
Docket Item:

HECC University Program Approval Process Overview

Summary:

Under Oregon law, all proposed new academic programs, or significant changes to existing programs, at public universities must be approved by the HECC using prescribed criteria before they commence (ORS 350.075(g), ORS 350.085(2), and ORS 352.089(2)). Historically the Commission has relied on institutional Boards of Trustees and their administrations as best positioned to determine whether a market for students exists and whether it makes good financial and academic sense for an institution to pursue such programs. The HECC consults with the Statewide Provosts' Council and with individual institutions in a more rigorous review to help resolve any competitive dynamics between universities and to make the program approval process transparent and efficient. Private colleges and universities are not afforded a similar opportunity to provide formal input.

Docket Material:

Introduction

The Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) is required by statute to review and approve any "significant change" in a university's academic program. "Significant change" is defined as "any new undergraduate or graduate degree program, or any existing undergraduate or graduate degree program that will be offered more than 40 miles from the site at which it is currently being offered" (OAR 715-013-0020). In reviewing significant change proposals, HECC is charged with considering the following criteria:

1. Is the program consistent with the mission of the public university;
2. Does the program unnecessarily duplicate academic programs offered by other Oregon public institutions;
3. Is the program located in a geographic area that will cause undue hardship to another public institution; and
4. Are programs allocated among public institutions in a manner that achieves statewide needs and requirements?

Of these four responsibilities the HECC has been most engaged in the second and third areas. Historically the Commission has relied on institutional Boards of Trustees and their administrations as best positioned to determine whether a market for students exists and whether it makes good financial and academic sense for an institution to pursue such programs. The Commission does not generally attempt to independently assess those conditions. Although HECC staff include mission alignment (area 1) in review of proposals, mission statements tend to be so broad they are generally not the basis for denying any new program approval.

Early experience in 2015 with competitive program development encouraged the Statewide Provosts' Council (SPC), a voluntary council that serves in an advisory capacity to the HECC, to collaborate on the production of a new program approval flow chart that was adopted in June 2015 by the Commission.

Subsequent experience with the growth of hybrid programs that are offered through a combination of online and face-to-face modalities led to an agreement among Provosts on protocols for notifications, triggering conditions, and cross-institutional collaboration in program development. Portions of that SPC agreement were ratified by the HECC on April 11, 2019, when the Commission formally established the conditions under which a hybrid program must be approved by the Commission before it is offered (Docket item 9.2 (a)).

Among other things, this undertaking revealed the importance of requiring universities to notify the HECC and other universities earlier in their processes of developing new programs.

With guidance from the Oregon Council of Presidents (OCOP), the SPC subsequently developed a voluntary process that takes into consideration internal institutional governance guiding new program development, statutory requirements, and HECC's responsibility to be attentive to collaboration and potential competition. The new process focuses on processes and timelines that promote early notification, consultation, communication, and collaboration. It also includes expectations for the quality of the evidence and analysis that institutions present on issues of duplication and undue hardship. (Docket item 9.2 (b))

HECC has staff worked collaboratively with the SPC to revise the 2015 program approval flow chart. This 2019 New Program Approval Flow Chart captures the HECC's statutory responsibilities and distinguishes where it incorporates the SPC agreement (Docket item 9.2(c)). As an advisory body to the HECC, the SPC has generally supported new program proposals unanimously and HECC staff has generally supported these recommendations and submitted proposals as consent agenda items for the Commission's approval.

In cases when SPC support is not unanimous, HECC staff does not submit items for the consent agenda. HECC staff prepare informational material and recommendations for the Commission. Proposing institutions and/or non-supportive institutions may select to present before the Commission.

Docket Item 9.2 Attachments:

- a) HECC staff analysis / and proposal for changes related to hybrid program delivery (Commission Meeting 4/11/2019 Docket item #12.2, adopted by the Commission)
- b) Statewide Provosts' Council Program Approval Process (May 2019)
- c) Program Approval Flow Chart
- d) Related sections of ORS and OAR.

Staff Recommendation:

This is an informational and discussion item only.