Statewide Governance: The Myth of the Seamless System

by John V. Lombardi, Professor of History, University of Florida

SEAMLESS EDUCATION — the phrase conjures up images of students moving gracefully from kindergarten through secondary school, college, and beyond. One imagines a smooth system, all parts working in concert, leaving parents pleased, legislatures happy, and employers delighted...

This is the dream that inspires those who hope to integrate state systems of higher education. Unfortunately for the bureaucrats who delight in this vision, though, students, parents, teachers, and schools have very different goals and dreams. Where the champions of a seamless system seek homogeneity, parents and students seek differentiated experiences. Where legislators seek efficiency and economy, teachers and schools seek complexity and enrichment.

Most states have long recognized that students and parents want to have a choice of academic opportunities, and most systems have wisely chosen to accommodate a wide variety of institutional types. If these systems founder, it is because of the ways in which they operate rather than because they've adopted a flawed design.

Designing for Distinction

State officials may pursue economy and efficiency through standardization, but colleges and universities seek to distinguish themselves by their differentiated quality. Generally speaking, nothing inflames the passions of an institution's alumni and other supporters more than an effort by system bureaucrats to limit their school's ambitions. In short, most colleges and universities are highly driven to improve, and most are prone to the associated phenomenon of "mission creep." Only the most solid of organizations can resist it, and only if they enjoy significant financial resources and long-standing political support for their traditions.

In states where there is only a single university system, every institution lobbies endlessly to improve its own position relative to the others. Inevitably, all seek to expand their academic domains; this has the gradual effect of blurring whatever had once made each campus distinct. Eventually, every institution comes to adopt a similarly broad mission.

A more structured example is California, which defined mission differentiation into three subsystems. While the systems compete with each other for money, the institutions compete primarily within systems, not individual institutions. This structured California model has withstood many attacks and challenges over several generations.

System Wars

A university system serves political as much as educational ends, and if it cannot meet the political challenges from local constituencies, it fails. These challenges come in two primary forms:

The first is the challenge from a local constituency that has no institution of its own. Significant political actors, recognizing the economic and cultural benefits of a university, seek authorization and funding to build a campus in their community.

The second comes from a local constituency that already has its own institution. The political actors associated with this institution will seek more money and an expanded mission for their school, anticipating economic growth and higher status for their community.

Both of these challenges turn on the availability of money. If the system or systems are strong and the state reasonably rich, then the state can invent or expand institutions to meet the demands of the local constituencies.

But if the state has too little money to meet the demands of its various constituencies, the higher education system will begin to confront intense pressures which their leaders may be too weak to resist. Thus, the system will have no choice but to try to accommodate at least a part of every demand. For example, it will establish branch campuses of existing institutions, or it will

reallocate funds to support program expansions. Florida, among other states, experienced this process in the 1990s.

When these efforts to satisfy all parties fail—and they inevitably do—the state will often move to reorganize the system, on the assumption that the decision-making structure must be to blame. Thus, the state will move either to centralize or to decentralize its form of higher education management, creating the reverse of whichever system is already in place—and this process is visible today in Texas, Kansas, Florida, Nebraska, New Mexico, Illinois, and Maine.

From the perspective of university officers—presidents, provosts, and deans—these system wars have predictable patterns. Administrators can generally anticipate a period of legislative and bureaucratic enthusiasm for accountability. There will follow an elaborate planning process, leading to the production of a negotiated five-year master plan document. And there will be a (usually) submerged but ferocious conflict over the methodology used to divide up the state's dollars among its various institutions.

Flagship institutions—those with or within striking distance of national standing as research universities—will worry that system reorganization will lead to a redistribution of state revenue from the intellectually powerful to the politically powerful. Other institutions—those that aspire to greatness—will struggle to keep open a window of opportunity to realize their improvement plans. Meanwhile, private colleges will watch carefully to ensure that whatever state subsidies have come their way do not suddenly disappear.

For their part, system officers, government bureaucrats, and legislators will try to create structures meant to contain and manage all of these competing aspirations. They will entertain hopes that the reorganization—whether an effort to centralize or decentralize institutional planning—will improve efficiency by reducing budgetary requirements, and that somehow this restructuring will lead to a more effective allocation of resources and political conflict.

Conclusion: It's Not the Design that Matters

Many of the players in this recurring drama labor under the illusion that there is a "right" way to manage a complex statewide higher education program. The advocates of centralization typically produce examples demonstrating that all problems can be solved if the state's various colleges and universities are brought under the purview of a single, constitutionally mandated governing board. And the advocates of decentralized systems will produce equally compelling examples demonstrating the merits of institution-specific boards.

They are all wrong, of course, for the success of a statewide higher education system depends on three critical elements, none of which are unique to any particular organizational structure:

1) **Money.** If there is enough money to invest in higher education, any system will work well.

2) **Quality of the leadership available on institutional boards and within state legislatures.** If the leadership is strong and draws from a clear statewide vision, any system will work. (And if the leadership of boards and the quality of elected officials is less than ideal, then local considerations will overwhelm the process, whatever system is in effect.)

3) **History of higher education in the state.** Every state has long-standing traditions that underlie the organization, mission, and funding of new and old institutions. Every state has a political culture that determines how it will approach the delivery of critical services. Ideally, a higher education system will match the political culture it serves. A system that works wonderfully in one state will often fail miserably in another, not for lack of money or leadership but because the imported system best fits only the idiosyncratic political structure and tradition that created it.

Does this mean that there is no point to the constant effort to revise and reform statewide higher education systems? Not at all. It argues instead for a clear understanding of the issues and for recognition that institutional diversity is an irreducible constant of American higher education.

The history of statewide higher education tells us that all colleges and universities will strive to improve and to enhance their individual reputations. It tells us that organizational structure is less important than commitment and money. It tells us that politics is a critical determinant of success, certainly in public higher education. And it tells us that a long-term political consensus about higher education is much more important than the details of high-level system organization.

Most importantly, the history of American higher education reminds us that quality in teaching and research always comes from the campus and not from the system. PR

John V. Lombardi served as president of the University of Florida from 1990 to 1999.