-year institutions, but in Utah, with the transformation of Dixie State and Utah Valley into four-year institutions, less than a quarter of Utah’s college students attend community colleges. The proportion of state funds appropriated to two-year schools has declined over the past five years. This trend is especially alarming for rural Utahans who are served by two of the state’s remaining three community colleges. The term “community” college has special importance in rural areas where these institutions serve not only as catalysts for local economic development but also as centers of social and cultural life. The importance of community colleges like Snow and CEU in fostering

¹⁶ Charles Fluharty and Bill Scaggs, “The Rural Differential: Bridging the Resource Gap,” in *Rural Community Colleges: Teaching, Learning, and Leading in the Heartland*, edited by Pamela L. Eddy and John P. Murray, New Directions for Community Colleges No. 137 (Jossey-Bass, 2007), pp. 19-26.

¹⁷ Stephen G. Katsinas, King F. Alexander, and Ronald D. Opp, *Preserving Access with Excellence: Financing for Rural Community Colleges*, RCCI Policy Paper, n.d., available at <http://www.ruralcommunitycolleges.org/policy.htm> (accessed June 30, 2009).

community identity and rural citizenship should not be lost in discussions about costs, enrollments, and efficiency.¹⁸ State higher education policy should empower rural communities. New ways of thinking and working will be required to ensure that the people of rural Utah are equitably served by the state's higher education system, but it will be innovations and adaptations originating from within rural communities on the basis of shared experience, commitment, and vision that have the highest potential for success.¹⁹

¹⁸ Michael T. Miller and Courtney C. Tuttle, "How Rural Community Colleges Develop Their Communities and the People Who Live in Them," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31 (Feb. 2007), 117-127; Michael T. Miller and Daniel B. Kissinger, "Connecting Rural Community Colleges to Their Communities," *New Direction for Community Colleges*, No. 137 (Spring 2007), 27-34.

¹⁹ Stan A. Rosenfeld, "Rural Community Colleges: Creating Institutional Hybrids for the New Economy," *Rural America* 16 (Summer 2001), 2-8.