HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STATE: HOW SHOULD THE RELATIONSHIP EVOLVE FROM HERE?

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According to a bibliography assembled by Richard Novak, in the 75 years from 1920 to 1995 more than 100 books, reports, and major studies were written in the U.S. on the relationship between higher education and the state. That calculates to be 1.33 studies per year. I draw three conclusions from his study. First, the topic must be important. Second, the issues have not been settled. And third, it is very difficult to say or write anything original on this topic.

Despite the difficulty of being original or settling the matter, changing conditions and changing leaders seem to require a continuous conversation. So I will forge ahead.

I'd like to begin by commenting on a new book by a friend whom I deeply respect. In *A View from the Helm*, Jim Duderstadt, former President of the University of Michigan, reflects on his service at the institution where he has spent his entire career. As he tells his story, it is easy to infer the hierarchy of obligations he felt as an academic leader. The first obligation is to do what is right for society, as best one can determine the right. The second is to protect and advance the well-being of the University as a community and an independent social institution. As I read the story, he deliberately pursued this second obligation by working to maximize resources and manage relationships with elected regents and with the state and federal governments well enough to minimize their control and interference with the proper functioning of the University.

Duderstadt's perspective will strike some in political life as an outrageous claim of excessive autonomy and lack of accountability to the public trust. But to many in academic life, Duderstadt's sense of obligation will be viewed as a moral imperative – an entirely proper check on the short-sightedness of government and the potential abuse of political power in limiting intellectual freedom and human progress.

I'm in the middle. I understand both points of view. I will confess, however, to being troubled by the "tone" of some of Jim's chapters, just as he, and many in the higher education community, were troubled by the "tone" of the first draft of the Spellings' Commission report!

The issues at stake are quite fundamental. How can the state simultaneously achieve:

- Excellence in instruction, research, and public service; and
- Responsiveness to public priorities and needs?

This is a tough problem. Colleges and universities need lot of autonomy and freedom to achieve excellence. This isn't just because they want it or like it. Human progress and the advancement of knowledge depend on the freedom to create new ideas and experiment with fresh approaches. Moreover, the kind of talent required for world-class teaching and research is rarely willing to work in a bureaucracy.

At the same time, the states and the U.S. national government together spend about $150 billion to support higher education in order to meet public priorities – the education of our people and research and services to address important human problems. The public has a right to demand focus on real needs, results, and cost effectiveness. And in a representative democracy, the public invests power in elected leaders to serve their interests. The role and office of those elected deserve respect, even as we exercise the right to criticize their performance.

The key question is familiar to us all: How can institutional autonomy and freedom be reconciled with accountability for addressing public needs? In the final analysis, "institutional interests" and the "public interest" are one, not at cross purposes, but the point of departure, perceived interests, and immediate priorities often *are* different. Public policymakers and educators must manage constructively and effectively the moral ambiguities and the political dynamics of their situation.

In the 1960s the rapid expansion of higher education in the United States to educate the baby boom led to an explosion of writing and argument about the relationship between higher education and the state as well as the invention of new mechanisms and relationships. Lyman Glenny's 1959 book, *The Autonomy of Public Colleges,* was a launching pad for the state planning movement, followed by Minter's *Campus and Capitol* in 1966, Berdahl's *Statewide Coordination of Higher Education* in 1971, and dozens of less well-known books and papers.

When inter-institutional competition for growing resources heated up in this period, legislators and governors in about half the states opted to establish lay boards with a professional staff to plan the growth and coordinate competing local interests. In the other half of the states, existing statewide governing boards assumed the state planning role. (Enrollments more than doubled between 1960 and 1970, and state funding grew four-fold from $1.6 billion to $7.0 billion.)

Today the global "knowledge economy" is stimulating new discussions, new ideas, and new relationships. The emerging public mandate is for virtually all citizens to have some form of postsecondary educational attainment without compromising quality. Some question seriously whether the mechanisms developed in the past half century to shape public policy for higher education in the United States are up to the challenge. And others question whether such widespread educational attainment is feasible. I don't know the limits of the possible, but I'm confident current performance falls far short of what we need and what can be achieved.

What are the issues? There are many, but three stand out.

First, *Inadequate capacity to articulate and pursue a public agenda for higher education.*

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued a paper recently asserting that “states must improve their capacities for dealing with higher education issues and providing public policy leadership.” In essence, the paper argues that higher education policy in too many places has become the sum of institutional interests and ambitions. States need greater capacity for defining state priorities, mobilizing resources to meet the need for greater educational attainment, and holding themselves and institutions accountable for doing their part. While most SHEEO members would find this an articulate and compelling paper, it is clearly a criticism of the status quo, in which we all are complicit. What has gone wrong?

It is dangerous to generalize about higher education in the United States, but I will take the risk. The state planning and coordination movement worked out pretty well for a while, especially when it was necessary to make lots of decisions about new campuses and the expansion of higher education. The record of higher education in the United States over the past fifty years is quite impressive, and state planning agencies and activities played a key role in those achievements.

With notable exceptions, however, the power and influence of state coordinating bodies have been progressively minimized in the past twenty years. Some state coordinating boards never gained much traction, and especially in the 1990s, others, once quite effective, were abolished or reduced to a shell of their former functions and effectiveness. I think a fair assessment would conclude that institutions, which never have been inclined to accept the need for a statewide planning or regulatory body, have gradually persuaded political leaders to reduce or eliminate the role of coordinating and planning boards. And at times political leaders have strengthened institutional opposition to coordinating boards by failing to respond to their efforts to advocate public attention to serious educational issues and needs.

Statewide governing boards hire and fire presidents, so their role has rarely been challenged directly by institutional leaders. But institutional interests and inertia also have shaped the behavior of governing boards, occasionally leading to practices which “de facto” reduce the board’s staff and executive to a clearly subordinate advisory role, rather than a leadership role. In effect, the role of statewide governing boards in pursuing a “public agenda” as well as an “institutional agenda” has often been marginalized, either through the influence of institutional leaders protecting their freedom of action or the natural tendency of governing boards to focus mostly on institutional governance.

Second, *Inadequate ability to respond to strongly expressed public priorities.*

The greatest higher education issue of concern to the U.S. public is the rising cost to students. Public higher education can, with partial legitimacy, claim this is due to decreases or inadequate increases in state funding and federal support for student aid. Private institutions have more complex justifications. But the legitimacy of these arguments is only partial, and the public really doesn't care about the technical details. No issue has been more contentious than higher education costs in the deliberations of the Spellings Commission or Congressional consideration of the Higher Education Act.

Third, *Inadequate collaboration and alignment with K-12 education.*

The rising interest in closing achievement gaps and increasing education attainment has focused primarily on elementary and secondary education in the United States. But the quality of teachers and school leaders prepared in higher education and a perceived, arrogant "detachment" of higher education from K-12 concerns are recurring sources of criticism. The National Governors Association "Agenda" to improve high schools cited the fragmented governance structure of American education as one of the major issues to be addressed. Suggestions to consolidate all levels of education into a unified governance structure periodically reappear.

How have we responded to these issues?

National reports leading to legislation. Over the past three years, four major national reports have called for improving enrollment, degree completion, and student learning in higher education. They include *Public Accountability for Student Learning: Issues and Options*, by the Business-Higher Education Forum; *Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education,* by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education; *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education,* by the Commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings; and *Transforming Higher Education: National Imperative – State Responsibility*, by the National Conference of State Legislatures, Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. Collectively, these reports and the concerns animating them are beginning to lead to legislative action at the national and state levels.

Effective adaptation within established governing and coordinating structures. In virtually every state the established structures for shaping higher education policy have tried to respond to the issues identified in these reports. Where the right ingredients have come together they have been reasonably successful. What are the right ingredients? No chemical formula guarantees good results, but the key ingredients are:

1. State higher education policy leaders, supported by staff with well-developed analytical capacities, who have a commitment to articulating and addressing the broader "public agenda" issues;
2. Engagement and support from the executive branch;
3. Credibility with and support from legislative leaders;
4. Engagement of the private sector through lay boards and advisory councils; and
5. Credibility and leverage with the institutional community.

The state higher education policy leaders who have been most successful either have been coordinating board SHEEOs who have good working relationships with the executive branch or governing board leaders (usually, but not always SHEEOs) who “get” the need for public policy leadership and have enough personal leverage to move institutional practices, with or without a good deal of political support. Although progress on specific initiatives (such as P-16 work) has occurred without deep involvement from political leaders, there is little evidence that governing board leaders have achieved broad-scale progress without political involvement and engagement.

While we have made some progress, it remains to be seen whether existing coordinating and governing structures can become successful enough to re-establish confidence in their collective capacity to meet these challenges.

Changing established structures. Dennis Jones, whose memory bank of failed state initiatives is among the deepest in the country, argues that changes in structure should be the last resort, only when everything else has failed. Why? Because structural change, rather than substantive change, tends to consume all the available energy, especially if structural change is large scale.

But change is difficult regardless of the strategy, and changing structure is often the first resort. We have seen, and continue to see, changes in structure and formal relationships, some large scale (such as in Florida), and some medium scale (such as in Kentucky ten years ago). In addition, there is a clear trend for Governors to seek and obtain a more active personal role in higher education planning and policy development.

In two states where the SHEEO agency was significantly diminished in the 1990s (Minnesota and New Jersey) the current Governor now appoints (directly or indirectly) the agency’s CEO. In two other states, Ohio and New Mexico, the law was recently changed to make the SHEEO a gubernatorial appointee (as has been the case in Colorado and Maryland for some time.) In a number of other states, governors have worked directly with appointed boards to influence the selection of higher education state executives.

What are the benefits and risks of these responses?

Several implications of these trends are clearly positive. Greater executive branch involvement in higher education public policy and less public complacency are needed to promote the changes needed in American higher education. If our leaders and the people are not engaged, the powers of inertia will be insurmountable. And responding effectively and wisely to the pressure on higher education to engage constructively with K-12 education would be good for the country and for higher education.

But there are risks. Several worries come to mind.

One worry is focus and sustainability. Several factors conspire to give political leaders a short attention span, and all leaders, but perhaps political leaders especially, are vulnerable to the temptations of distributive, rather than strategic, policy making. Many issues compete for attention; a crisis can arise in almost any corner, and become allconsuming; terms of office are relatively short; elections are frequent; and high turnover in key staff is the norm.

Governors and legislators naturally want their work to be sustained; to do so they must build and participate in broad, bi-partisan coalitions, including citizen leaders who are committed to sustaining progress. I personally believe lay governing and coordinating boards are a crucial part of that mix, but for them to be effective they need to be populated with real citizen leaders – people governors and legislators trust and respect.

Another worry is the increasing tendency for education, and aspects of higher education in particular, to become partisan issues in a political environment that is becoming increasingly polarized, often along ideological lines. Higher education has survived ideological combat before, but “buffer” bodies have helped insulate it from the hottest conflict and serious damage. While it can be difficult, educational leaders need to respond wisely to unfair attacks and consider strategies that emphasize and make more visible the intellectual openness of the academic community.

Proposals to make education “all one system” are particularly tricky, because it is hard to oppose this idea without seeming elitist or arrogant. But making K-12 and higher education “all one system” has proved virtually impossible, even where both are superficially in the same structure. On many specific issues these two levels of education can and must work together more closely and effectively, but progress on those substantive issues is not likely to become easier if a structural “solution” includes *all* issues of turf, power, and culture.

Where should we go from here?

The report of the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education emphasized that “real improvement in educational performance will come when accountability in higher education is a *democratic process through which shared goals are explicitly established, progress is measured, and work to improve performance is motivated and guided.*” The Commission report also delineated a division of labor, according the responsibilities and capabilities of various public policy makers, citizen leaders, and educators. It sadly seems a little old fashioned to talk about common purposes, reciprocal obligations, and collective self-discipline, but these are the basis of improved educational performance and a proper relationship between higher education and the state.

As the mechanisms for public policy leadership in higher education continue to evolve, only those leaders willing to adapt to change will be successful. Despite the changing context, however, successful policy leadership will still require the ingredients mentioned earlier as the basis for achieving the necessary increases in educational achievement in the United States:

- State higher education policy leaders must have a clear vision, a commitment to addressing the broader "public agenda" issues, and the staff capacity required for identifying needs, mobilizing resources, and fostering collective accountability for progress;

- The executive and legislative branches of government as well as civic and business leaders must be deeply engaged in setting the agenda and working with higher education boards and leaders to support the agenda and sustain progress over time; and finally,

- The process and mechanisms of pursuing the public agenda must have credibility and leverage in the institutional community.

It is time to conclude, but I hope the conversation continues. We need a sustained dialogue to make this work. Thank you very much.