

ASSIST Intersegmental Budget Change Proposal

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Nature of the Request

This Intersegmental Budget Change Proposal is being submitted by the Intersegmental Coordinating Council to request \$1,084,000 of general funds annually in order to augment the funding of ASSIST. These new funds would be combined with the current \$1,309,000 CCC, CSU, and UC segmental allocations for ASSIST to provide for continued operations, an enhanced technical infrastructure, and increased input of new course articulation at a total annual amount of \$2,393,000.

This BCP represents the details of a new funding plan that has been developed by the ASSIST Board of Directors whose membership includes faculty, system office, and campus representatives from CCC, CSU and UC as well as CPEC. The ASSIST Board developed this funding plan in response to a number of factors including: the most recent external evaluation of ASSIST; ongoing strategic plans for ASSIST; and the recent endorsement of ASSIST as California's official repository of articulation and transfer information by the leaders of the CCC, CSU and UC systems and CPEC.

Executive Summary

ASSIST is a Web-based transfer planning tool that shows students courses they must complete at California Community Colleges so that they can successfully transfer to a CSU or UC campus. This information – called course articulation – is the vital “transfer roadmap” for California Community College students. Since its inception as a voluntary, pilot activity in 1985, ASSIST has grown substantially and has evolved into California's official repository of transfer and articulation information as recognized by the California Education Round Table. All California Community College, California State University, and University of California campuses are required to maintain their most current articulation information in ASSIST. Thousands of students are served daily by ASSIST via the Internet where ASSIST is now providing over 80,000 reports each month.

Now that ASSIST has matured into a permanent and successful fixture for California, the ASSIST Board of Directors seeks to structure its funding and operations in the most efficient and effective ways possible to ensure the long term success of this important new part of California's public higher education/student transfer infrastructure. The ASSIST Board believes that this request is very important in order to achieve the key goals for ASSIST of providing complete, accurate and up to date articulation at a time when extensive and efficient articulation and student transfer are seen as key components to managing California's growing population of students in higher education.

The ASSIST Board has developed a comprehensive new funding plan to facilitate this. Key aspects of this plan include:

- 1) ***Enhanced technology and availability:*** New funding will be used to establish a production-level, fault tolerant technology infrastructure for central operations to ensure 24 hour a day, 7 day a week availability of ASSIST

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- 2) ***Increased Input of Course Articulation Data:*** As CSU and UC campuses develop new course articulation with Community Colleges, new funding will support the work required to enter and update articulation data directly in ASSIST
- 3) ***Increased Direct Student Use of ASSIST:*** A more reliable technical infrastructure and software enhancements will make it easier for students to get needed information without having to rely exclusively on professional college and university counseling services.

Current ASSIST funding through the CCC/CSU/UC systemwide offices totals \$1,309,000 annually. This funding plan requests an additional \$1,084,000 from the State general fund. With these additional new funds and a modified funding structure for ASSIST, California will be able to expect that all of the most up to date, complete and accurate articulation information is always available to students, faculty, staff and others who rely on this information to facilitate the seamless transfer of students.

Background/History

An effective student transfer process has remained a top priority among the California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California as is called for in the California Master Plan, a wide range of legislation, and systemwide/campus policies and practices. One of the most important cornerstones to an effective transfer process is articulation information that identifies how courses are transferable among campuses of the three systems of California public higher education. While responsibility for creating and maintaining articulation agreements is vested with the universities as receiving institutions, there is substantial work for both colleges and universities in developing and reviewing articulation. Over the years a number of different types of articulation information have evolved. Each university has established its own practices for the number of agreements they maintain and the frequency with which they are updated.

ASSIST, the Articulation System Stimulating Inter-institutional Student Transfer, is a computerized information system which operates as the official repository of articulation information for the State of California. The mission of ASSIST is to facilitate the transfer of California Community College students to California's public 4-year universities by providing an electronic system for academic planning which delivers accurate, timely and complete information.

ASSIST began as a pilot project in 1985 funded by a combination of segmental and Transfer Center Project resources. At the conclusion of the pilot in 1988, the program moved into an implementation stage, and over the years ASSIST has grown to the point where all CCC, CSU and UC campuses are actively participating.

Day to day operational support for ASSIST including software development and maintenance, technical support, training, user support and general coordination is provided by the ASSIST Coordination Site. ASSIST is governed by the ASSIST Board of Directors, which includes representatives from the CCC, CSU and UC systemwide offices and campuses, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, and the ASSIST Coordination Site.

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All of the articulation information in ASSIST is entered and maintained by individual colleges and universities throughout the state, and all California Community College, California State University and University of California campuses participate in ASSIST. The ASSIST Board of Directors has established specific goals and policies to help ensure that all of the most current articulation that has been established between California public colleges and universities is available in ASSIST.

ASSIST is currently funded at a level of \$1,369,000 annually which supports Coordination Site operations and a small offset of data entry costs for each UC and CSU campus. The segmental breakdown for current annual funding is: CCCCCO \$589,000, CSUCO \$360,000, UCOP \$360,000 and an additional \$60,000 from UCOP beyond the normal amount allocated for ASSIST.

In order to better support the long term needs of ASSIST, and in response to the last external evaluation of ASSIST in 1996, the ASSIST Board of Directors has adopted an ongoing strategic planning process. With the first ASSIST Strategic Plan, ASSIST achieved three important goals. 1) The ASSIST database was expanded to include all of the most current articulation that had been established between all CCC, CSU and UC campuses. 2) All of the data in ASSIST was made available via the Internet at www.assist.org. 3) ASSIST was established as the official repository of articulation information for the State of California by the three public systems of California higher education.

In February 1999, CCC Chancellor Nussbaum, CSU Chancellor Reed, UC President Atkinson, and CPEC Executive Director Fox signed a joint resolution endorsing ASSIST as California's official source for articulation. This endorsement emphasized the ongoing need for articulation and the importance of making it available directly to students in a comprehensive, readily accessible manner.

It is now time to capitalize on the momentum ASSIST has generated, establish and support it as a permanent resource for California, and continue to expand and enhance related services to ensure that students are provided with the information they need in planning their academic careers.

In order to meet the current and future expectations of California students, the California Legislature and the leaders of California public higher education, ASSIST needs to be established and supported as a permanent resource. By augmenting and institutionalizing the central operations of ASSIST, the ASSIST Board will be able to ensure that 1) articulation information will be available to students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 2) articulation information in ASSIST will be complete, up to date and accurate, and 3) improved technologies will result in more students being served by ASSIST.

State Level Considerations

An effective transfer function between California Community Colleges, CSU and UC remains a high priority for the State. Numerous sections of the State Education Code address specific ways in which colleges and universities are to collaborate to achieve success in this area. Some of these activities include maintaining specific ratios of transfer and non-transfer students at universities and the development of course articulation agreements between colleges and universities. Additionally, recent efforts such as the 1998 CCC/UC MOU regarding increasing student transfer, and a similar CCC/CSU MOU currently under development, reflect high level commitment to and support of an increasingly effective transfer function.

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There are over 1.4 million students attending California Community Colleges, many of whom are interested in transferring to a CSU or UC campus. There are a significant number of students who, for a wide range of reasons, are unable or unwilling to use the services of trained counselors and advisors in preparing for transfer. For these students, easily accessible, complete and up-to-date articulation agreements are even more important as this may be the only information they use in making academic planning decisions.

The California public higher education systems are working hard to fix weaknesses in the current system by rebuilding efforts that have been damaged in earlier years due to conflicting priorities and restricted resources. Some of these include system efforts to restore full-time articulation officers and transfer center coordinators, and to make out-dated articulation agreements current.

Complete and up-to-date articulation agreements continue to be one of the fundamental components of an effective student transfer process in California. To best serve Community College students, CSU and UC must keep existing articulation agreements up to date and create more new agreements with colleges.

Curriculum at colleges and universities are continually changing to meet the needs of local students and changing institutional priorities. These curricular changes require a great deal of work for college and university staff to keep existing articulation agreements up-to-date. As changes are made and new agreements established, it is critical that this information be disseminated and made readily available. Other than ASSIST, there are no effective methods for disseminating articulation agreements. Historically, colleges and universities have relied on paper distribution, which represents significant problems with lag-time, inflexibility and access.

As California's official source for articulation information, students, faculty, counselors and others rely on ASSIST for efficient academic and transfer planning. In order to meet the State's mission and vision for ASSIST, it must be readily available on the Internet for high volumes of users 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Justification

California's Master Plan requires a transfer function that works well for all students, regardless of whether or not they take advantage of professional counseling and advising services. With articulation agreements as one of the primary tools for students to use in transfer planning, ASSIST has been established as the only official repository for California articulation information. ASSIST was designed specifically to address issues of information access and dissemination, and has continued to evolve as a tool that is actively used by all California public colleges and universities.

ASSIST has already realized wide acceptance and success, and it has developed significant momentum. However, given the ever-changing nature of technology and the growing need for more articulation, there are some significant challenges facing ASSIST.

1. ASSIST needs to be established and supported as a permanent, production-oriented service.

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As the official repository for California articulation information, ASSIST needs to be a reliable service that students can expect to be available throughout the year, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. While all ASSIST services have been designed to meet this goal, the technology infrastructure at the central ASSIST Coordination Site needs to be augmented to provide a fault-tolerant technical environment and reliable, high speed access to the Internet. Also, Internet technologies will continue to undergo rapid change in the future. It is very important that ASSIST technologies are not allowed to lag too far behind. This has already happened once with ASSIST (and been rectified) and the ASSIST Board is committed to ensure that it does not happen again. The most common methods for managing technical change are to maintain and continually review focused technology plans (which ASSIST already does) and to support a three-year life cycle for key equipment.

The ASSIST Board of Directors believes that it is now time for the State to expect that the central operations of ASSIST operate in such a manner.

2. All of the most current articulation agreements need to be entered and maintained in ASSIST.

While universities are responsible for entering final articulation agreements into ASSIST, colleges and universities are required to maintain updated curricular information in ASSIST each term. While all of the colleges and universities in the State enter their respective data in ASSIST, many institutions have had to restructure funding and dedicate additional resources to support these activities, sometimes at the cost of impeding other articulation activities.

In keeping with goals of the CCC/UC MOU and other agreements between the segments, new and increased numbers of articulation agreements will be established over the next several years. Ongoing curricular changes require specialized work by trained staff who can work with ASSIST to keep agreements accurate and up to date.

The articulation information provided through ASSIST must be kept complete and up-to-date in order for students to have confidence in the data and continue using this service. Now that ASSIST has proven that it operates under a successful model and the leaders of California public higher education have endorsed it as the official repository of articulation information for the State, the ASSIST Board of Directors wants to ensure that as articulation and curriculum are updated, the ASSIST database is kept complete and up-to-date.

3. ASSIST and articulation need to be made easier for students to use, and more students need to use it.

Historically, articulation agreements have been designed for use by administrative staff at colleges and universities. The current format for presenting articulation information is often quite confusing and complex for students to take full advantage of this important information. The Coordination Site intends to conduct detailed student focus groups to determine more useful ways of presenting articulation information to meet specific student needs. The ASSIST software could then be enhanced to meet both the needs of students and the needs of administrative staff in communicating articulation information.

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By taking advantage of advanced technologies, the ASSIST Board of Directors believes that ASSIST can dramatically increase direct use by students and make articulation less confusing.

Now that ASSIST is well established at colleges and universities, the ASSIST Board believes that the next important step is to dramatically increase the number of students who use ASSIST directly. Students who use professional counseling and advising services at colleges are better prepared and have more useful and efficient interactions with these counselors if they have spent time collecting and analyzing information from ASSIST. Students who do not use college services for transfer planning need to know that ASSIST is the primary resource they should use for locating articulation information. The ASSIST Coordination Site needs to continue to evolve the ASSIST software to best meet the changing needs of students.

4. ASSIST operations need to be supported most effectively over time.

During the initial 15 years of ASSIST, each of the three public systems have allocated specific funds to support central and campus ASSIST operations. The systems continue to support ASSIST at the highest levels and fully intend to maintain their current financial commitments to support ASSIST in the long term.

However, as described in the most recent external evaluation of ASSIST, sponsored by CPEC and conducted by the Carrera Consulting Group, the current structure of intersegmental funding for ASSIST served the project well in the initial years, but is now a liability as it makes ASSIST too susceptible to changes in intersegmental relations. ASSIST has already experienced (and recovered from) these types of problems, and if it is to be a reliable resource for students, this issue should be addressed.

CPEC has recommended that if the State is to allocate additional funds to ASSIST, those funds should be allocated from the general fund directly to the ASSIST Coordination Site (with UC as the fiscal agent). This is consistent with other well-established intersegmental projects such as MESA, PUENTE and CAP.

Analysis of Feasible Alternatives

In considering the future for ASSIST, the following three alternatives have been discussed.

1. Status Quo

The sources and amount of ASSIST funding could remain at the current annual level (CCC \$589,000, CSU \$360,000, UC \$420,000). These funds would continue to be pooled together to support central ASSIST operations and a minimum level of the total CSU and UC data maintenance costs.

However, as technology advances and increasing emphasis is placed on establishing more articulation, ASSIST would not be able to maintain its current momentum.

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New technologies require increased support for operational personnel as well as hardware and software. As the base technologies that support ASSIST continue to evolve, the Coordination Site would be unable to keep up. ASSIST technologies would lag behind, and the Coordination Site would be unable to provide the types of services expected by students and institutions.

Eventually, ASSIST technologies would become obsolete and could no longer be supported. At that time, it would take substantial effort to redesign ASSIST and re-implement it using current technologies.

Technical salaries at the Coordination Site must increase in order to retain existing staff. In 2000-2001 an additional \$100,000 will be required just to maintain existing technical staff salaries at an appropriate level. Without additional funds, the ASSIST Board will need to make serious choices about how to retain an effective staff at the Coordination Site and provide needed baseline services.

As evidenced in many forms including the recent CCC/UC MOU regarding increasing the total number of CCC transfers to UC, the total number of articulation agreements between colleges and universities is expected to substantially increase over the coming years. While there is a high volume of articulation currently established in California, there are many holes between institutions where students traditionally have not transferred. There is substantial work for both colleges and universities in establishing new articulation agreements and updating existing ones. This behind-the-scenes work is critical to the process. It will be increasingly important that those new and updated agreements be entered in ASSIST. As the amount of new and updated articulation increases, it will be increasingly difficult to keep these data updated in the ASSIST database.

2. Institutionalize and augment central ASSIST operations

A second alternative would be to augment current annual ASSIST allocations by an additional \$1,084,000 from the State general fund directly to the ASSIST Coordination Site (with the University of California as the fiscal agent as is currently the case). The current \$1,309,000 of segmental allocations for ASSIST would be combined with the new allocation to support the following core operations and new activities at a total annual amount of \$2,393,000:

- Establish high speed network access to central ASSIST server computers
\$60,000 – annual lines and equipment
- Upgrade to a redundant fault tolerant technical environment for central ASSIST server computers
\$190,000 – hardware and software
- Ensure that central ASSIST hardware and software technologies remain current
\$170,000 – annual replacement of 1/3 of hardware plus software upgrade contingency
- Ongoing central operations at the ASSIST Coordination Site
\$985,000 – salaries/benefits/operating expenses (99/00 level)
- Augmentation of existing Coordination Site technical staff salaries
\$100,000 – salaries/benefits (required in 00/01)

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- ASSIST articulation database data entry/maintenance
 - \$360,000 – UC data maintenance
 - \$360,000 – CSU data maintenance
- Enhance the ASSIST software to make it easier for students to use and support the more complex technical environment at the central ASSIST Coordination Site
 - \$170,000 – additional salaries/benefits/operating expenses

This alternative would ensure that as technology continues to progress and as colleges and universities establish more articulation agreements, ASSIST would be able to keep pace and provide the expected level of service to California's growing population of students who are depending on an effective transfer process to meet their academic goals.

With this new funding structure which combines segmental allocations and State allocations from the general fund, ASSIST would continue to be guided by and accountable to the intersegmental ASSIST Board of Directors.

Recommended Alternative

The ASSIST Board of Directors recommends the second alternative detailed above for the following reasons.

First, this alternative provides the greatest benefit for the State as it addresses the full range of needs raised earlier in this proposal, including:

- Establishing and supporting permanent, production-oriented ASSIST services by:
 - Establishing high speed network access to central ASSIST server computers
 - Upgrading to a fault tolerant technical environment for central ASSIST server computers
 - Ensuring that ASSIST hardware and software technologies remain current
 - Supporting the more complex ASSIST technical environment
- Ensuring that all of the most current articulation agreements are always maintained in ASSIST
- Making ASSIST easier to use and increasing the use of ASSIST and articulation by students to facilitate "trouble-free" student transfer
- Providing State-level funding of ASSIST core operations to ensure stable, ongoing operations

Second, this alternative demonstrates a carefully planned expansion of ASSIST activities in key areas that are aligned with State priorities. By building on and maintaining the positive momentum that ASSIST has generated over the past years, the State is more likely to experience benefits within the first year of funding as well as long term improvements with this alternative.

Third, this alternative continues to reinforce the collaborative nature of ASSIST. It emphasizes and promotes intersegmental cooperation. It continues to emphasize that articulation is a critical aspect of a trouble-free student transfer process. And it encourages CSU and UC campuses to continue creating new and updating existing articulation agreements.

Timetable for Implementation

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The ASSIST Board of Directors has continued to demonstrate progress with ASSIST through strategic planning and setting focused long-term goals, mid-term objectives and short-term activities. Because ASSIST has already established a strong infrastructure of central services, all of the activities in this proposal would begin in the first budget year. By the end of the first budget year, the ASSIST Board should be able to demonstrate modest, but noticeable increases in student usage and numbers of agreements in the database. In the second budget year, the State should be fully realizing the benefits of a healthy project.

The improvement of central ASSIST operations toward a permanent, production-oriented service should be less visible to the outside observer. By the end of the first budget year, the Coordination Site should complete the upgrade to a fault-tolerant technical environment for ASSIST. This will ensure that central ASSIST services continue to be available over time as technology evolves and unexpected circumstances arise. Also during this first budget year, the Coordination Site will conduct student focus groups and other related activities to determine specific ways in which the ASSIST software can be enhanced to make it easier for students to get the information they need most. The Coordination Site will complete the development of those new software capabilities by the end of the second budget year.

In subsequent budget years, ASSIST will have the available resources to continue focusing central operations on changing technologies and other important new priorities that are sure to develop. The ASSIST Board of Directors will continue to use a strategic planning model with effective monitoring and accountability to guide the ongoing operations of ASSIST.