STARS – An Alabama Higher Education Success Story in Danger

By: Dr. John Schmidt and Dr. Mark Heinrich

In our state, headlines and news stories this time of year are usually filled with football stars and gridiron heroics. Yet, some 20 years ago, a team of legislators, university officials and two-year college leaders together formed a star in the academic arena. This star – called, appropriately, STARS for Statewide Transfer and Articulation Reporting System -- has received little recognition. In fact, most Alabamians take the program for granted.

But today, STARS is under-funded and in peril of collapsing. If it fails, students in Alabama will no longer be assured they will receive credit for classes they take prior to transferring, or they may have to duplicate unneeded classes, despite the considerable expense. To remain healthy, STARS requires an infusion of legislative financial support and a renewed spirit of commitment by the team who created a program that has saved Alabama college students nearly $1 billion and has become a model for other states.

Before STARS, two-year college students in Alabama who wanted the upward mobility of a university degree navigated in a virtual minefield of costly duplication and academic inefficiency. For example, standard courses in English, math and biology taught at the two-year college level were not accepted by most universities, resulting in students having to pay for costly credit hours in retaking basic core courses. If we suffer a repeat of this due to the collapse of STARS, the cost for Alabama college students will be steep, considering the sharp rise in tuition and other expenses related to attending four-year institutions. This also will cause a delay in these bright young people entering the workforce, hurting the productivity of the state’s economy.

By legislative action in 1994, the STARS program was created to facilitate credit transferability among all state two-year colleges and universities. To ensure academic quality and accountability and validate future course transfers, legislators also created a 10-member policy committee of two- and four-year college representatives called the Alabama Articulation and General Studies Committee, or the AGSC. Finally, an 8-10 member full-time staff was established with a $1.2 million start-up fund to manage daily functions of the AGSC/STARS program. Due to its earlier partnership with the community college system, Troy University was selected to host the overall AGSC/STARS operation and assist in the development and coordination of the program.
Today, Troy remains the host site, working in collaboration with the Alabama Commission on Higher Education for the transfer of appropriated legislative funding in support of daily operations.

So what has the STARS program meant to students and the state?

For starters, over 20 years, the $1.2 million initial investment has resulted in savings to Alabama taxpayers of almost $1 billion in tuition, books, and room and board. Transfer guides, enabling two-year college students to avoid duplication of unneeded courses, have numbered over 1 million copies. Further, the Alabama STARS program has become the model for states such as Texas, Michigan, Kentucky and Mississippi. And California this summer envisioned the creation of a program like STARS.

However, trouble looms for the program in Alabama. The STARS process is now struggling with new demands, changing technology and, in particular, a lack of adequate funding. Currently, the STARS staff consists of two full-time employees, down from the previous 10 members. The current budget amount is $125,000 less than the optimal budget of $500,000, the amount received from state appropriations in 2007-2008. In the following years (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), STARS eclipsed all-time annual usage records (providing transfer guides for more than 175,000 students across Alabama). Staffing during these years consisted of four full-time and two part-time staff members.

Within the current budget framework, today’s two staff members:

• Prepare some 75,000 transfer guides annually in response to student demands
• Coordinate the quarterly meetings of AGSC members who verify coursework transferability among all universities
• Travel the state in coordinating with two-year college counselors, and
• Attempt to purchase needed technology upgrades enabling currency and responsiveness within the STARS framework.

As leaders responsible for the sustained success of STARS, we urge a renewed legislative focus and funding for a model system of educational efficiency within our state. STARS simply cannot continue at the current funding level. But so far, no champion in the Legislature has come forward to help create the necessary awareness required in keeping STARS responsive to the needs of Alabama students.

What began as an innovative program illustrating collaborative leadership in Alabama is now in danger of collapsing due to the lack of adequate funding. It’s critical that
lawmakers in Montgomery work with educators to return STARS to its stature as a model of higher education efficiency within Alabama and beyond. Indeed, the Alabama model is one other states want to emulate. We need to work together to return STARS to its “star” status, but the effort must begin with the recognition that it can’t be operated on a shoestring.

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For more information about this program, please visit: www.gettheguide.net.