



Alliance for Research
— on —
Higher Education

Higher Education Strategic Plan Coordination Proposal

November 29, 2006

South Carolina lacks a cohesive and comprehensive vision for its education system. Maintaining the status quo is not acceptable when the new economy calls for highly skilled workers, collaboration, and educational opportunities for citizens of all ages. This is an opportune time for strong leadership and renewed efforts towards increased cooperation. The call for a Strategic Plan for Higher Education is a move for more effective and coordinated government oversight of education, K-20, addressing the long-term needs of South Carolinians.

The Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs and the Alliance for Research on Higher Education would like to inform the State's leadership of the strengths of our organization and of our interest in assisting with this project.

The Alliance and the Institute

Newly formed under the Institute's umbrella is the Alliance for Research on Higher Education. The mission of the Alliance is to serve as a state, southeastern, and national resource for research on higher education and its relationship with a state's economy. The Alliance's unique construct relies upon collaborative partnerships with experienced higher education specialists from across the state and nation. Alliance senior scholars have significant experience gathering and analyzing data related to enrollment modeling and other statistic-based studies linked with state information needs. Other areas of expertise include facilities databases, financial reporting, and sponsored research programs.

The Strom Thurmond Institute has more than two decades of service to the State and is one of the primary resources for objective information on government budgets and taxation. The Institute's reputation is one of independent comment and evaluation on a range of public policy issues. The Institute has state-of-the-art computer resources at its disposal, including GIS mapping software that allows geographic representation of trends. Current projects underway that would contribute to the Plan's development could include work on the State's "wireless cloud" network, analyses of tax dollar distributions by school district, and collaboration to implement EEDA legislation.

Dr. Bob Becker, Director of the Institute, will provide leadership and supervision as needed on the project and will lead several focus groups analyzing policy issues. Personnel for the project will include an experienced higher education researcher, a taxation and cost specialist, an experienced strategic planner, two doctoral level graduate assistants, and selected senior scholars. Experienced leaders in higher education have already agreed to serve as senior scholars and will contribute much to this project on specific questions.

Strategic Plan Coordination Overview

We will adapt facets of the Strategic Plan's coordination based on subsequent discussions with Task Force members. Allowing the Alliance to coordinate the plan has the added benefit of allowing it to serve as the data and research resource as coordination evolves into implementation. As implementation of the Plan continues, the Alliance will serve as the data and evaluation specialists to assess the success of specific initiatives.

The guiding principles of the Alliance's coordination effort are threefold:

- **Communication and collaboration among constituencies is paramount;**
- **Constituent trust for objective, cooperative planning is a must; and,**
- **Use of standardized and reliable data sources is central to the Plan's acceptance.**

The Alliance may be the only group that can encompass these principles in the development of the State's Higher Education Strategic Plan.

Steering Committee: The Higher Education Strategic Plan will set forth for the State a vision with a five year horizon. It is proposed that the Plan's coordination be overseen by a Steering Committee (Addendum 1) that will report to a group designated by the Governor's Office. The Steering Committee will lead the effort to determine the strategic initiatives. This group of approximately 12 leaders will be selected for their diversity of thought and for their dedication to South Carolina. The Steering Committee will benefit from multiple teleconferences, will receive regular updates from the Director, and will meet at least three times per year.

To date, possible strategic initiative topics include:

- Affordability & Finance
- Facilities & Infrastructure
- Academic Planning & Outcomes
- Effectiveness & Efficiency
- Economic Development & Impact
- K to Gray Seamless Education (including distance education initiatives)

Working Groups: Vital to the plan's success is reliance upon empirical research and collaboration. Throughout the Task Force report, there is the call for assessment of multiple facets affecting higher education. The list includes, but is not limited to, evaluation of:

- Tuition and fee trends
- Return on investment for the State and its citizens
- Longitudinal enrollment trends
- Facility capacity & deferred maintenance
- Mission fit
- Alternative delivery methods & coordination of distance education
- Perceptions of strengths & weaknesses
- Program productivity & duplication
- Increased opportunities for collaboration & coordination
- Business practices & efficiencies
- K-12 partnerships & seamless transitions
- New programs of interest & placement
- Longitudinal analysis of lottery funds & effect on access levels
- Workforce planning

Working Group members will be drawn from a diversity of arenas and will be responsible for conducting the majority of the analyses. Each specific project will have a Chair who is responsible for gathering representatives from all appropriate sectors, e.g. education, government and private sectors, for completing the research and reporting results through the Director. As suggested from the tentative titles, there will be significant opportunities for collaboration among working groups. These groups were selected based on the Governor's initial charge to the Task Force and its subsequent focus points.

Coordination of effort: The Alliance will serve as a central point for all data and will make as much information as possible available on its web site. Working groups will have access to the Institute's facilities, as well as to a password-protected web site where drafts of papers can be downloaded.

It is paramount to the Plan's implementation and success that the working group data sources be revisited annually to evaluate how well the current objectives are working, if data is available for assessment. Each of the initiatives and specific objectives will be revisited periodically and altered as needed.

Assumptions

From the Task Force report, several assumptions were made that serve as the foundation for moving forward.

- The Steering Committee will report progress to the Governor's Office as requested.
- It is assumed that the data sources from the Foundations for the Future Report are accurate, and they will be maintained as resources for monitoring progress and large group comparisons.
- Data sources called upon in this project must be of the highest integrity, can be assessed for reliability and validity, and can serve as benchmarks for assessing implementation and outcomes of the Plan.
- Data not available from current SC CHE files or from federal databases will be gathered from the institutions.
- It is assumed that the Plan will include private institutions of higher education as appropriate, and data from these institutions will be available.

Specific Contributions

There are some specific requests in the Task Force report, and certain projects related to these requests are already underway through other Alliance and Institute projects:

- 1) **Statewide enrollment model** – A model is being developed for statewide planning using SC CHE enrollment and graduation data. This model will be placed onto the Alliance web site for interested parties to download and “play with” as they wish. Variables include, but are not limited to, number of entering first-time freshmen each fall, number of entering transfer students, retention rates, graduation rates, enrollment by major, and demographics such as race, gender, and high school.
- 2) **Improved facilities information** – Alliance personnel have already implemented detailed and user-friendly space information at their respective institutions. It is possible to build a similar database at the state level. The Alliance has the ability to create and analyze space information relative to questions on capacity, utilization, and maintenance. In addition, an area Commissioner has agreed to serve as a resource on this aspect of the project and has more than 30 years in the construction business.
- 3) **County Mapping** – The Institute has already developed and presented information on county-specific information. Through integration of tax information with education and survey data, additional specificity is available than with only statewide summaries.
- 4) **K-12 Networking & Analyses** – Both Institute and Alliance personnel have substantial experience working with SC school district leaders. Because collaboration with K-12 districts and analysis of integrated K-16 data is important to understanding the issues of concern, new data will have to be gathered and merged with existing enrollment and graduation data. Examples of these analyses include success of students by district in key courses such as calculus; retention and graduation rates by district; and attendance patterns by institutions by district.
- 5) **School Tax & Property Tax Data** – The Institute has prepared several analyses regarding different tax rates by school district and by county. This information will be a valuable asset when evaluating attendance rates by school district, retention, and potential impacts for changes in taxation.
- 6) **Distance Education Infrastructure & Demand** – Alliance personnel and senior scholars are interested in evaluating the potential for distance education coordination in South Carolina. Access issues require that leaders consider the future of education, and how non-traditional delivery modes are best managed. In addition, Institute personnel are working on the “wireless cloud” project for the State, and this piece will be a parallel part of any distance education discussion.
- 7) **Network of Experienced Finance & Data Personnel** – Communication is essential to the success of the Plan, in both its creation and implementation. The complexity of the Strategic Plan initiative requires collaborative work among numerous personnel who are interested in donating their time to the Plan. The Alliance is building a cadre of senior scholars with unique skills and interests, and with a long-term commitment to education.

Conclusion

There could rarely be a more appropriate time to initiate a higher education strategic plan for the State. Consistent leadership across the executive and legislative bodies suggests that the time can be taken to create and implement the Strategic Plan before another election cycle.

It is proposed that the **Alliance** serve as the coordinating body for the Strategic Plan. We believe this would be beneficial for the following reasons:

- The Institute has the space and existing infrastructure to house contemporary senior scholars who are working on specific research projects;
- As an academic center, discussions are not required to be part of public record;
- The **Alliance** is designed to rely upon collaboration, which will lead to broad-based concurrence among constituent groups;
- The **Alliance** will use only upon valid and reliable data sources, conduct empirical research, and allow for replication of analyses; and,
- Using the **Alliance** and the Institute will allow for changes in responsibilities over time without creating a new department, saving long-term personnel costs.

We envision the initial step to be a discussion among the leadership, perhaps with the Higher Education Task Force, to further evaluate perceived needs and priorities. The enrollment model will provide the foundation for several issues, including projections of student populations and funding formula outcomes. The legislative interviews, in combination with presidential interviews, will provide common talking points for moving forward.

The **Alliance** is seeking initial funding for building the enrollment model and for conducting legislative interviews. The **Alliance** accepts responsibility for being accountable for all projects it undertakes. To further advance this discussion, the **Alliance** is seeking additional funding to move forward with the Strategic Planning process.