

# Utah Valley University's Dual Education Model:

HOW ONE SCHOOL BUILT A THRIVING UNIVERSITY AROUND A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By Matthew S. Holland

**T**oday, Utah Valley University (UVU) is the largest university in the state. With over 37,000 students, it is projected to grow to 46,000 in eight years. Twenty-five years ago, it was a community college with less than 10,000 students.

A significant driver of UVU's rapid evolution and growth is its unique dual education model. Combining the rigor and richness of a first-rate teaching university with the openness and vocational programs of a community college, UVU's dual model represents an idea whose time has come.

When I was named president of UVU eight years ago, the state legislature had recently voted unanimously to make Utah Valley State College a university. We faced extraordinary crossroads in deciding what kind of a university UVU would become. The allure of the elite research pathway was tempting, particularly as UVU was already excelling with very good four-year liberal arts programs.

## Elite vs. Inclusive

We concluded that there were plenty of elite, costly research institutions in America. My own

education benefited enormously from such institutions, which play vital roles in our nation. But the country and Utah needed something different.

As a result, not only did we keep our vocational education programs, we expanded them while building additional four-year academic programs and graduate studies under the same roof. We chose to stay inclusive in every sense.

The challenges to this dual model were many. How do you expand the university's scope and mission while keeping tuition affordable?

How can you balance open admissions with the seriousness and rigor required for outstanding four-year

degrees? How do you educate vocational and four-year students side

by side? How do you manage a faculty that ranges from experts with doctoral credentials to those with applied technology experience but more limited educational credentialing?

Because we needed to provide as many opportunities for as many people as possible, our first decision was to keep an open admissions policy for all who wanted access to higher education.

This "open door" policy lends itself to being more inclusive, but we also concluded it was not enough to reach many underserved populations. Through a detailed inclusion plan, we actively work to increase campus diversity, attracting underrepresented students from the region and world, as well as those who have varying levels of academic preparation. Our efforts are succeeding: enrollment for students of color has increased from 8.6 percent to 18.1 percent (a 108 percent increase) since 2009. During roughly that same time, our Latina/o student enrollment has grown from 1,080 students to 3,760. Today, 38 percent of our students are first-generation college students.



## Controlling Costs

We also recognized that our open admissions policy and outreach to underserved populations would be neutralized if we didn't keep tuition low. Four defining strategies have been key.

1. A teaching mission. Our faculty's first duty is teaching, not peer-reviewed research. We carefully calibrate faculty rank and status requirements, teaching loads and staffing ratios to incentivize engaged teaching and learning. Many faculty also teach classes at the certificate, lower-division and upper-division level, which has strengthened the quality of all our programs even as it saves on costs.
2. A transparent budgeting process. We hold ourselves more accountable and stay better focused through an open approach that demands virtually every budget request be publicly justified before all interested parties (students, staff and faculty).
3. A comprehensive focus on student success. We relentlessly reexamine university activities and expenditures to ensure they support our teaching mission and student retention, completion and preparation.
4. A strategic focus for athletics. By leveraging affordable sports, we fill unique voids in our market, such as launching Utah's first, and already very popular, Men's Division I soccer program—versus a significantly more costly football program so many expected. Deploying these strategies, we cut student fees for the last two years, and

retained one of the lowest tuition rates in the nation for a major university.

## Structured Enrollment

Inclusion and access are not the only stories here, though. One of the most defining strategies fueling our growth and student success has been structured enrollment. Once admitted, students are enrolled according to their interests and level of preparation. All students are guided by online and face-to-face orientation and an inspiring opening convocation. New students who do not meet college-ready standards—a certain GPA and ACT score—receive mandatory, personalized advisement and are channeled into a certificate or two-year associate degree program. If they subsequently meet certain college readiness requirements, they can progress to upper-division levels with all their credits counting, many of which formally ladder into baccalaureate programs.

This formula honors inclusivity while fostering greater levels of academic seriousness and has proved a powerful catalyst for our growth. While our large freshman class has been expanding every year, our junior and senior classes have been growing even faster, given that upper-division students are now less inclined to drop out or transfer to other more rigorous institutions.

## Targeted Expansion of Programs

We also carefully developed an expansion roadmap for our programs and degrees, only adding those that are truly needed in the region and that lead to practical opportunities for success after graduation. In many cases, the community has been willing to help pay for such programs—another cost-saving strategy.

For instance, UVU sits in the booming “Silicon Slopes” where skilled IT jobs are difficult to fill. In addition to creating a suite of certificates for two- and four-year degrees related to this field, we have launched one of the few

fully dedicated cybersecurity master's degrees in the nation.

After discovering a local need for addressing needs of individuals on the autism spectrum, we secured donations for a first-of-its-kind autism center focused on the practical side of responding to the condition versus research, which other institutions were tackling. In May, our new center opened, entirely funded by community resources.

The creation of a B.S. in personal financial planning demonstrates our focus on success after graduation. We developed what is one of only a limited number of dedicated, AACSB-accredited bachelor programs in personal financial planning. After six years, UVU's program is ranked nationally in the top five. Major regional, national and international employers recruit UVU financial planning graduates, resulting in 100 percent job placement.

## Higher Education for All

For UVU, our dual model provides more opportunities for more people and saves costs for both the university and students. It also has a cultural upside. There is considerable value in bringing together student populations not normally educated at the same institution. As racial and class violence and polarized populations roil the country, bringing together disparate sets of people to learn and socialize together can help bridge the gap between educated elites and the working classes, as well as other divides. I see it happen every day at UVU.

The dual model is not for every institution, but it is now one proven method for making higher education affordable and accessible without surrendering quality. We need more places where middle-class and underserved populations can get a certificate or an advanced degree and acquire skills that make them a vital member of America's workforce and citizenry. Higher education can be both serious and inclusive while offering much more cross over than it has in the past. With open admissions, structured enrollment and a strategic roadmap, we can level and improve the playing field for more students than ever before. **P**

---

*Matthew S. Holland is president of Utah Valley University.*