

USM Regional Higher Education Centers (RHECs)

The USM’s Regional Higher Education Centers (RHECs) play a critical role in helping the System achieve its core mission of access, affordability and student success. Not only do the two current RHECs enroll over 4,500 students – many of whom would not have been able to attend a traditional USM campus – but they do so at an average savings to the student of \$8,000 over the course of her/his degree and with a four-year graduation rate that is almost 20 points higher than for USM transfer students overall. Finally, it is important to recognize that the partnership structure that is the heart of the 2+2 centers allows them to offer a range of programs selected from different USM institutions to meet the unique workforce needs of the center’s region.

Each of these factors, when combined with the geographic importance of each RHEC, makes the USM’s emphasis on RHECs in the strategic plan, and its commitment to their success understandable. Not only do RHECs provide a cost effective option for students, but they also boost access in underserved areas, address regional workforce needs, help spur other forms of economic development or revitalization, and provide additional market options for institutions struggling to boost enrollments.

At the same time, a number of ongoing operational and financial issues exist that make the further expansion of the RHECs a challenge for the System, the RHECs and their partner institutions. These include issues tied to:

1. **The financial impact** on institutions of operating off-campus programs.
2. **Operational hurdles** associated with attracting and sustaining new or expanded programs that challenge both the institutions providing the programs and the RHECs hosting them.
3. **Culture differences** in how traditional campuses and RHECs operate and the populations/regions they serve.
4. **Issues of Governance** – priority setting
5. **Accreditation issues** that may impact the ability of institutions to offer some programs at an off-campus site.

To help address these issues the USM has developed and is implementing a new financial and operational model for the development of programs and the operational support of its RHECs. This model has two components:

The first component of this model would address the way in which the RHECs partner with USM institutions to identify, plan, develop and sustain programs. This component would be MOU based and would emphasize or contain the following principles/elements:

1. All costs associated with establishing and operating any program at the regional centers would be shared between the centers, the institutions, and the USM per the terms of an MOU.
2. As part of the MOU development process, each RHEC and its institutional partner would work together to identify and document the following:
 - a. the potential size, scope, workforce need and impact of any programs proposed by or for the regional center,
 - b. jointly agreed upon enrollment projections and degree-production targets for the program(s),
 - c. estimates of the anticipated costs,
 - d. agreed upon performance metrics.
3. To ensure that each program receives the level of financial and operational stability needed to successfully plan and build enrollment per the MOU. (Details are available.)
4. The MOU would designate an agreed upon “review period” at which the program’s continued viability and desirability would be assessed.

The second component of the financial and operational model would address the base operating needs of the RHECs themselves. (Details are available.)