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*UVU's prestige may leave some out, critics say
'Pecking order of elitism' puts low-income, unprepared-for-college students at risk
By Ben Fulton*

Robert Cousins hopes the transition of Utah Valley State College to a regional university on Tuesday will validate what he and his colleagues already know: Despite the "college" label, UVSC faculty are university quality.

"With the acknowledgement of this status, hopefully people here will become aware of some of the good work we do," said Cousins, chairman of the school's English department.

Prestige and credibility count for much in the run-up to UVSC's change to Utah Valley University. So does a more ambitious educational mission that will add three select master's degree programs and fortify the bachelor's degree programs while maintaining the school's technical and trade offerings. Amid all the change, though, is the looming question of whether the new UVU can do all this *and* keep its original community-college ethos.

With a growing Utah County population and Brigham Young University admitting fewer Utah students all the time, UVSC argued that the state needed another university. By offering 51 bachelor's degrees, the college operated as a de facto university. Plus, with exploding demand for educators, nurses and business development, there seemed little doubt Utah could use new master's degree offerings in teacher education and, by 2010, nursing education and business management.

But proponents of the community college model wonder if the school will continue to provide higher-education opportunities for those who can least afford them, but need them as much as anyone else.

'Mission creep': "There's a cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die pledge that there will be no mission creep with these sorts of transitions," said Kay M. McClenney, program director and faculty member in the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin. "But there is no example anywhere of a community college that converted to another status where the phenomenon of mission creep didn't occur."

In competition for state tax funds and recognition, McClenney said, the hierarchy of prestige dictates that it's better to be a bachelor's-degree granting institution than a community college; better to be a regional university, such as UVU, than a bachelor's-degree granting institution; and better to be a research university than simply a university. What gets lost is the crucial role community colleges play in preparing students who are less well-off financially and least prepared for greater higher education.

"There's just a very clear pecking order of elitism," said McClenney, who has authored several publications about community college leadership and directed a recent survey of 700,000 community college students in 49 states. "People who lose in this situation are low-income people, and those underprepared for college work. The affluent in this country have long had access to higher education. Our challenge is expanding the door."

The best measurements of whether a community college fulfills that role, McClenney said, are affordable tuition along with quality English as Second Language offerings and developmental education programs for those not yet ready for college- and university-level work.

UVSC officials worry more that its career and technical education offerings might suffer in the change, not ESL or developmental programs.

“UVSC is committed to retaining the community-college feel and purpose with open enrollment, yet we soon will add the unique advantage of university status,” said Susan Thackery, director of career and technical education, in a news release earlier this month.

Both Dave Buhler, interim commissioner of the Utah System of Higher Education, and Cameron Smith, assistant to the president for developmental planning at UVSC, reject the notion of mission creep as well.

Utah has seen three institutions of higher education evolve from community college roles into wider college and university missions over the years — Weber State University, Dixie State College and Southern Utah University — but each school has retained characteristics of a community college. “We’re not turning a switch,” Buhler said. “We’re really following a model unique to Utah which is solid and serves students and taxpayers well.”

Smith said mission creep is most likely to occur when a special interest or small group of faculty drives the change. In UVSC’s case, the UVU transition was overseen by the Utah Board of Regents and approved by state lawmakers.

“How can we make this transition and still tell the story of our community college mission? That’s the trick,” Cameron said. “We make certain we celebrate three different cultures: the two-year degree, the four-year bachelor’s programs and now the master’s programs.”

‘Pathway to a better life’: UVU will receive \$10 million annually in new state funding as a regional university, not enough to lift its operating budget from last place for lowest percentage of tax funding among state institutions of higher education. Tuition-paying students make up the difference, and

with planned annual tuition of \$3,188 for full-time students in 2008-09 year, the school will be more expensive than Salt Lake Community College, which charges \$2,658 per year.

UVSC’s ESL program has long been funded by tuition alone, but its developmental education program will actually get funding and faculty boosts, thanks to the transition, said Ofa Ione, department chairman of developmental math. Job security in his department was a concern during talk of the transition, but was quelled after a meeting with administration.

“We still get a lot of students here not prepared to move ahead,” Ione said. “If we accept these students, how can we not view developmental math as important?”

Utah residents don’t enroll in community colleges at a rate equal to other Western states, such as California or Wyoming, but that could soon change. A May 2008 study, “The States and Their Community Colleges” by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, notes that Utah’s community colleges serve 13 1/2 percent of all full-time students enrolled at public and private post-secondary institutions, far below the national average of almost 28 percent. Between 2000 and 2005, however, Utah saw a 20 percent enrollment increase in its community colleges — above the national average of 11.5 percent. The study also showed that enrollment in Utah community colleges is 5.7 percent ahead of enrollment in four-year public colleges.

“The only perspective I argue for,” McClenney said, “is not what feels elite to faculty members, administrators or legislators, but what do the people of Utah need to be on the pathway to a better life?”