UNIVERSITY SYSTEM of MARYLAND

Maryland Higher Education Overview

USM Chancellor Jay A. Perman/Requests for Comment

February 5, 2021

COMMENT REQUESTED

Page 24—What steps are being taken to assist the transfer student population, specifically identifying actions that have been taken as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to more easily facilitate the student transfer process for these students.

The University System of Maryland has long been attentive to the needs of transfer students, who comprise a significant share of our enrollment. Last fiscal year, USM transfer students numbered 38,191, 29 percent of our total undergraduate population. That number represents a one-year, 0.7 percent dip in *total* transfer students—that is, those matriculating from Maryland community colleges and from other in-state and out-of-state two- and four-year institutions, as well as those transferring between USM universities.

For the duration of COVID, all USM institutions have enhanced their online advising services for transfer students, and transfer fairs have been converted to virtual events. (We expect that some of this virtual activity will continue long after COVID has passed.) Over the long term, the USM has focused a key piece of our strategic work in enrollment management on developing and expanding pathways for transfer students.

While our total transfer population has experienced only a modest decline, the drop among students transferring from Maryland community colleges was more substantial. In FY2020, we saw a one-year, 4.4 percent drop in community college transfers, for a total of 11,167. We expect this decline to worsen, given pandemic-related challenges and their acute, deleterious impact on U.S. two-year colleges and the students they serve.

At the same time, we hope to reverse this drop in community college transfers with more focused attention on the academic and financial needs of incoming transfer students; improved admissions, placement, and academic advising practices; course redesign efforts; supportive learning communities; and expanded dual-admission agreements.

And we believe we'll see quick progress as we undertake a priority effort—improving the transfer process itself. In collaboration with the Maryland Association of Community Colleges, the USM has convened 12 affinity groups, consisting of faculty from four-year and two-year institutions statewide, to develop core

outcome assessments for individual courses. These assessments allow the institutions to determine course comparability more accurately than is possible based on a comparison of syllabi.

This effort includes more than 300 faculty in accounting, business administration, computer science, cyber, education, English, health, information systems, math, psychology, social science, and sociology. Meanwhile, the convening group has assembled a parallel Provost Council made up of chief academic officers from five four-year and five two-year institutions.

The primary focus of these groups has been comprehensive improvements to ARTSYS, the system designed to facilitate the transfer of students from Maryland community colleges to a USM university or other participating four-year institution. The group contracted with Quottly Inc. to develop a robust, state-of-art platform that has improved the transfer experience in two significant ways: 1) As courses are deemed comparable, ARTSYS will automatically update the system. Personnel no longer have to update the system manually for each course reviewed. 2) Even more importantly, the student portal is transformed by a search engine that permits students to explore many recommended transfer program pathways at once; easily save their own data and searches; and securely upload their transcripts using any mobile device. The new platform will also permit virtual meetings with advisors, in addition to face-to-face meetings.

These enhancements have been in development over the last year, and ARTSYS demonstrations have been provided to the USM; non-USM public institutions; private colleges and universities; community colleges; and MHEC.

State funding has *not* been made available for this project. Initial one-time-only IT implementation costs are $10,000 for any institution with a recognized student information system, and $20,000 for institutions with a "homegrown" system. Full implementation costs—including all course comparisons and recommended transfer pathways, and the capacity for interinstitutional registration—are proposed to be distributed on the basis of institution size. Thirty-seven participating institutions would proportionately share a total yearly cost of $892,500.[1]

While this cost is significant, it's worth it. To be an effective tool for students and for institutions, ARTSYS needs these upgrades, and we anticipate they'll streamline a process that's been justifiably criticized as cumbersome. We owe students a seamless interface that facilitates this critical juncture in their college career and sets them up for immediate and long-term success.

COMMENT REQUESTED
Page 31—Steps that have been taken to address education delivery and access for their students.

The University System of Maryland understood at once that with a pivot to emergency remote instruction last spring, some students would be at a distinct disadvantage, with limited—or even *no*—access to the technology and connectivity they needed to meet course requirements. That disadvantage was liable to persist through the fall semester, when the USM delivered courses in a largely online or hybrid format.

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[1] The USM has also negotiated a price for a system that doesn't allow for interinstitutional registration.

USM institutions immediately assessed the magnitude of the issue. Many universities surveyed their students, faculty, and staff in the spring, and again over the summer in preparation for fall. These surveys showed that the vast majority of students and employees had access to the technology and connectivity required for online education and telework, and most of the gaps identified in the spring were temporarily closed to finish the semester, with more sustainable solutions put in place over the summer.

Two institutions mapped student and employee addresses, overlaid with FCC maps of cellular or hardline internet connectivity. This effort identified not only those with no internet access, but also those who had connectivity options but no ability to pay a provider. For these students, financial aid was pursued to help them purchase a connection.

Institutions that did *not* formally poll students regarding technology access have nonetheless aggressively communicated with them about access programs available through their IT and/or Student Affairs departments.

In concert with this effort to *assess* the technology gap, our universities launched aggressive programs to *close* it. All USM institutions have equipment loaner programs in place. The spring pivot to remote instruction allowed the universities to measure student needs, and the summer provided the time to ensure that loaner programs were replenished for fall.

Where connectivity is the issue (vs. technology), most universities purchase and lend out personal hotspots (or other devices) so that students and employees can access the internet from their homes. Where home connection isn't an option, our universities have gotten creative. For instance, with a number of campus buildings closed last spring, many universities created Wi-Fi hot spots in their parking lots and garages, where students could learn over a central connection to the campus network, while appropriately distanced from one another. Since then, our universities have identified underused rooms in campus buildings that can serve as personal study spaces and hotspots.

Many USM universities are using institutional funds distributed through the federal CARES Act to provide students with computers and connectivity. Additionally, most of our universities have launched and sustained fundraising campaigns, whose proceeds go directly to the purchase of loaner laptops and hotspots. One institution's foundation provided sufficient technology funding to support an expansion of the loaner laptop program; virtual computer labs enabling student access to software normally available only on campus; and cloud subscriptions enabling software to be downloaded to personal devices.

I think it's worth noting that some universities are meeting the connectivity needs of their surrounding communities as well as their students. The University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) has partnered with Comcast to provide one year of high-speed internet service to about 1,000 families in West Baltimore, targeting those with children in UMB's partnering preK–12 schools.

We're acutely aware that higher education requires adequate technology and connectivity. This was true long before a pandemic that laid bare a persistent digital divide. We're aware, too, that students on the wrong side of this divide are at a nearly insurmountable disadvantage. Without exception, our universities

have deployed their resources and their creativity to close the technology gap so that all students have what they need to compete and succeed.