

PARTNER PROFILE



UtahStateUniversity



Earned Admission: Expanding Access at Utah State University

THE CHALLENGE:

Ensuring Utah State Is “Accessible to All”

When Rep. Justin Smith Morrill introduced the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act in 1862, the legislation promised to “establish at least one college in each state upon a sure and perpetual foundation, accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil.”

As one of the land grant institutions the law created, Utah State University has long worked to fulfill its role in this mission, aiming to increase access to high-quality education for all students throughout the state of Utah. At the same time, the university maintains a set of admission requirements to ensure those who enroll in the institution are ready to thrive when they arrive on campus.

This created a concern for Utah State’s leadership: were they leaving too many aspiring learners behind?

“We took an internal look at ourselves and realized we could improve,” recalls Rene Eborn, Utah State’s associate vice president of strategic initiatives and deputy of digital transformation. “We started thinking about different ways we could help students who were perhaps not as prepared.”

The answer was not to change the university’s standards for entry but to provide a supported path for students who may not initially meet them.



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Katie Jo North, Executive Director for Enrollment Services, Utah State

THE SOLUTION: Earned Admissions

Early last year, Utah State partnered with StraighterLine to pilot a program that would offer prospective students a chance to earn their admission through pre-coursework.

Students that do not meet admissions requirements no longer receive a denial letter. Instead, they are informed that, while they don't currently meet the university's standards, there is another way. Those students are then directed to the earned admissions program, which is primarily operated by StraighterLine, to begin their academic journey. Importantly, students are also told about this possibility before they ever apply, with information about the earned admissions program posted clearly on the university's application webpage and through a school-branded website created by StraighterLine.

Students pay \$125 a month to take classes focused on math, English, and study skills. The three courses are required for earned admission, and students

can complete the courses at their own pace. The program also includes access to live tutoring, student advisors, and coaching services. Once students pass the courses, they can enroll at Utah State the next semester.

The program not only provides students with an option to attend the university and be prepared for success, but also offers students a low-risk opportunity to see if higher education is the right path for them. They can stop and start as they see fit, without worrying about dropping out and leaving a black mark on their transcripts.

“For students who may be less prepared, the earned admission program is a way to give them a chance to try college, without going into debt doing it,” says Katie Jo North, executive director for enrollment services at Utah State. “The last thing we want is students going into debt and not finishing their degree.”

THE IMPLEMENTATION: Taking an Inclusive Approach

Utah State leaders knew they needed a flexible and low-cost solution to help meet students where they are. They also knew that they needed a technology solution that would allow them to rapidly scale such an effort. Even with a large enrollment management team, Utah State realized they needed a partner to meet the personalization, coaching, and mentoring needs of a successful earned admissions program. This led the university to partner with StraighterLine, which has worked with many institutions to develop similar college readiness programs.

Utah State entered the planning stage of its earned admissions pilot in April 2020. Academic leaders worked to include as many stakeholders as possible in those discussions. Faculty were key—and eager—voices in the conversation. Alongside administrators, they fully vetted every course in the program.

“It was really important to be inclusive and involve our academic leadership early on,” Eborn says. “Together, we began to outline which courses we would offer, as well as our high-level goals for the program. Then, we worked with StraighterLine to plan out the student journey.”

The pilot was officially implemented that summer, with StraighterLine providing a dedicated support team, advisor training, school-branded outreach materials, and live student support. Utah State initially offered the program to 300 students who were denied entry to university the previous year, and 30 of them opted to take advantage of the new pathway to enrollment.



162

students enrolled
in earned admissions
program

100%

admission rate to
Utah State

63%

register for
upcoming term

THE IMPACT: And the Future

One hundred and sixty-two students have now enrolled in the earned admissions program. Those who complete the program have a 100 percent admission rate to Utah State. The majority of those admitted students—63 percent—enroll or register at the university for an upcoming term.

The program proved especially helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for a cohort of students largely unique to Utah institutions: the large number of students who do not enroll in college until after they return from LDS service missions. With the pandemic stalling international travel and sending missionaries home early, Utah State was met with a sudden influx of prospective students looking to enroll outside of typical admission cycles. They needed options. Because students can start the earned admissions program at any time, some

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students were able to begin preparing for college no matter when they arrived home.

The success of the program has demonstrated just how important this sort of flexibility is for students. The university is now exploring ways to expand the program. StraighterLine continues to provide support to Utah State, while working with the university to identify even more strategies and solutions for students moving forward.

“For us, the partnership has been a huge win,” Eborn says.

Learn more about how your institution
can partner with StraighterLine



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