THE PARTHENON GROUP

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To: Florida Board of Governors

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Re: Online University Study

Over the course of the last four months, a team from The Parthenon Group has been engaged in a project with the Florida Board of Governors to develop the fact-base for Florida post-secondary online education and identify potential online strategies to expand the number of post-secondary graduates through the use of online education. The memo that follows provides a high level description of the objectives for post-secondary online learning in Florida and potential options for the state of Florida to pursue. The attached summary presentation and detailed fact-base presentation include additional information on the options we have developed through an iterative process with higher education stakeholders across the state.

Process

This process has relied on deep engagement with stakeholders from the Florida Board of Governors, the Florida Department of Education, the Florida Virtual Campus, individual institutions both within the Florida systems of higher education and external to those systems, as well as state legislative and budget staff. We have kept these stakeholders updated through a series of ongoing discussions and meetings designed to gather input, push the dialogue forward and solicit feedback, all while maintaining our objective view. The options presented here and in the accompanying documents represent the output of that iterative process.

Online Offerings

The online offerings that students seek come in a number of forms, targeting different students with different requirements for success:

- **Online / hybrid courses** are taken primarily by students living on-campus but seeking increased course flexibility. ~40% of SUS and FCS students took an online course in 2010-2011, above the national average.

- **Fully online degree programs** are targeted towards degree-completer students who are unable to take onsite courses, for work, family, geographical, or other reasons. These courses require fundamentally different onboarding, ongoing support services and data tracking than programs for onsite students. Examples of

these supports include multi-modal support services (in-person, online, phone) with 24/7 responsiveness, identification of a student's "at risk" factors prior to enrollment, and daily, weekly, and monthly monitoring of a student's activity levels and grades to allow early identification of "at-risk" behavior that can then be addressed with the student. While the SUS and FCS do offer ~700 programs that can be taken fully online, the online-only student has been a lesser focus and online-only enrollee levels are below the national average.

- Finally, **self-directed courses** (e.g., the Massively Online Open Courses – MOOCs) that pervade the higher education media are a nascent online offering at a very low cost. Florida's statewide common course numbering system could allow MOOCs developed within the FCS/SUS (e.g., for introductory and high demand courses) to be taken by students of all types (e.g., high school, on-campus, adult) across the state. Proctored exams would need to be established in order for students to receive course credit.

While these three types of online offerings share much in common, the different target students and varying requirements for success imply that different strategies could be considered for each.

Objectives for Online Learning

Through discussions with stakeholders, Parthenon identified four primary objectives for online learning in higher education within the state of Florida:

- **Expanding Access**: Allows students who cannot take face-to-face courses to continue their education.

- **Reducing System and Student Costs**: Allows for a lower cost of delivery, through lower physical infrastructure costs, better utilization of resources, reduced time- and cost-to-completion, and increased effective capacity of institutions.

- **Strengthening the Link between the Labor Market and Post-Secondary Education**: Enables a broader scaling of labor force-demanded degree programs through coordination with the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) and "Labor Councils" and program dissemination beyond the local catchment area.

- **Enhancing the Student Experience**: Allows digital delivery, in its many forms, to enhance the quality of existing core programs and to expand the flexibility offered to students through a portfolio of online learning models.

We understand that different stakeholders have different objectives for online learning. In developing potential strategies for the state of Florida to pursue, we have been inclusive of these objectives to allow stakeholders to decide their relative priority.

Strategic Options to Consider

In focusing on the objectives for online learning outlined above, we provide four strategic options for Florida to consider for the creation, development and expansion of new online learning models. These strategies are meant to build on the online efforts already underway across the SUS and FCS today, to develop a comprehensive, best-in-class portfolio of online degree programs, while testing best practices that could be applied to existing offerings. These programs would include both competency-based and credit-based[1] offerings, would be tied to labor market needs and would aim to lower the recurring per student costs to the state and/or the student. These strategies include:

1) **Institution by Institution**: Institutions continue to develop online offerings on their own, driving innovation in a way that fits each institution's mission. The state will clarify objectives of expanded online learning models, but potential collaboration among institutions remains at their own discretion.

2) **Institutional Collaboration**: System-wide online degree program offerings are developed under the direction of a coordinating body (e.g., FLVC, BOG, FL DOE). Centralized marketing, onboarding, support services, and data analytics are each either managed by the central body or one of the participating institutions. Program-level RFPs are issued to institutions for program development. Online degree programs developed collaboratively under the direction of this coordinating body would be marketed to students across the state.

3) **Lead Institution**: One (or a few) institution is selected by RFP process to drive the development of new online programs in target degree levels and disciplines. The lead institution would be selected on the basis of a performance grant process that allows applicants to emphasize existing best practices and organizational strengths that can contribute to effective state-wide online degree programs. This institution, on its own or with other institutions, would need to ensure program access to a diverse student body.

4) **New Online Institution**: An online institution is launched with a mandate to drive the development of new online programs in target degree levels and disciplines.

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[1] Competency programs award credit based on mastery of material rather than seat time. These programs lower instructional costs by utilizing student tutors/mentors and allowing students to complete courses at their own pace.

The primary focus of these strategies has been on the development of online-only degree programs, and the marketing, onboarding, support services, and data analytics needed to make them successful. These supports require a fundamentally different approach vs. the onsite student. These strategic options could also apply to existing online/hybrid courses and to the development of credit-bearing MOOCs (and their proctored exams). The strategic option implemented for each type of online offering could differ (see the worksheet matrix on page 37 in the summary presentation).

Additional Considerations

Given our familiarity with Florida's comprehensive K-20 data system, we were surprised at the lack of persistence (beyond course level) and graduation rate data for hybrid and online-only students, available across the system. Because these students are not walking into a classroom, more extensive data monitoring of their progress is needed. Persistence and activity data should be monitored on an ongoing (e.g., weekly, monthly, by term, yearly, cohort) basis to enable the early identification of a student being "at risk" of dropping out to then trigger action. It is difficult to establish best practices for this newer modality without comprehensive tracking. As the state of Florida plans for the expansion of online learning opportunities, we would strongly encourage that it make comprehensive data tracking a critical priority.