

Higher Education Recovery Task Force

May 5, 2020, Meeting Summary

The Southern Regional Education Board created a regional Higher Education Recovery Task Force to collaborate on strategies for reopening colleges and universities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chancellor Glen D. Johnson of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and SREB president Stephen Pruitt serve as co-chairs of the taskforce. Members include representatives of postsecondary governing and coordinating boards, independent college associations, and institutions, ranging from flagship and regional universities to historically black, community, and technical colleges.

The task force is charged with moving quickly to anticipate challenges related to postsecondary recovery amid COVID-19, with a priority attention to the safety and well-being of students, faculty and staff. This will involve finding solutions to key issues such as managing financial stress on institutions, maintaining enrollment and retention, supporting students, faculty and staff while safeguarding their health, providing high-quality online and remote instruction, and awarding emergency student financial aid. In collaboration with leaders and policymakers in SREB states, the task force will serve as a resource in developing strategies to re-open colleges and universities.

Chancellor Johnson acknowledged the strong local work of other postsecondary and state-level organizations and emphasized the complementary nature of the SREB task force. He urged members to participate in various efforts.

Members pointed out that the task force's work will include both short- and long-term issues. Short-term issues involve decisions around re-opening institutions, such as scheduling classes or making room assignments in residence halls under social distancing requirements. Long-term issues include topics such as difficult decisions about managing expenses.

Finally, the topic of the value of higher education was raised. Some members expressed an interest in doing an economic impact analysis of higher education for the region. It was noted that another regional education compact, the New England Board of Higher Education, has done such an analysis.

During this first meeting of the task force, members divided into three groups to identify areas of concern from the perspectives of state agencies (governing and coordinating boards), four-year colleges and universities, and two-year institutions. Summaries of these group discussions follow.

State Postsecondary Agencies

Members of the group began the conversation by describing the ways they have responded to COVID-19 as a state agency or board. The responses ranged from high-level planning guidelines to specific “punch lists” to aid leaders in reopening their institutions. Agencies have also organized meetings of presidents and surveyed leaders of institutions to identify different approaches and encouraging the sharing of ideas.

The group identified the following issues as short-term concerns for state postsecondary agencies and boards:

- Decreases in student enrollment, including large declines in international student enrollment and the ripple effect of admitting wait-listed students
- Adjusting tuition to mitigate enrollment declines
- Identifying procedures for safely reopening institutions and preventing the spread of COVID-19 among students, faculty and staff, especially those belonging to a vulnerable age group
- Creating consortium contracts for equipment and services, such as the purchase of personal protective equipment and development of more online capacity
- Changes in academic programs, including the creation of mini-credentialing programs to help unemployed individuals get back to work and eliminating academic programs no longer in demand

Four-Year Institutions

The group identified their most pressing issue as the health and safety of students, faculty and staff. Finances were also a top concern. Some mentioned that institutions expect enrollment decreases, especially among out-of-state and international students. They discussed methods of reducing spending including eliminating some courses.

Issues these members identified include:

- Create a checklist or guidelines for reopening an institution. Members of the group discussed what should be included in these guidelines to adhere to the CDC and government rules on social distancing, such as mixed instructional methods (online and face-to-face), creating alternative work options for faculty and staff, changing course scheduling so class dismissals are staggered, and examining places where students gather, such as residence halls and student centers. Members suggested that colleges and universities look at practices established by hotels, supermarkets and even prisons for ideas to make their institutions safer.
- Develop guidance on policies that might need to be revised or better communicated because of COVID-19, such as changes in worker’s compensation laws.

- Produce a communication strategy to keep students, parents and staff informed of changes to campus policies and practices. Members suggested that communication include posts to social media and institution websites, email, and letters.
- Identify ways to reduce institutions' expenditures. Group members listed the possibility of furloughs or layoffs.
- Develop partnerships or a consortium that would allow institutions to obtain joint contracts for the purchase of PPE or other goods and services.
- Identify ways in which enrollment decreases can be mitigated, such as changing residence hall living to allow for social distancing and communicating with out-of-state students to help allay their fears of going away to college to reduce the financial impact on the institution.
- Produce a contingency plan in case the institution must close again in the fall term because of a resurgence of COVID-19. This plan should include steps to close a campus, a process for moving instruction from face-to-face to online learning, and steps to control spending and conserve funds in anticipation of budget cuts.

Two-Year Institutions

The two-year institutions group discussion began with actions taken in the past 60 days to close campuses but continue instruction online or remotely. These actions included allowing students to change from a grading policy involving letter grades to one that is Pass/Fail. This involved working with four-year institutions to make sure they would accept Pass/Fail grades for courses being transferred and determining how GPAs that included Pass/Fail grades would be calculated. Institutions also developed temporary policies and practices to continue to support students remotely, such as how to request an official transcript, complete a dual enrollment course, and apply for scholarships.

Members identified the most immediate concerns as the financial well-being of the college, including the possibility of legal liability for individuals who became ill and the health and safety of students, faculty and staff. Members expressed concern about whether institutions would have enough PPE to ensure the safety of students, faculty and staff, and where or how to get additional PPE.

Members identified the following issues:

- Institutions should be documenting lessons learned now so that they are prepared if there is a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall.
- Some anticipate decreases in enrollment because students are worried about attending a two-year commuter institution with many students coming and going throughout the day or relying on services such as childcare which might put family members at risk. Some group members reported that some students have

indicated they will enroll if courses involve face-to-face instruction, but not online.

- Some members expressed concern that students forced to take online classes might demand lower tuition, especially if they perceive online instruction as less expensive to offer. The group discussed this faulty reasoning because colleges have had increased expenses due to expanded technology costs for online courses, such as adding more learning management system users to existing contracts, more software applications to make courses engaging, more IT support for troubleshooting issues – including home-based networks, more training of faculty for online teaching, and making courses accessible for students with special needs. One system plans to charge technology fees to all students to help recoup some of those costs.
- Institutions with residence halls expressed concern that students might be hesitant to live on campus out of fear of contracting COVID-19.
- Members also mentioned concerns about what steps an institution should take if a student, faculty or staff member became ill. Would the institution be financially liable? What would the institution need to do or know before allowing that student to return to campus? Members thought institutions should take the appropriate steps to be responsible and defensible. They also mentioned taking steps to protect the health of cleaning staff, who would be at high risk for infection.
- Finally, members of the group reported that some faculty were surprised to find that they enjoy teaching online and that more innovative instruction has taken place. Even so, some students do not have access to the internet to participate in online courses and complete assignments.

The group also discussed strategies to address some of these concerns. To prepare for possible financial constraints, they suggested that institutions freeze expenditures, create a hierarchy of needs, and delay expenditures that can be pushed back without harming operations. They recommended creating a reserve to ensure that top needs can be funded by working with foundations and thinking outside the box. Members of the group asserted that two-year institutions should revisit their core values and identify academic programs that are not producing, examine faculty workloads, and conduct labor analysis to determine if some programs are no longer needed. The review of curricula should also include the issue of whether courses (or programs) should be offered online or using a hybrid format.

Members of the group identified some additional strategies including:

- Reduce class sizes by 50% and use CARES Act funding to cover the added expense of more and smaller classes. This would allow for social distancing in classrooms, but it would not protect students, faculty and staff in their residence halls and offices.

- Offer flex classes that can be taught online or in person.
- To allow for social distancing, institutions could offer a hybrid three credit-hour class that might meet with 10 students on Monday, 10 others on Wednesday, and 10 others on Friday, with online work between the days they meet. This could help students who need in-class time with instructors.
- Provide additional support and professional development in online teaching to faculty. Also, work with students to prepare them for differences between online and face-to-face instruction so that the transition will be seamless.

The group agreed that their greatest concerns were health, the uncertainty of budgets, and legal risks.

Next Steps

The meeting concluded with a few action items:

The four-year institution group is to provide FAQs to Kylie Smith of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education at ksmith@osrhe.edu. She will send those FAQs and a template to be used for their institutions.

The task force might invite leaders of institutions that have already made the decision to reopen to a future meeting to discuss what went into their decision to reopen and what strategies they are using to do so.

Legal liability and other legal issues might be addressed at the next meeting. Kylie suggested contacting NACUA or another national legal organization to serve as a resource.