

Commentary

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Are University Systems a Good Idea?

— By MARK G. YUDOF

Life was simple before World War II. After that, we had systems.

- Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hopper

Physicians and biologists speak of “systems biology” and engineers of “systems engineering.” The idea is integration. If you manipulate a patient’s potassium level, you had better worry about the impact on other organs and bodily functions. If you want a more powerful heater in your car, you should think about the whole electrical system.

In higher education, the term obfuscates as much as it enlightens. There are many different types of college and university systems in our country - sometimes even within the same state. The system-level office of academic affairs in California, for example, plays a greater role in faculty appointments, promotions, and compensation than that office does in other systems. Some systems centralize legal services, facilities construction, and budget preparation, while others do not. Meanwhile, research on the subject is anemic, largely consisting of factoids organized by state. Few, if any, studies have evaluated whether our systems as they operate today are actually a good idea.

We know that higher-education systems are phenomena of roughly the last 50 years. There were state boards of regents as early as the 18th century and branch campuses of state universities by the late 19th century, but the idea of a “rational system” for higher education emerged after World War I. Frustrated state policy makers thought that public universities were not taking advantage of coordinated planning opportunities and economies of scale, and that they spoke to legislators with too many voices. After World War II, the movement toward organized systems gained further momentum as states established campuses in underserved areas to meet the growing demand for higher education.

The turning point was the creation of the 1960 Master

Plan for Higher Education in California, with its tiering of graduate, undergraduate, and community-college educational opportunities. Following the success of the University of California, a movement toward systems washed across the country. Every legislator and chamber of commerce leader, so it seemed, wanted to create a Berkeley in his backyard. Sometimes campuses were planned and created to populate the system. At other times, as in my home state of Texas, pre-existing institutions were cobbled together with new campuses to create systems that were more a result of happenstance and politics than the orderly integration of complementary institutions.

Part of the effort involved what has become known as “branding.” Bringing institutions into the fold identified them with flagship universities that had built splendid reputations. Systems were also supposed to help colleges share resources and increase coordination. In addition, they had the potential to improve quality across a range of institutions and to strengthen political support.

In some cases, the systems resulted in better-coordinated degree programs and improved educational standards. But usually California was emulated in form, not substance. For example, California gave its central system office extensive authority over facilities, faculty hiring and promotion, budgets, and more. Many other states adopted similar structures but continued the old patterns, such as making appropriations directly to individual campuses and decentralizing decision making.

What’s more, the food fight over legislative appropriations and other scarce resources did not disappear. The flagships felt threatened by the wannabes and their advocates. The up-and-coming institutions complained

that they were not securing the resources to catch up. Rather than generating more political support, the addition of new campuses often amplified local and regional conflicts.

Indeed, in the rush to create new systems, legislatures had often not sufficiently grappled with critical questions: Is a campus better off standing alone or as part of a network? Are system bureaucracies just one more impediment to progress, or can they be beneficial? Which businesses, if you will, should systems be in, and which should they abandon?

The fundamental question is the one that I asked myself in 2003 after I became chancellor of the University of Texas system: Can the operations of a system truly add value to the work of the campuses? I have found that the answer lies in three related propositions:

1. Systems usually contribute more to emerging institutions than they do to flagships. System people are no smarter or more experienced than those at the campuses, and usually there are fewer of them. They are also farther from the campuses and less knowledgeable about local circumstances. That said, flagship institutions generally have the knowledge and capacity to make and carry out most of their own decisions, as approved by their boards. In contrast, emerging institutions often lack the personnel, programs, and experience of the flagships and may look to the system for assistance on academic-program development, fund raising, capital planning, and other matters.

One caveat: Everyone, or nearly everyone, has a boss. Legislatures, subject to the limits of their state constitutions, have broad authority over higher-education policies, as do governing boards. All public universities should follow those policies, whether related to academic programs or not - even if people on the campuses think they are misguided. System administrators may be chosen to compel compliance with such policies, irrespective of each campus's administrative capabilities. They might be required, for example, to monitor and set targets to improve graduation rates - a matter of considerable concern to governing boards and elected leaders.

2. A system's role should expand when it comes to broad organizational issues that concern the entire enterprise. While system officials should usually leave teaching and scholarship to each institution, even the most mature and capable campuses can sometimes benefit from support in certain management areas. For example, a ro-

bust accountability system, overseen from the center, is part and parcel of an efficient administration. Similarly, a system may be better positioned, as an entity external to the campus, to investigate allegations of impropriety, like the recent student-loan controversies involving inappropriate relationships between financial-aid offices and lenders.

Systems can also act as honest brokers, encouraging cooperation and collaboration among their campuses. Left to its own inclination, each campus would have its own computer backup facility. It would order all of its supplies. It would have its own technology-transfer office. Significant economies of scale can be found in several areas, like sharing electronic library databases or using uniform definitions of accounts and other common standards to assess financial performance.

In our system, for example, three campuses share a technology-transfer office; a group of universities has adopted one software system for tracking registration, financial aid, and other student matters; and our academic-health campuses jointly purchase equipment and supplies. We project those steps will save \$250-million over the next decade.

A university system can also invest in certain priorities and measure the impact of those investments. Besides our accountability system, we require each campus to assess and compare student learning. In recent years, we have also allocated \$100-million for faculty start-up packages, primarily for equipment and facilities renovations to our campuses, as a means of attracting and retaining outstanding professors - and a way to gauge how well each institution is doing so.

The system can also speak as one voice to gain support among legislators, other policy makers, and the public. In Texas we produced a privately financed 13-part series that aired on public television, depicting how public universities help solve critical social, economic, environmental, and health problems.

3. A system that adds value will differentiate its services among institutions. Although multicampus collaborations can provide substantial savings, complete centralization would backfire - especially in a highly heterogeneous system of many campuses with various missions and resources. What is helpful to emerging campuses is often more of a hindrance to established, first-tier universities and medical centers. One size does not fit all. Fund-raising operations, for example, are as highly differentiated as the campuses themselves. Some are in

need of significant consulting services. Campuses take advantage of system services in areas such as reorganizing their personnel and operations to build a stronger capacity for fund raising, recruiting development professionals, and handling other basic growth areas. Such services are in high demand by smaller and midsize campuses. Larger campuses with mature operations prefer to have assistance in professional-development opportunities, financial support, the loosening of traditional policy restrictions, and other areas that will allow them to become more nimble and innovative in their approaches to secure more donations. The system's focus should be on providing genuine help and not adding cost and complexity.

The promise that higher-education systems would completely resolve the messy interplay among colleges, and between them and political leaders, has largely gone unfulfilled. But systems can be useful if system and campus leaders, and their governing boards, are willing to allocate authority in ways that add value to carefully delineated activities. Perhaps Larry Faulkner, a former president of the University of Texas at Austin put it best: System administrators should recognize that a system office is not a university, and campus presidents should recognize that theirs is not the only college in the system.

Mark G. Yudof is chancellor of the University of Texas system.

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