

CHANGING ROLES

By Gordon K. Davies

OF GOVERNING AND COORDINATING BOARDS

The work of state higher education system boards is changing. By “system boards,” I mean governing boards for all of higher education in a state, governing boards for certain kinds of institutions (such as the Louisiana Community and Technical College System and the California State University system), and state coordinating agencies (such as the Illinois Board of Higher Education). All of them have a general responsibility to promote cooperation and coherence among the institutions for which they are responsible.

But times have changed, and so should the ways in which systems boards do that work.

Many of these boards (or agencies) were created in the 1950s and 60s, when the US faced the great challenge of rapidly building capacity to accommodate large numbers

of students. The GI Bill had sparked a movement in which people from a wide range of backgrounds found college education suddenly available to them, ushering in a vastly larger college-going population that would lead to dramatic growth of the American middle class.

In the mid-20th century, the primary work of the governing and coordinating agencies was to promote rational and politically acceptable expansion, ensuring that all regions of a state were served by institutions that were reasonably accessible and that these institutions offered comparable and appropriate arrays of programs, student services, and amenities.

Fast forward to 2010. The major challenge today is not building capacity; it is instead using the existing capacity of state systems of colleges and universities as efficiently and effectively as possible. Certainly new buildings need to be built, but not as many as during the mid-20th century. New

Gordon K. Davies (gdavies02@comcast.net) has been the executive head of two statewide coordinating boards, one in Virginia (the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia) and the other in Kentucky (the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education).

programs need to be started, but not as many. New institutions need to be established, but not many. There are more than enough highly selective universities and not nearly enough colleges committed to meeting the needs of the people in the states in which they are located.

The size and strength of the for-profit sector of postsecondary education has also changed American higher education. It now enrolls about 12 percent of all students, who collect about 25 percent of federal grants and loans. Most of these institutions operate nationally or at least regionally, often offering online learning in states in which they have no physical presence. State approval, still nominally a responsibility of most coordinating or governing boards, has become difficult and frustrating.

From the World War II veterans onward, millions of families now are entering the fourth generation of college-going, while states are seeking at the same time to serve a new population of potential first-time students. The first group tends to think of college as a right, even to take it for granted, while the second faces daunting obstacles to enrolling, persisting, and completing programs of study.

State boards now have two major responsibilities. First, they must insist upon the public purpose of higher education: to meet the needs of the people of the states in which they are located. Second, they must continue to act as “buffers” between the colleges and universities and the political and bureaucratic institutions of government.

It sounds simple if you say it fast. But actually, this dual role is complicated and difficult because of the social, economic, and political situation in which we find ourselves.

We have an economy in which people must be college educated (and have a degree or certificate to show for it) in order to participate and contribute. But we have a politi-

© Matthew Henry Hall www.matthewhenryhall.com



cal situation in which there is no will to generate additional revenues or to stop deficit spending. And we have a general public that wants colleges and universities to make available services and modes of delivery that most of them are not equipped to provide.

Seeing that old models of governance do not work in this new environment, state leaders have responded in two contradictory ways: with excessive deregulation or with exces-

sive central control. Both are understandable, given what is happening in states across the nation. And both are wrong.

Excessive deregulation is a predictable outcome of state reductions in higher education funding. “If the state will not, or cannot, support us, then cut us loose to do what we think best in order to make our university as good as it can be,” say flagships and other universities with top-twenty ambitions (obviously, this is not as big an issue with community colleges). At a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, James Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, advanced this argument: “We’re facing the prospect in which state money is so meaningless as to not be worth the regulatory burden.”

At least one governor has responded to this complaint by offering a flagship university complete autonomy in return for its purchase of the land and physical assets that have been provided by the state. That ended the discussion. But the argument that if a state gives its institutions very little support, it should exercise very little control is appealing. In Wisconsin, the governor took this position to the point of recommending that the flagship University of Wisconsin, Madison, break off from the rest of the system and assume the status of a “public authority.”

Meanwhile, at the other end of the governance spectrum, some state governments have assumed direct control of their public colleges and universities. In several, the governor has assumed authority to appoint the head of the state governing or coordinating body, while others have eliminated or greatly weakened the “buffer” boards that once helped to guard against both political interference in higher education and excessive bureaucratization of the institutions.

Independent buffer boards are apparently under fire in other nations with sophisticated higher education systems as well. In England, for example, the Higher Education Funding Council is moving to a more regulatory model as the result of a government review. In Japan, the independent buffer agencies are experiencing pressure from a government that wants more control. (A panelist at a Japanese symposium on the changing roles of buffer boards said of them that, in being situated between government and the institutions, they are “kicked from below and punched from above.”)

The result is a highly political system that can distort the historic values and purposes of higher education. The recent tendency to treat colleges and universities simply as weapons in a global battle for economic supremacy is a good example of this trend.

Politically controlled systems also tend to lack long-term coherence. As governors come and go, so too do their leadership appointments and the expectations of what the system should be doing.

But while state boards are under fire, their role in effecting change has never been more crucial. We need them to move away from a bureaucratic style of operation to focus on (1) cost management rather than revenue enhancement, (2) the core instructional mission rather than pursuit of status (through selective admission, graduate programs, and research), and (3) strategic choices rather than short-term fixes. We need them to ensure that the successful education of undergraduates from all social and economic sectors of our society becomes the dominant priority of all but a few institutions.

Here are some of the things the higher education boards – the buffer agencies – should do:

1. Set an agenda focused on access and success by changing existing budget formulae to reward the behavior we want and need, such as improved graduation rates coupled with a rigorous assessment of learning.
2. Measure what matters, such as progress from elementary school through college and the retention of graduates in the state.
3. Establish a formal relationship with the state’s apparatus for economic development.
4. Establish genuine working relationships with K-12, both at the state level and regionally across the state, on such issues as the Common Core Standards.

As governors come and go, so too do their leadership appointments and the expectations of what the system should be doing.

“We need to recognize that the rapid expansion of for-profit postsecondary institutions has raised legitimate concerns about the quality of their offerings. State approval mechanisms are ill-suited to deal with these giant, multi-region institutions.”

5. Take responsibility for all of adult education, including basic literacy and numeracy.
6. Monitor the multiple sources of funds coming into each institution and where they are spent.
7. Report what is being done, the resources used in doing it, and the results achieved. Of course some innovations will fail. It is important to recognize quickly which ones they are, abandon them, and move on. In this way, even failures contain elements of success.
8. Protect the autonomy of the institutions.

Finally, we need to recognize that the rapid expansion of for-profit postsecondary institutions has raised legitimate concerns about the quality of their offerings. State approval mechanisms are ill-suited to deal with these giant, multi-region institutions, which often operate in states in which they have no physical presence. The US Department of Education is attempting to address this problem, but unfortunately it is doing so through bureaucratic actions like defining the “credit hour” and “gainful employment.” The states are in a better position to regulate the quality of these institutions through their licensing authority. They might work through the regional compacts to revisit their procedures and standards for institutional approval.

There are good examples of multi-state cooperation that have proven very valuable: For years, SREB’s Minority Doctoral Grant Program and Academic Common Market have addressed access and achievement issues across state borders, not just within them, and in 1996, the Western Interstate Council on Higher Education (WICHE) states created the Western Governors University to address the pressing problem of access in the region. The states need to act in a coherent way to guard against top-down control that could tie colleges and universities in knots.

“You get kicked from below and punched from above,” said the witty participant at the Japanese symposium on the changing roles of state boards. It’s true. It’s always been true, only now the state boards will be knocked around for new reasons.

From above, the demands are for cost reductions and increased productivity; from below, they are for deregulation and the pursuit of business as usual. Balances can be achieved that meet the demands of each side to some extent. But if the two sides start kicking and punching one another, the results will be damaging and useless brawls. Street fights are not going to help us set a course for the future. Come, let us reason together. 