

TO: Talent, Education & Industry Alignment Subcommittee
FROM: Jimmy McDonough
DATE: March 23, 2026
RE: Higher Education Initiatives Board Update

Executive Summary

Talent Ready Utah is advancing a coordinated, statewide system that aligns education, industry, and government to move students into high-demand careers through integrated funding, work-based learning, and placement infrastructure.

Over the past several months, we have made measurable progress across this system. New grant awards are expanding capacity in priority industries and driving strong enrollment, credential attainment, and job placement outcomes. The Cooperative Education pilot is transitioning from design to implementation, with initial student placements expected this summer and full participation across Mechanical Engineering programs by Fall 2026. In parallel, employer onboarding for the Utah Talent Hub is underway, establishing the foundation to scale internship, co-op, and employment opportunities statewide.

These efforts are intentionally interconnected. Grant investments are building program capacity, cooperative education is embedding structured work-based learning into academic pathways, and the Talent Hub is creating a centralized platform to connect students to employers. Together, these components position us to move from program-level success to a scalable, system-level talent pipeline aligned to Utah's workforce needs.

Momentum is strong, but key risks remain. Full implementation of Salesforce as a unified grant and engagement management system is delayed due to legacy data migration challenges. Employer adoption and capacity will be critical to scaling co-op placements and ensuring high-quality work-based learning experiences. In addition, the absence of a standardized, systemwide definition and framework for work-based learning continues to limit consistency and reporting.

Over the next quarter, our focus will be on resolving system implementation constraints, converting employer engagement into placements, and advancing a unified work-based learning framework to support long-term scale and impact.

Key Decisions / Board Actions Requested

- Educator Fellowship
- Talent Ready Connections (K12)
- Utah Works (K12)
- Return-to-Work (K12)
- Deep Tech Amendment – Weber State University

Strategic Context

These program areas support Talent Ready Utah’s core strategy to align education and workforce systems with industry demand. The focus is on building scalable pathways that integrate academic programs, work-based learning, and employer engagement to strengthen Utah’s talent pipeline in priority sectors.

Program Updates

1. Initiatives

Overview

The initiative portfolio continues to expand across priority industries, with a focus on workforce-aligned programs, industry partnerships, and scalable training pathways.

Key Updates

- 30 new programs awarded across 7 industries in FY 2026
- Deep Tech awards supported 25+ industry-partnered projects and internships
- Life Science Initiative expanded clinical shadowing, NSA-supported cybersecurity capstones, and internships with direct job placement outcomes
- Healthcare programs launched new clinical degrees and strengthened pathways from industry training to accredited academic programs
- Engineering, Computer Science, and Educator Fellowship initiatives launched with strong institutional interest

Challenges & Risks

- Legacy systems continue to limit reporting, visibility, and integration
- Ongoing monitoring required for budget and MOU compliance
- Data migration into Salesforce is delaying full system deployment

Opportunities

- Expand high-demand programs into rural regions
- Scale high demand programs in rural regions
- Increase industry engagement in all academic pathways

Metrics & Impact

- Strong enrollment growth and completion rates tied to workforce outcomes
- Program growth up to 227% in select technical fields
- High job placement rates and increased industry-recognized credential attainment

2. Cooperative Education / Work-Based Learning

Overview

The co-op pilot is entering implementation, with first student placements expected this summer and full participation across Mechanical Engineering programs by Fall 2026. Early cohorts are intentionally small to validate the model and inform scale.

Institutions are largely prepared, with pre-co-op coursework and credit structures in place or under development. Scaling will depend on employer participation, alignment of student pipelines, and program flexibility.

Work is also underway to establish a statewide framework for a standardized, transcript-based approach to tracking work-based learning participation and outcomes.

Key Updates

- Initial cohorts of 2–5 students across six Mechanical Engineering departments
- Employer engagement underway with RAM, MCM Engineering II, Hill AFB, Northrop Grumman, and U.S. Synthetic
- Utah Tech preparing for Summer 2026 co-op cohort
- Institutional input confirms WBL activity is widespread but fragmented in definition, policy, and tracking

Challenges & Risks

- Tuition costs for early cohorts may impact participation
- Employer capacity to support high-quality co-op experiences
- Lack of standardized WBL definitions and frameworks limits consistency and scalability

Opportunities

- Leverage early employer adopters to expand participation
- Convert existing internships into structured co-op models
- Expand co-op into additional disciplines, including life sciences
- Align WBL frameworks across K-12, technical colleges, and degree-granting institutions

Metrics & Impact

- Target of at least 21 full-time, paid, credit-bearing co-op students by Fall 2026
- Pilot will validate employer demand, student participation, and institutional scalability
- Improved ability to link WBL participation to employment outcomes

3. Talent Hub

Overview

Employer onboarding is underway, with an initial focus on life sciences. Salesforce is being used as the system of record for employer engagement, while Talent Hub captures job postings, applications, and hiring outcomes.

Student engagement efforts are aligned to ensure that student participation supports employer demand and hiring outcomes.

Key Updates

- Platform enhancements to improve employer onboarding and bulk opportunity uploads
- Integration with Salesforce to track engagement and performance metrics
- Targeted employer outreach underway in life sciences, supported by institutional pipelines
- Coordination with BioHive and BioUtah to accelerate employer engagement

Challenges & Risks

- Technical dependencies between Salesforce and Talent Hub require continued refinement
- Variability in employer and institutional adoption
- Inconsistent opportunity quality and candidate readiness

Opportunities

- Use data to guide industry expansion and refine engagement strategy
- Improve platform performance through user feedback and data-driven iteration
- Standardize quality expectations for opportunities and candidates

Metrics & Impact

- Success measured by employer activation, opportunities created, and placements achieved
- Target: 300 opportunities posted annually, resulting in 200+ placements
- Advertised to over 75 student clubs and organizations
- Email message sent to 6 BioHave campus chapters
- TalentHub presented to the U of U club advisor, and a flyer was shared. Should reach 600+ students.
- TalentHub added to the U of U Brio newsletter, distribution 1,100+ students.

Risks & Mitigation Strategies

- Cross-cutting risks include system implementation delays, employer adoption variability, and fragmented policy frameworks.
- Mitigation efforts are focused on system integration, targeted employer engagement, and development of standardized work-based learning definitions and practices.

Looking Ahead (Next Quarter / 6–12 Months)

- Finalize Salesforce implementation and data migration
- Launch initial co-op cohorts and expand employer participation
- Advance and formalize a systemwide work-based learning framework
- Scale Talent Hub adoption across priority industries and institutions