THE ROLE OF
AMERICAN MULTICAMPUS UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS
AS BUFFER INSTITUTIONS
IN SAFEGUARDING CAMPUS AUTONOMY

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Summary

Most of the states in the U.S. have organized their public higher education into multicampus university systems by consolidating previously independent institutions under a single governing board and a single central administration for easy coordination, better control of expenditures and more rational allocation of resources. The central administration provides leadership, not only to identify the priorities, set the strategies and implement the plans to meet future demands, but also to safeguard campus autonomy and academic freedom by acting as a buffer between the campus and external pressures (including governmental agencies) as well as a facilitator for the diverse constituencies within the system and the internal interest groups on the campus.

Introduction

Universities throughout the world are facing a multitude of problems, which are financial, educational, social, administrative and political in nature. They are under pressure from within and without. The increasing demand for higher education from both individuals and the professional sector is coming at a time when there are cuts in public expenditure in most cases. The social and political pressures have caused shifts in governmental priorities and resulted in the spreading and diminishing of resources available to higher education as well as increased intervention by various governmental agencies in the internal

affairs of the universities. These demands from the state and the public for academia's accountability is a significant development. On the social end of the matter, public interest in higher education is at its peak because of media coverage as well as the growing expectations of the public from universities for equal educational opportunity and meeting the educational needs of adults on a life-long basis. Universities are serving larger and larger segments of society. Our universities and colleges rather than being pushed to the periphery of our society, are moving increasingly to the center.

All countries are searching for both structural and policy changes to achieve greater effectiveness in their higher education institutions which are expected to provide greater service to the national economy, contribute not only to scientific research efforts but also to the fields of arts and culture, educate a highly qualified work force for international competitiveness, emphasize quality in education, efficiently use public resources, and be accountable to the public.

American higher education with its gigantic dimensions of student, teacher and institutional numbers, the diversity of its institutions, the great scope of its activities and the equality of educational opportunity provided universally is no exception to this trend. On the American higher education scene, there are about 3400 independently organized institutions which educate about 12.5 million students. Of these, over 40% are public institutions but they educate about 80% of all the students and have 75% of the teaching staff and spend 63% the money allocated to higher education(6).

State universities have been established by statute or by provisions in state constitutions and the general revenues of the state provide well over 50% of their general education budget. The traditional organization model for higher education has been a single, autonomous institution with little or no connection to other peer institutions, and with all the advantages and drawbacks that come with singular individualism. Yet, in the last four decades, a trend to move from the single institution to a coordinated system has started to become dominant and has decisively been shaping higher education throughout the world in the form of multicampus university systems in the U.S. and the national systems in Europe and elsewhere. When a single coordinating body is responsible for a broad range of institutions within a single system, new issues, new policies, and new concerns begin to surface.

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The increased interest of the state in the affairs of the university and its demands for more accountability for the use of public resources have elevated the interaction between governments and higher education to new levels of tension. Multicampus university systems have been established in a significant number of states. These institutions have been rather effective in not only centrally administering campuses and planning for future demands but also in safeguarding campus autonomy against government intrusions and mediating among various constituencies within the system and the internal interest groups on campus while being accountable in its stewardship of public resources. This study is an investigation of the effectiveness of these institutions in their role as buffer institutions in counteracting external pressures on the system and internal conflicts across the system and keeping autonomy and accountability in balance.

Public University Systems

Of the 10 million students that are educated in public institutions, almost 7 million are in public systems of higher education. Of the 50 states, 42 have consolidated their public higher education institutions into "systems" mostly for easy coordination, achieving rational resource utilization by systemwide planning and efficient operation as well as implementing public policies aimed at restructuring postsecondary education on a statewide basis. The result has been the rise of multicampus university systems, some as mega-institutions with student enrollments as high as 400,000, as many components as 64 campuses, and with multibillion dollar budgets(6).

Usually the head of the system is a chancellor and the heads of component institutions (i.e. campuses) are presidents. There is one board for the system. In some states, the system is comprised of only senior colleges and universities or only community colleges while in others the system may include all public higher education institutions. For part or even all of the state the board has the policy setting function and delegates authority to the chancellor, under whom is a central system administration which may have a staff of 50-60 in small systems and, 800-900 or more in the mega- systems(7).

10 Largest Multicampus University Systems in the U.S.

System	Campuses	Enrollment
1. State University of New York	64	404,000
2. California State University	20	375,000
3. Massachusetts University System	29	185,500
4. University System of Georgia	19	183,000
5. City University of New York	34	175,000
6. University of Wisconsin	15	161,900
7. University of California	9	157,300
8. State University System of Florida	9	155,500
9. University of North Carolina	17	131,900
10. University of Maryland System	11	127,000

The system constituencies may be categorized broadly as: the campuses, the public, the media, students, alumni, faculty, staff, professionals (and their unions), the administrators, and funding agencies at local, regional, state and national levels. The duality of loyalty of most faculty and professionals (first to their professions, then to their departments, colleges, campuses and finally to the systems), the identification of students with the campus rather than the system, the desire of campuses for more flexibility, decentralization and autonomy, the underdevelopedness of alumni spirit (in contrast to big name campuses), the lack of intercollegiate athletics to rally the public, the preconceived notion of the public that they are entitled to free services of the system, the ambivalent attitude of the media towards the system and the generalized notion of lumping it with other state agencies are major drawbacks of the systems.

The campuses are legal entities and have fully developed independent administrative structures with a president at the head of each institution. The central system administration does not interfere in the internal affairs of the campus but acts to coordinate financial and academic matters and to allocate resources. The campuses rarely interact with state governments, since the central administration usually deals with the government.

Each campus draws upon the central administration for assistance and guidance and upon the university board of trustees for broad policy decisions. Each campus also draws upon the special strengths of other campuses and often develops with them cultural or educational events or programs that it could not support by itself.

The decentralized pattern of administration protects local campus autonomy and promotes drive toward high academic quality. As a multicampus institution, a university system is more than the sum of its parts. Each campus has its own destiny to fulfill, but in doing so, contributes not only to its sister campuses but also to the university system.

The mission of each institution in the system may be different and complement the others. The central administration's duty is to see that academic values are preserved, educational quality is maintained and the campus has the opportunity to develop according to its mission and contribute to society within this mission. For this the central administration provides leadership so that the identified priorities and strategies are set and plans to meet future demands are implemented. By providing necessary coordination and preparing system-wide strategic plans, the campuses are directed to develop in such a way that they complement each other and meet public accountability requirements rather than going into destructive competition (7).

The political weight of a big, well-managed system is of vital importance in times when the economy is troubled. The case of the whole system can be made clear and as has been observed in the past few years, the budget cuts in higher education systems have been at much lower levels than other state agencies. In addition, the system may have enough financial flexibility to keep quality programs going at undiminished levels of funding.

Higher Education and Government Interactions

The dramatic change in higher education since World War II was due to state initiative, imagination, and responsiveness to changes in society. The need to expand brought about by demographic increases in the 18 year old group and met by public support for the policy of expansion, was easily funded due to rising revenues from economic growth (19).

From the state point of view, the above patterns worked well insofar as they led to the growth of each institution or segment. When institutions tried to grow beyond the state need or ability to fund, the state had to formulate priorities in matters of finance and new programs. Such problems gave rise to the emergence of state systems of higher education. At different times and in different states different structures of higher education systems emerged *(4)*. However, in time of economic decline, impact on the quality rather than quantity will be profound. In adjusting the capacity to the demand without sacrificing quality, diversity, and mission, one must take into consideration which programs to consolidate, strengthen, or eliminate and which institutions to support more *(19)*.

In this context of university's interaction with government, the two major players are the federal government and the state governments. In the U.S. as far as government-university interaction goes, federal government is taken very seriously. It is committed to :

1. improvement of educational opportunity
2. strengthening of both secondary and higher education institutions
3. encouragement of higher standards of performance
4. advancement of research required in the national interest
5. expansion of the creative arts
6. a concern for educational development in modernizing countries

Federal government responds on many fronts to foster a focusing of national interest in education.

The second major player is the state government. By the U.S. constitution, higher education is the responsibility of state governments. The principal issues that state governments face in higher education are *(16)* :

1. planning for enrollment management
2. program quality and coordination
3. financing higher education, including student aid
4. policy formulation and accountability
5. governance of systems including centralization/decentralization
6. effective and efficient use of public funds
7. relationship with economic growth and technology transfer.

To achieve these through higher education, relations between government and universities should improve. According to the six recommendations of Carnegie Foundation studies, state governments and their agencies should *(8)* :

1. plan and provide basic support for a comprehensive system of higher education.
2. encourage good management by permitting administrative decisions to be made as close as possible to the point of action.
3. create broad categories of expenditure rather than line item budgets.
4. protect the integrity of the campus. In academic matters they should not directly review academic programs.
5. work closely with regional accrediting assocations.
6. aim for diversity as the a primary goal of statewide coordination.

Governments can be influential by *(3)* :

- funding mechanisms
- influence upon university activities
- research contracts
- recognition of new institutions
- requirements on maintaining standards

The key factor in the relationship between higher education institutions and governments is the balance between autonomy and accountability. This balance can be facilitated and even stabilized by a *buffer institution*. The issues of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability are raised when buffer institutions start making strategic decisions on the allocation of resources to universities according to social priorities and national needs. Thus, a buffer institution with a well defined function and mandate is essential. Such a buffer institution provides an interface between the academic institution and the government in either its executive or legislative role. It translates public will and demands to the academic institution. On the other hand, it serves as an intermediary in transmitting institutional needs and demands to the governmental circles. At the same time it provides a cushion or a shield to the institution (in the absence of which government could be too intrusive or mercurial.)

faculty and staff appointment, and employment to operation of facilities. These can be interpreted to contain elements that influence institutional autonomy in the classical sense. Consequently, the best guarantee of institutional autonomy is to have many sources of financing and not to have one major source such as the national treasury in unified systems. Thus, the universities should try to extend and diversify their revenue sources.

Accountability

Accountability is a relatively new concept in higher education and there is no reference to it before 1970. Yet the principle of accountability has been around for quite a long time:"to be accountable" has meant "to be answerable legally or morally for the discharge of some duty or trust." According to a Carnegie Council report : "External authorities are exercising authority over higher education and institutional independence has been declining. The greatest shift of power in recent years has taken place not inside the campus but in the transfer of authority from campus to outside agencies."*(13)* However, this over-regulation is seen universially in institutions throughout society. Therefore the case of accountability should be viewed in political terms rather than as a moral issue.

Distinctions between control and accountability are crucial unless government can maintain an appropriate restraint in its dealings with higher education: either the development of higher education will be hampered or in the extreme case, government will be encroaching on the autonomy and the established agenda of higher education *(11)*.

The emphasis on accountability in recent years has been due to the disenchantment of the public with the performance and potentialities of existing institutional forms. The demand for accountability also has gained impetus through pressures for greater participation in decision making. In the name of accountability, universities are made to assume greater responsibilities outside their traditional functions. Therefore, efforts must be made to separate legitimate demands from unreasonable or even illegitimate ones *(1)*.

Accountability is a hierarchic relationship between various levels of authority to carry out a set of duties. The higher authority delegates to a lower authority which in turn becomes accountable to the higher authority.

Accountability is a one-way phenomenon. Each stage is accountable to the stage above it but not to the one below. However, the one above has responsibilities to the one below. Therefore, "to be accountable" is not identical with "to be responsible." The stage which is accountable must be allowed a measure of autonomy approriate to the nature of the task. General policies may be set by the organization at large, yet in the implementation, in order to deal with sudden contingencies, responsible judgement must be exercised (since it is impossible to specify fully the rules governing the conduct of an office holder in every conceivable situation) one good maxim to remember is: "only an autonomous decision maker can be held accountable." For accountability to exist, the accountable office holder must have at his command adequate means and resources to execute his trust. If sufficient means are not available, execution of a task cannot be morally or rationally expected *(1)*.

Policy making and planning

In *government-university interactions two major processes are public policy* formulation and the planning of multicampus systems.

Policy Making

Public policies are set within a context of societal expectations, demands, and constraints directed toward the solution of a societal problem or the resolution of a common issue. Public policy structures at local, state and national levels have been showing a growing concern for and involvement in higher education. This is evidenced by the review of the programs and policies of *higher education systems and institutions* by these external agencies, and by the increasing number of governmental regulations concerning higher education *(13)*.

The characteristics of higher education policy making are very complex and often an *intermixture of political and policy making activities which occur* within as well as across institutional and governmental levels and they focus on a variety of policy areas. Politics has been defined as *"The authoritative allocation of values"* or as *"The acquisition and uses of power and influence."* However there is some ambiguity in separating politics from policy. The characteristics of higher education policy making systems can be given as follows *(12)* :

1.In regard to higher education, political and policy making activities occur at various levels.

2.Various forms of political relationships occur within and across institutional and governmental levels.

3. Relationships between higher education and public authority are highly interdependent and there are numerous points of inter-penetration *(13)*.

The interdependence between higher education and public authority should not be overlooked in interpreting issues and outcomes. The tension between the aspirations of the system and the constraints of the statewide master plan may impede the system's competitive edge for status, clientele, resources, or political influence within a state.

Planning

The second important process is system-level planning of multicampus universities. Planning strategies for single campuses are not sufficient for university systems. Each campus may develop plans independent of others, however the system -level plan is not a simple combination of unit plans. It is rather an integrated approach to the needs and strengths of the system. The challenge for planning in a multi-campus system is one which can be met by greater coordination, and integration i.e. "the system itself is greater than the sum of all its individual campuses." The process of system -level planning must account for and facilitate the interaction of administrators and faculty from different campuses and create a context in which all can be meaningfully involved.

To facilitate the development of more effective procedures for system - level planning, criteria unique to it must be considered and to achieve its goals, the system planning must *(19)* :

- not constrain the individuality of each campus by forcing artificial conformity but
- allow each campus to identify unique mission statements and promote its own areas of excellence, {These areas of excellence differentiate one campus from the other while helping the system capitalize on all of its potential.}

Plans should become the benchmarks for campus accountability. Within the confines of the plans, campuses should receive the fullest possible authority and autonomy. System and state officials should judge system-level proposals and actions solely on whether they seem consistent with the agreed-upon plans (5).

Systems as Buffer Institutions

Responsibility to work with government lies with the central administration and usually the campuses tend not to be individually the object of governmental interest. The university system in that sense serves as a buffer between the natural inclinations of government to interfere and their ability to interfere due to the way the budget is prepared. It is very hard for government to get at any given program in the university system because it cannot line item the budget and it cannot fight its way through the system bureaucracy to get to the individual campuses. Thus, the systems do serve as buffers in favor of campuses.

The real power should reside in the chief executive officer if the system is to function properly and achieve its mission. Then no campus president can bring any item to the board of trustees without the concurrence of the chancellor. No student group can bring an item to the board of regents except through the chancellor. The faculty cannot take an item to the board except through the chancellor. So the chancellor really controls the flow of business to the governing board (12). It is also true of governmental interests. There is no way the government can get any item on the board's agenda except through the chancellor. So, the chancellor of a system serves as a buffer both ways, and as a focal point to carry out the agenda of the system for the good of the society at large as well as the university itself. Thus, multicampus universities serve as buffers to protect their component institutions from obvious and unnecessary political pressure and act as bridges to link the gap between the interests of society and the interests of the institution's president and faculty. A significant influence of system central administration is to reduce internal conflicts on individual campuses and across the system's components. This provides an extra buffering leverage by showing to the state agencies that the

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Each side, academia or government, has to see it both ways and accommodate rational and legitimate demands from the other side. The system as the buffer institution is the conduit for this communication.

The board of trustees and its chairman have an important role in this interaction: they have the ear of both sides and easy access to them. Being highly respected and solid citizens, they are disinterested yet their concern is the welfare of the system as a whole. Since they act as a policy making body, they delegate their executive prerogatives to the system's chief executive officer or the chancellor. The chancellor is expected to provide leadership to the system and give the guidance needed in troubled times, provide wisdom and enlightened opinion not only to the public and the academia but also to the politicians and the media. These are especially essential for receiving necessary support and for getting confirmation for his decisions.

The System as a Facilitator for Diverse Constituencies

The system administration (as personified by the chancellor) must be like a person who convenes the right parties: brings the right people together in a milieu of dialogue and positive interaction. It must have the perspective and insight to detect when an issue has systemwide ramifications and act on time to make use of the opportunities it will provide to the system and its constituencies. The system administration, even though it may have the power to say the last word, should not exercise authority over the constituent entities but let them know that it is there in the background. Consequently, when an issue is too big for each constituency, the system may step in and resolve it.

Campus heads prefer the chancellor to say certain things in a certain way - the way they would have liked to express the idea but could not because a certain constituent group might be offended. In that case, the president can go to his campus constituents and say that it is resolved by the chancellor or the system administration and that it is obeyed systemwide (14). One good example is the faculty work load. In certain cases, the system administration is a convenient adversary or a "secret ally." The presidents or the senates may always "pass the buck", or justify an inaction by blaming the system administration. However, when one sees there is no recourse (or, no authority) beyond the campus president, it may be undesirable and even vicious. If an inequity is done by the campus administration, it can be undone

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by the chancellor. In other cases, the system may act as a pressure relief mechanism. Thus, the system administration may at times settle the differences between constituencies and at other times may impose compromises. This effort to mediate among internal interest groups on a campus (or across the system) will strengthen the hand of central administration.

In certain states, although a semblance of a system may exist, the chief executive officer is not present in the structure (e.g. Michigan) where the public institutions meet as a council with an assembly chairman with no executive powers. Then, the problems encountered are two-fold:

a. some are more equal than others due their clout or the prestige of their institutions.
b. in the presence of dominant people, a group will not take a stand, even if one or two institutions are going to be affected dramatically.

Therefore, in critical times, decision making will not be the same as if there were a chief executive officer.

Future Outlook

Universities are trying to respond to new pressures and conditions. They are searching for ways to maintain dynamism and quality of higher education in a period of diminishing resources and under conditions of retrenchment. The external pressures on higher education are not likely to subside in the next few years. If the universities can devise creative and proper responses to these pressures, their health and the status of their academic constituents will be guaranteed.

The state government currently is the major player in higher education, and will continue to be so in the future. More active roles in the affairs of higher education are being played by state agencies and internal matters of higher education (such as academic program planning and review) are now among the concerns of statewide planning and coordination.

Conditions inherent in government bureaucracy limit its capacity to regulate campuses effectively. There is frequent turnover at the top in many government agencies. Where new administration takes charge, new legislation

is introduced that changes the shape and character of existing programs. Lack of continuity in government action is sometimes simply due to poor administration or bureaucratic slowness. Government supervision is limited because of its obligation to treat all cases uniformly. This is because a public agency, when enforcing duly adopted regulations, cannot grant an exception to one institution without granting the same privilege to all. The ambitious range of bureaucratic oversight generates a work load that the government itself cannot handle. Although the bureaucracy demands accountability, it provides very few incentives for responsible decision making *(8)*.

From academia's point of view, a checklist of imperatives for state governments can be given: to maintain the current level of support to provide tuition grants to all needy students, to assist institutions in adjusting to changing needs, to avoid excessive regulation, to employ flexible funding formulas, to encourage institutional cooperation, to ensure statewide coverage of open-access institutions and of area health education centers, and to expend public funds with maximum institutional autonomy *(13)*.

State governments will continue to reflect various social concerns in regard to the performance and cost of higher education. Moreover, the state government perception of social concerns will not necessarily coincide with the perception of these concerns on the part of the leadership, faculty, staff, and students of individual colleges and universities. A rational approach by both parties is essential to achieve a mutually satisfactory relationship.

However, the state's philosophy on "who pays and who benefits", its approach to the balance between public and private institutions in higher education, the existence of its land-grant tradition and the state's policy on the scope and quality of public higher education combined with audits and court rulings are crucial parameters to interpret future development of multicampus university systems.

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