

MINUTES  
STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA  
BOARD OF GOVERNORS  
INNOVATION AND ONLINE COMMITTEE  
February 24, 2021

1. Call to Order and Opening Remarks

Chair Kent Stermon convened the meeting at 2:00 p.m. on February 24, 2021, with the following members present: H. Wayne Huizenga, Jr., Charles Lydecker, Ally Schneider, and Dr. William Self. A quorum was established.

2. Approval of Committee Meeting Minutes

Governor Huizenga moved that the committee approve the minutes of the meeting held on September 16, 2020. Governor Self seconded the motion, and the members concurred.

3. Planning for a Post-Pandemic World in the State University System

Chair Stermon thanked the provosts for beginning a very good discussion on what the system should look like after this pandemic.

Provost Ralph Wilcox said that even as institutions continue operations across the State University System, all are preparing for the day when campuses will be populated and will return to a greater sense of normalcy. Collective deliberations have been guided by five general questions that have focused on the willingness to embrace change and innovation, based upon lessons learned and best practices, to envision the future and to explore how twelve member institutions can benefit from shared experiences through even greater collaboration.

He stated that provosts believe that the State University System of Florida was better positioned than most other state systems to transition to remote instruction last March, due in large part to the Board of Governors' forward thinking and strategic leadership in expanding the delivery of quality online learning across the twelve universities. Growth was guided by the Board of Governors 2025 Strategic Plan for Online Education, which has three core elements: quality, access, and affordability. He said this is the plan that the Board of Governors Innovation and Online Committee, the Steering Committee, and the statewide Implementation Team are charged with systematically implementing and tracking.

With a student-centered focus on assuring success, academic progress, and learning in the face of a global pandemic, universities rapidly pivoted to remote instruction and learning in the Spring 2020. There was little change for the many students already enrolled in online courses. Provost Wilcox indicated that

universities made significant investments in software, hardware, and professional development and support to ensure academic and business continuity for students, faculty, and staff. Throughout, university faculty and staff, most of whom were working remotely in Spring 2020, continued to provide essential services necessary to support our student success.

He said that at the same time universities were focused on their students, they were challenged to provide their employees with technology and skills essential to work effectively from a remote location. Universities worked hard to expand employee assistance programs to help faculty and staff cope with the increased challenges.

He said that beginning last Spring, continuing through the Summer and Fall, and now in the Spring of 2021, universities have implemented a range of preventive health measures to limit the transmission of the virus, including daily symptom tracking, regular handwashing and use of sanitizers, physical distancing and reduced human density across campus, mandatory face coverings, and other forms of public health preventative and surveillance measures. He said many of these are expected to continue into the future, guided by public health professionals and scientific evidence. Student health centers and mental health counseling professionals have labored tirelessly as their workload has significantly increased, requiring even more investments on the part of the universities. Continuing mitigation strategies in the Summer of 2021 and beyond will, in large part, be dependent upon diminishing infection rates, the availability, efficacy and safety of vaccines, and emerging clinical treatment of the disease. Demand for mental health counseling, which was already growing exponentially in advance of COVID-19, is likely to remain at a greatly elevated level.

He stated that it will be important for the Board of Governors to continue to recognize the important role that Florida's academic health science centers play in helping to shape evidence-based policies, delivering clinical services both on and off campus, tracking the spread of the virus, and conducting biomedical research leading to disease prevention and treatment.

Provost Wilcox indicated that while the story of academic continuity throughout the global pandemic is one of considerable success across the State University System, with students provided access to quality education through a variety of instructional and learning modalities, along with a range of campus-based activities, both in-person and online, the most common regret from students, faculty, and staff is a loss of attachment to their campus communities. Specifically, the loneliness that comes with isolation has resulted in a pent-up appetite to return to campus for in-class, extra- and co-curricular activities including graduation.

One common theme has been the demand for new and previously anticipated advancements of facility enhancements, instructional information technology,

preventative health, and essential personnel necessary to ensure academic and business continuity. While overall, student enrollment levels have appeared to have been stable this academic year, a drop in the number of out-of-state students, including international students, due to travel restrictions has resulted in a loss of tuition for some. The 6% holdback and some appropriations combined with significant declines in some auxiliary revenues means that universities are facing a rapidly growing price tag associated with COVID-19. He said that some universities across the system have received considerable federal funds, yet the added costs incurred by institutions in excess of revenues continue to grow.

As the system envisions a post-COVID future, provosts are wondering what impact the last 12 months will have on institutional and system-wide performance against plans. He asked:

- What will it mean for new and continuing student enrollment, retention, progression, and graduation rates? What about employment rates of our graduates?
- Are the impacts disproportionately greater in one part of the state than another, or for certain demographic groups?
- How can we help our graduates reenter the workforce?
- What will it take for Florida's economy to regain its strength and flourish?
- How can we ensure an even brighter future for the State University System?

He said the provosts believe the answers to these questions, and to others, lie in thoughtful and collaborative planning for the future (identifying lessons learned, best practices, challenges and opportunities essential for framing a bright future for the SUS in a post-COVID world). He said the Steering Committee has already begun that journey, having met with representatives for the Council of State University Librarians, the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates, the Vice Presidents for Research, the Online Education Implementation Committee, and the Academic Coordination Group last Friday. In the coming weeks and months, the Steering Committee plans to meet with Student Affairs representatives to better understand their experiences, as well as Chief Financial Officers, Vice Presidents of Administration, and deans of medical schools and colleges of public health.

Governor Kitson said this initiative is perfectly timed and provides an incredible opportunity to build on lessons learned to see what can be put in place permanently. He thanked the provosts for what they are doing.

Chair Stermon stated that while the committee is called Innovation and Online, much of the committee work has been focused on "online." He encouraged

everyone on the call to focus on the “innovation” part and cast as wide a net as possible concerning how we view the response to COVID and to think outside the box. He said that some of the issues are now turning into opportunities to get better. He said it is necessary to think in terms of the next 10 to 20 years within the State University System, and not just the next 12 months.

Governor Levine expressed concern that some of the negative experiences people had with K-12’s online programs may result in pushback from students who experienced an overabundance of online courses. He asked how people can be re-educated on online learning and how to embrace it again.

Chair Stermon said that his response would be for our universities to concentrate on having an excellent product, and once we get students into the system, the problem will take care of itself.

Chancellor Criser stated that there was an increase in the four-year graduation rate of students in the system, as well as increases in the progression rate. At the same time, there were increases in enrollment and increases in the numbers of hours delivered. He said he thinks some of that is the focus that is placed on delivery, but more importantly, it is the culture that has been created and continues to be created for students in our system. He believes the value of this conversation going forward is to not only think about within the university community, but also how universities will work with the colleges and K-12 to make sure that students understand what their opportunities are.

Provost Wilcox indicated that a focus on the quality of online delivery and online learning was really at the heart of the work the system has been engaged in for many years. He said the quality of the product, both in terms of delivery and student learning effectiveness, is something in which the provosts have great confidence.

Governor Self thanked Provost Wilcox for his leadership and said they had a good, robust conversation last week in the Steering Committee. He said the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates brought forth some of the challenges and opportunities. He said he echoes Governor Levine’s concerns, and there are already studies going on in terms of teaching and learning, and online versus mixed-mode versus traditional face-to-face courses. He said he is excited about the potential and the opportunities as a system, and as a faculty, even, to innovate in the next few years. He said that students do not all learn the same way and there will be populations of students that universities will need to be careful not to leave behind in these new innovations.

Chair Stermon indicated the recommendation that came out of the provosts’ discussion was to establish a planning workgroup to assist the Innovation and Online Committee’s discussion on the post-pandemic world in the SUS.

Governor Huizenga moved to use the existing Steering Committee to undertake

responsibilities of assisting the Innovation and Online Committee in the discussions of a post-pandemic world in the SUS, bringing into their meetings other institutional leaders as needed. Governor Self seconded the motion, and the members concurred.

Chair Stermon called attention to the Committee Workplan for 2021, saying that part, if not all, of each meeting will be devoted to the post-pandemic discussion. Governor Self moved to approve the Committee Workplan for 2021. Governor Schneider seconded the motion and all members concurred.

4. Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Chair Stermon adjourned the meeting at 2:40 p.m.

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Kent Stermon, Chair

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Nancy C. McKee, Ph.D.  
Associate Vice Chancellor