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Utah Tech University
Title III Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP)
External Evaluation Mid-Year Visit for Year 1
March 21-22, 2024

I. INTRODUCTION

The mid-year site visit is a process of consultative review during which JCCI's external evaluators 1) review the status of the grant project, 2) offer guidance and advice regarding the implementation of the grant, and 3) prepare for the year-end evaluation.

The external evaluators use the grant proposal as the foundation for Utah Tech University's (Utah Tech) grant contract. The grant proposal serves as the guiding document as evaluators compare the current status/structure against what Utah Tech proposed to the Department of Education (ED). The mid-year visit included evaluators' review of existing project documents/reports and interviews with key personnel in order to gain an understanding of the status of Utah Tech's grant-funded project and to develop recommendations for further project implementation.

> **The proposal narrative outlines the grantee's responsibilities and becomes the contract between the institution and the Department of Education.**

II. OBSERVATIONS

Utah Tech received its Title III SIP grant award in 2023 with a proposed start date of October 1, 2023, and a grant ending date of September 30, 2028. During the mid-year visit on March 21-22, 2024, the evaluator met with several representatives of the institution, including the Title III SIP Project Director (PD), the Academic Oversight Committee, and budget and institutional research personnel. The evaluator notes that there appears to be buy-in at all levels of the institution. JCCI's key observations related to the implementation of the grant project to date are listed below, and related recommendations are included in the Recommendation Section (pp. 3-4).

1. A review of the project timeline (as submitted in the proposal narrative, (pp. 29-31) confirmed that Year 1 activities are on track as proposed. As outlined in the timeline, the Title III SIP Steering/Advisory Committee meets monthly, and the PD meets regularly with the President, Steering/Advisory Committee, and budget office.

2. The project design includes Year 1 targets for all eight measurable objectives with most targets projected to reflect improvements above the baselines (as submitted in the proposal narrative, (pp. 17-18). The evaluator reviewed in detail with Utah Tech

representatives the objectives, baselines, and targets for Year 1 and clarified time periods for measurement. As a result of this review, project leadership is committed to working with IR to ensure they have an established and standardized process in place to gather and analyze data for all target objectives during the grant period.

The evaluator noted that, without all interventions fully implemented in Year 1, the Year 1 targets may not be attained. However, the evaluator noted that this is common with Year 1 grantees and that, as long as Utah Tech implements the activities, monitors progress on objectives, and makes significant progress toward the Year 2 objectives, they should eventually meet targets over the grant period.

3. University leadership and staff indicated the Utah legislature has passed legislation that may impact the Center for Inclusion and Belonging (CIB) at Utah Tech. This center currently works to embody and further the university's commitment to inclusive excellence for underrepresented populations through supporting equitable and inclusive learning opportunities and fostering a sense of belonging through campus and community engagement events that promote and celebrate cultural identities. Objective 4b. of the original Title III SIP proposal focuses on using the student membership in the center as a way to track underrepresented student enrollment in Open Education Resources (OER) and Supplemental Instruction (SI) courses. If, as a result of the state legislation, Utah Tech must alter the CIB, Title III leadership is already exploring alternative strategies to gather data that will represent changes in the same group of students and allow the university to maintain the integrity of Objective 4 for measurement throughout the grant period.

4. A review of the proposed Key Personnel and Management Plan sections as detailed in the original proposal narrative (pp. 32-37) indicates Utah Tech's hiring and overall management plan are on track as proposed. Project leadership and staff are excited about and committed to the project's success, as are members of the Oversight Committee. Academic leadership is also very positive about implementing SI and OER on campus, demonstrating broad support and praising the project leadership for their organization and communication thus far.

There has been a small delay in filling all SI peer leaders during Year 1, but the university is hopeful all positions will be filled during Year 2. The evaluator notes the Title III SIP project has been on the agenda during Academic Council; however, they have not yet presented to the University Council on a regular basis. The PD will request to be included on future University Council agendas. Grant information does make its way to the president, however, through other established University channels. The evaluator discussed with project leadership the importance of ensuring

the incoming Utah Tech president understands the importance of the Title III SIP project and the university's commitment to the project.

5. As of the mid-year visit, Utah Tech anticipated little, if any carryover funds at the end of Year 1 as they have hired all staff originally planned for Year 1 and have experienced no major expenditure delays. Upon review of the grant budget period, Utah Tech realized they budgeted their grant positions in Year 1 based on their academic budget year (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024) rather than the grant budget year (October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024). The result is a three-month shortfall to fund grant personnel in Year 1.

    The university plans to use a combination of strategies to address this oversight. Possible solutions may include using institutional funds, reallocation of funds within the grant personnel category (due to unfilled peer SI leader positions), and/or moving funds from grant supplies into grant personnel toward the end of Year 1. The university is aware of restrictions in place for moving funds between categories and although they do not anticipate the need to submit a formal budget modification, the university is aware of the procedures required for a budget modification request. Regardless, this evaluator advised Utah Tech to notify the Department of Education about their plans to cover staff shortfalls in Year 1. This approach should ensure Utah Tech follows the correct Title III grant budget timeline for the remainder of the grant period.

III.   RECOMMENDATIONS

1. JCCI recommends Utah Tech notify the Dept. of Education of their planned strategies to cover the unexpected shortfalls for project staff salaries in Year 1.

2. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech submit a project modification to the Department of Education as soon as possible **if the** legislation passed by the Utah State Legislature will impact how the university plans to track data for Objective 4b.

3. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech's office of Institutional Effectiveness work with grant administrators to ensure they have an established and standardized process in place to gather and analyze data for all target objectives during the grant period.

4. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech continue to strengthen their data governance efforts around standardizing business processes involving data. This will help ensure consistent reporting.

5. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech project staff meet directly with university student advisors to ensure they understand the importance of SI classes and their positive impact on student retention and success. This has the potential to assist advisors in encouraging students to enroll in SI classes for the fall 2024 semester (Year 2).

6. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech leadership encourage individual faculty chairs to support faculty time (as service time or credit) for the significant time required to convert courses to OER format.

7. JCCI recommends that the PD plan to meet with the new president, once he/she is hired so the president can be advised of the importance of the project, their contract with the Department of Education, and project goals and objectives in advance of the end-of-year evaluation for Year 1, scheduled for November 2024.

8. JCCI recommends that Utah Tech ensure the Title III SIP project has regular access to the university president and other leadership through regular presentations at University Council and the academic leadership meetings.

IV.   SUMMARY

Utah Tech should be proud of the strong start of their Title III SIP project during Year 1. They should also be commended for selecting evidence-based and industry standard interventions that are targeted to their needs for maximum impact. The PD's and Program Manager's commitment to the implementation of OER and SI will yield positive outcomes for retention, graduation, and increasing pass rates at Utah Tech.

The few recommendations offered herein are similar to those offered to most Year 1 grantees at the mid-year point, should serve to strengthen the project for the remainder of Year 1, and position Utah Tech for success in the remaining grant years.