

HIGHER EDUCATION OFFICIALS AND LEGISLATORS GET CORDIAL

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The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: July 17, 1998. Pg. D4

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This week's higher education meeting with the Legislature's Executive Appropriations Committee started with a hearty rendition of "Happy Birthday" for higher education commissioner Cecelia Foxley, evidence that the sometimes-chilly relations between education officials and some legislators appear to be thawing.

That is likely due to an increased effort by educators to assure legislators that they are wisely spending the half billion dollars they get annually to fund Utah's nine public college and universities.

In recent years, some legislators have accused education officials of being reluctant to respond -- if not arrogant and aloof -- when it came to legislator requests for more fiscal efficiency and accountability on campus.

But at Tuesday's meeting, Foxley and two members of the state Board of Regents presented a plan to tie some future funding at each institution to its ability to efficiently and effectively move students through their programs and into the job market.

The concept is called "performance-based funding" and it is becoming more popular at public colleges around the country. Institutions that meet their prescribed goals secure more funding.

Regent David Jordan said eight states already use it for a portion of their funding, and more than a dozen are considering it.

Under the plan presented Tuesday, Utah schools would be evaluated for how efficiently they accept credits from transfer students, how long it takes students to graduate, how much time faculty spend in the classroom, and how well students perform on standard examinations already required for graduates entering fields like the sciences and health.

Educators are also moving toward a statewide test for students after they complete their first two years of college to determine how effective schools are at teaching general education course work, though that test will not be administered for at least one year.

States that have adopted performance funding typically only tie about 5 percent of a school's overall budget to performance, a level the regents said is appropriate for Utah.

The regents said they also want the performance funding to be used as an incentive, not a punishment, for schools that do not meet their goals. A punitive approach, they reasoned, could make it more difficult for schools to reach their goals.

"It may be that giving them less money is not the cure," said Jordan.

No date was set to start the new policy.

"My guess it's more likely going to be the next budget go-round," said Foxley.

Senate President Lane Beattie congratulated educators on doing more to ensure money is being spent efficiently and students are being well served, but he said that effort must continue to head in that direction or "the Legislature will respond."

"It isn't an idle threat," said Beattie. "It is a necessity."