

THE LEADERSHIP DYNAMIC IN PUBLIC COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS

A Joint Paper

of the

National Association of System Heads

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

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FOREWORD

Societal pressures, scarce financial resources, and heightened requirements for accountability and transparency demand that system board members, system heads, and campus chief executives work together in concerted and productive ways to achieve their individual and collective purposes. There is a need for a clearer articulation of how a state system board, a system executive, and individual campus chief executive officers can engage one another most effectively. What are the respective responsibilities of these players within a state system? What are the rules of engagement—the procedures and guidelines to ensure that a system and its campuses work together effectively and are accountable for their performance? How can the leaders of a collection of higher education institutions—often characterized by differences in mission, size, and programmatic strengths—function most effectively together in a combined strategy to serve a state and its citizens in exchange for state financial and political support?

It was to address such questions as these that the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the National Association of System Heads (NASH), and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) convened a special session to focus on characteristics of effective public college and university systems. The AGB-NASH-AASCU discussion sought to identify key principles and practical strategies to guide system board members and their chairs, system heads, and campus chief executives in achieving an effective working relationship to help advance the needs of states and their communities. The discussions from this event yielded a clearer delineation of the responsibilities of the system board, the system head, and campus chief executives within a public college and university system of higher education.

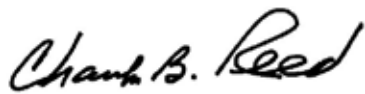
This paper offers a summary of key points and recommendations from the discussion and other sources. Its purpose is to provide guidelines to each of the major figures in the leadership dynamic, helping bring about increased effectiveness in public higher education systems while contributing to a heightened understanding of these systems by state policymakers and higher education researchers.

We are pleased that our three associations could collaborate to address the important leadership dynamic within college and university systems. We thank those who joined us on May 30, 2008, for a wide-ranging discussion of these issues and who helped frame many of the points in this paper. Special recognition is owed Dr. Thomas Meredith, an individual who has served higher education as an institutional president, and system executive in three university systems. Tom is the immediate past president of the National Association of System Heads. He was instrumental in seeing that this paper was produced.

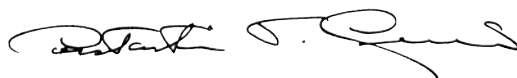
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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of public universities and colleges in the United States are part of public college and university systems. The impetus that gave rise to such systems was a desire within state governments to impart greater coherence to a state's public universities and colleges for purposes of addressing public priorities more seamlessly, to reduce unproductive competition among them, to realize a more efficient use of state resources, and to create a political and economic environment that would allow institutions of different sizes and missions to thrive and succeed.

Public higher education systems are made up of institutions of all kinds, including state flagship universities, smaller regional universities, and community and technical colleges. Leaders at any of these institutions may wish at times for a more direct and unfettered course to a legislature and governor—a path that could allow them to define and pursue the institution's destiny more completely on its own terms. At the same time, however, institutions within public college and university systems often reap the benefits a system confers. While those at a flagship research university may feel that smaller campuses of a system are an impediment to their institution's trajectory, in many cases the system can strengthen a flagship's particular case for financial and political support by presenting it in the context of other state goals for education. Those at smaller institutions may at times feel relegated to the shadow of the public research university, though a system can provide a collective voice with an influence in state government that smaller campuses would not likely attain individually.

A former head of three different systems once said that a university system is a place where countervailing public forces come into equilibrium. At its best, a system provides a clearly understood context to guide the actions of individual colleges and universities. At the same time, every system requires a degree of flexibility that allows individual institutions to contribute to a state's educational goals in different ways according to their distinctive strengths. The relationship among different parties in the leadership dynamic of a higher education system must include elements of responsiveness and mutual support, even as each is held to clearly defined standards of accountability.

The dynamic of shared powers and responsibility among the board, system chief executive, and institution chief executives inevitably is a source of some tension in public university and college systems. The challenge in every case is to make the tension productive—to make the relationship one that sets meaningful expectations and holds each player accountable to high standards of integrity and professionalism, while at the same time providing the support that allows each party to be effective in fulfilling his or her leadership responsibilities, particularly those that help achieve state priorities and public purposes.

A system governing board has responsibilities similar to and yet distinct from the board of a single public institution. Effective system boards balance the demands of several, sometimes competing, institutional interests while presenting a unified front to policymakers and the public. They lead and monitor several institutions while simultaneously advancing the system and its strategic agenda as a collective. A high performing system board represents all of the state's citizens and all of the system's institutions equitably.

The chief executive of a public university or college system occupies a space among a state

government's elected officials, the board, and the chief executives of the public universities and colleges that constitute the system. He or she is the top educational leader and spokesperson for the entire system (or for all of state higher education), as well as the top administrator with management responsibilities to see that the system office implements the policies of the governing board. The system head is the conduit to the board for institutional presidents, the mediator of institutional disputes, the leverage for cooperation and collaboration, and above all, the champion for a strategic agenda to address the needs of the state and its citizens. Though the sphere of influence is extensive, the system head may find it in some ways to be a lonely realm. Unlike campus chief executives, system heads do not have faculty, students, and alumni of their own and such things as football or basketball teams to help elicit loyalty and support.

An institutional chief executive within a college or university system is not a branch manager but a leader provided the authority and autonomy to run a given institution with minimal interference from the system office or board. The campus chief executive is also a member of a system policy-making team, formally through the system's council of presidents. Campus presidents within systems have a different sphere of influence from that of a president with an independent governing board; the external influence may be only in one's region or community and not statewide. Some institutional presidents find this constraining, others find it liberating. Successful institutional executives understand the mission of the institution within the context of the system mission and their responsibility to see both missions fulfilled.

PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

The leadership dynamic of public university and college systems occurs in a space defined by the intersection of political, social, financial, and academic interests. At its best, a public higher education system helps a state to optimize its investment in higher education and to achieve a well-coordinated response to challenges facing a state and its citizens. For a system to reach its full potential as an instrument of governance, each of the major players must have integrity as well as a shared commitment to achieving common purposes through higher education.

The insights and recommendations presented below address each of the major agents in this leadership dynamic—the system board, including the board chair; the system chief executive; and the institutional chief executive—in five identified areas of critical importance to system effectiveness:

- providing a collective and unified voice;
- building interdependent support;
- balancing central authority with institutional differentiation, autonomy, and creativity;
- strategic planning and direction; and
- performance assessment.

PROVIDING A COLLECTIVE AND UNIFIED VOICE

The fundamental purpose of a public university or college system is to be an interface between a state's higher education institutions and the needs of the state and the nation at large, helping provide individual institutions with a broader perspective on particular societal challenges that are occurring within a state while optimizing the capacities of a state's public universities to meet those challenges. A system helps give a more productive cast to the competition for resources and recognition that inherently exists among all higher education institutions in a state. As such, a system allows several (or all) of a state's higher education institutions to address the governor and state legislature and make, in a unified voice, the case for state investment in higher education. A system enables a state to leverage its investment in higher education in an optimal way, helping to effect a cooperative approach among different institutions that might otherwise be difficult to achieve.

One of a system's major responsibilities is to create an environment in which each campus understands its own well-being as directly aligned with the well-being of other institutions within the system, including the flagship campus or research institution, if there is one. A successful system conveys a sense that the fortunes of all institutions within the system are interrelated; the support, active engagement, and buy-in of institutions of different sizes, missions, and capacities are required if these institutions are to achieve their commonly identified goals.

A key challenge for a campus chief executive is to recognize and build upon the advantages of working cooperatively with the system head and leaders of other campuses to achieve combined purposes that no one institution could accomplish alone. In their approach to the leadership dynamic, campus chief executives should seek to regard other institutions in a system primarily as partners rather than as competitors. Smaller campuses should accept that the kinds of expectations placed on other institutions in the system—including a flagship—may call for different levels and different kinds of financial support.

Institutions reside within specific communities, however, that frequently see themselves in competition with other communities, including those in which other system institutions reside. Those communities see institutional presidents as the essential spokespersons for their communities and often expect them to advocate for

resources and programs that will advance the community. But such advocacy may at times be at odds with the priorities of the system or the state.

It is in helping to resolve such tensions and conflicts that the system governing board can demonstrate its leadership and the value of holding a broad perspective. The board must bring a dispassionate view in regarding the wishes of constituents and special interests, and it must base any actions or decisions on system policies and goals. Doing so may mean constraining institutional ambitions that conflict with these policies and goals. Individual board members may understand one institution of a system better than others and may conceive of their responsibilities as serving or advancing the interests of that particular institution; a responsible board or board chair will act to correct this behavior.

In some instances, legislators with a system campus in their district may play favorites in the legislative process, either as a result of institutional advocacy or by their own initiative. A system head and system board should enforce a policy that all system institutions are to support system funding priorities that have been negotiated internally. At the same time, experienced system leaders recognize that special appropriations occasionally do occur. If an individual institution is to receive a special appropriation

Providing a collective and unified voice

System board

- *Advocate for all institutions in the system equally and as a collective asset to serve the state and its communities.*
- *Speak with one voice as a board.*

System head

- *Create a sense of broader purpose.*
- *Develop a relationship of trust, and create an expectation of professional integrity in working with campus leaders.*
- *Create an environment that discourages end-runs.*

Institutional executives

- *Model an approach to leadership that regards other campuses in a system primarily as partners rather than as competitors.*
- *Avoid end-runs.*
- *Communicate the importance of the system.*

from the legislature, a system head must be adamant that the appropriation be new or additional funding—not reallocated monies from another system institution. A system leader must also ensure that a special appropriation does not create major funding imbalances with other system institutions or subvert institutional mission.

System board

- ***Advocate for all institutions in the system equally and as a collective asset to serve the state and its communities.***

Avoid any tendency to favor one institution over others in any and all aspects with internal and especially external constituents of the system. Understand that innocent comments about institutions can easily be misconstrued.

- ***Speak with one voice as a board.*** The board chair or the system executive should be the primary spokesperson for the board. Avoid situations in which individual board members are asked to comment publicly on controversial issues before the board, the system, or individual institutions.

System head

- ***Create a sense of broader purpose.*** In carrying out a system initiative or strategic plan, the system head needs to convey to institutions that his or her primary concern is with the vitality and effectiveness of the system or the state as a whole, reminding campus executives of the desired alignment of system and campus interests, and of the benefit to students and communities that can result from collaboration and cooperation among system institutions.

- ***Develop a relationship of trust, and create an expectation of professional integrity in working with campus leaders.*** A system head must feel assured that campus chief executives will not seek to undermine the system by appealing directly to the system board, the legislature, or the governor. The system head and the campus chief executive must have mutual respect and trust for an optimal working relationship, one that will preclude any inclination on the part of the system head to step in and attempt to manage the institution.

- ***Create an environment that discourages end-runs.*** Be politically astute when confronted by efforts in the legislature to advance the interests of a particular institution of the system. End-runs that circumvent system priorities should be strongly discouraged and addressed up-front

with institutional chief executives. Occasionally it may be necessary to enlist the help of a governor to veto a project initiated from an end-run, but it is better to deal with such actions internally and discretely.

Institutional executives

- ***Model an approach to leadership that regards other campuses in a system primarily as partners rather than as competitors.*** Institutions within a system must adopt an outlook that in order to be successful, other institutions must also be successful. An executive must respect the existing differentiation of mission that allows the institution to distinguish itself on its own terms, and seek ways to collaborate with other system institutions.

- ***Avoid end-runs.*** Do not seek to undermine the integrity of the system by appealing directly to the system board, legislators, or the governor. In cases when an individual institution has a well-justified cause to address the board or elected public officials directly, the campus leader must come to clear agreement with the system head, proceeding with that person's knowledge and consent.

- ***Communicate the importance of the system.*** Convey to members of the campus community the value of the system and the critical role it plays for the institution. In addition, campus presidents need to communicate the system's importance to key external audiences in the community or region.

BUILDING INTERDEPENDENT SUPPORT

It is a complex and evolving relationship that exists among the three different levels of leadership in a state higher education system: the system board (including the board chair), the system head, and the campus chief executive. In one sense the relationship is one of mutual support and interdependence; for any one of these players to be effective, the other two must conduct their responsibilities with integrity.

If an effective relationship among these three parties is characterized by mutual support on the one hand, it must also be characterized by accountability on the other. Campus chief executives ultimately are accountable to a system head, even as they look to the system head as perhaps their most important source of advice, encouragement, and support. A system head in turn requires not just the cooperation of campus chief executives but also the support of the system board—and of the board chair in particular—to succeed in engaging a state’s public universities and colleges to achieve a strategic public agenda. Finally, the board itself is accountable to a state and its elected officials in fulfilling its responsibilities both to the mission and to the fiduciary well-being of the system and its individual institutions. To succeed in this charge, a board must have the trust of both the system head and individual campus chief executives.

System board

- ***Provide support and guidance for the system head.*** The board needs to convey its consistent support for the system head both in its communications and its actions. If an incoming system head does not have the strong support of the board, it will be difficult for that person to develop relationships with the governor and legislature. The board chair, especially, should provide major support and understand and appreciate the mutual responsibilities that he or she assumes, along with the system executive, for leading the system. On some occasions, it may be appropriate to identify someone outside the board itself who can serve as a mentor to a new system leader.
- ***Through the system head, provide support and guidance to campus chief executives.*** Wise system leaders recognize the pivotal leadership of each campus executive, while at the same time recognizing the limits of campus leaders’ authority. A set of internal and external stakeholders exists for each institution, different from but parallel

Building interdependent support

System board

- *Provide support and guidance for the system head.*
- *Through the system head, provide support and guidance to campus chief executives.*
- *Help a newly appointed system head become familiar with the culture of a state.*
- *Be willing to take the heat on controversial issues to protect executive leaders.*
- *Have confidence in the professional expertise of the system office staff to do their jobs; communicate any concerns about staff directly to the system head.*

to those for the system, and their consent is frequently required if positive change is to occur. Board leaders should understand that implementation of system policies at the ground level may not come as easily as they might desire, and that support and guidance through the system head is essential. In addition, governing boards should be aware that new campus leaders may need mentors that the system can identify.

- ***Help a newly appointed system head become familiar with the culture of a state.*** Introduce the system head to key people, such as political and civic leaders, as well as business leaders who help drive the state’s economic agenda and who have been appointed by the governor to important task forces in the state.
- ***Be willing to take the heat on controversial issues to protect executive leaders.*** System boards (chairs, in particular) need to provide “cover” for system heads or individual campus chief executives on contentious or sensitive political issues, or on such matters as union contracts negotiated at the system level.
- ***Have confidence in the professional expertise of the system office staff to do their jobs; communicate any concerns about staff directly to the system head.*** Building a strong, competent central office staff is essential for any successful system. If concerns do arise about the competence of system staff or the general staff capacity of the system office, then the board should address the issue directly with the system executive.

Building interdependent support

Special responsibilities of the board chair

- *Help build leadership within the full board.*
- *Insist that board members work for the benefit of the whole system and not any single component or constituent.*

Special responsibilities of the board chair

More than any other single agent, the board chair ensures that the board conducts its governance responsibilities with effectiveness and integrity, while avoiding any conflicts of interest. One of the most important responsibilities of a board chair is to convey to fellow board members what it means to serve as agents of the public trust with fiduciary responsibility for a state's universities and colleges. The board chair must assume the responsibility of ensuring that board members act appropriately and discipline individual members if necessary; a system head cannot be expected to take on this role.

• ***Help build leadership within the full board.*** It is important for the chair to identify and nurture other board leaders by assigning them to important work committees and task forces. And given that most board chairs serve for a period of two years (or less), it is essential to a smooth transition of leadership within the board that it be facilitated by the outgoing chair.

• ***Insist that board members work for the benefit of the whole system and not any single component or constituent.*** No matter how members were appointed to the board, their responsibilities are to all of the citizens of the state and all of the system's constituent institutions. The tendency of some board members to represent or advocate for particular institutions or communities undermines the board and the system. The chair has a special responsibility to remind members of the broader purposes of their system board service. In these and similar instances, when individual board members are out of line, it is the chair who must take corrective action; a system executive cannot reprimand board members.

System head

- ***Call attention to instances when campuses and their***

leaders are doing a good job of contributing to the fulfillment of a state's strategic goals. A simple but powerful step in creating an environment of cooperation and shared pursuit is to give public recognition to leaders whose actions contribute to this purpose.

• ***Encourage an appropriate relationship between campus executives and the system governing board.*** The board, particularly the chair, has a critical role to play in overseeing the performance of the entire system, and as a general rule the board should direct all issues through the system chancellor or president. If a positive culture of trust and integrity exists between the system head and campus executives—one that undergirds proper roles, responsibilities, goals, and protocols—then direct contact of campus executives with board members and the chair at board meetings, social occasions, or campus events should be encouraged. Seeking to prevent any such contact is counterproductive to establishing a dynamic of system success.

• ***Be the system's chief internal communicator.*** The importance of good communication as a major factor in good system governance cannot be overstated. The system head should check regularly with the board chair, board members, institutional executives and his or her staff to assess the quality and frequency of communication throughout the system. Assuring that key individuals learn of important matters in a timely fashion can avoid perceptions that the system head may be acting unilaterally.

• ***Support campus leadership.*** Campus chief executives are at the center of innumerable and intense pressures. While their offices are afforded considerable authority, the effectiveness of the campus leader is based on his or her influence and persuasion. Suspicion that the system office does not support the campus president undercuts his or her effectiveness and can lead to institutional paralysis.

Institutional executives

• ***Cultivate a relationship with a system head that makes it possible for that person to provide support and advice when needed.*** Campus executives should seek out opportunities for engaging the system head as an important source of guidance and support for issues that the campus chief executive is facing or will soon face.

• ***Support system leadership.*** It is important that institutional leaders not undermine system leadership even when

institutional goals cannot be supported. Campus presidents must understand and appreciate the responsibility of system leadership to balance successfully several competing claims for the good of all campuses, and ultimately for the good of the students and state citizens. It is particularly important to voice disagreements internally, and not to external stakeholders—alumni, donors, elected leaders, or the press.

must prevail for the good of the system and the institution. The campus executive and the system head must each have enough confidence to let the other take the lead when it will advance the overall cause.

Building interdependent support

System head

- *Call attention to instances when campuses and their leaders are doing a good job of contributing to the fulfillment of a state's strategic goals.*
- *Encourage an appropriate relationship between campus executives and the system governing board.*
- *Work with the board and campus chief executives to determine the amount and kind of information a system can reasonably request of its campuses.*
- *Be the system's chief internal communicator.*
- *Support campus leadership.*

Institutional executives

- *Cultivate a relationship with a system head that makes it possible for that person to provide support and advice when needed.*
- *Support system leadership.*
- *Flagship president and system head relations.*

- ***Flagship president and system head relations.*** Many business, government, and civic leaders see the president of the system's major flagship/research university as the state's top higher education leader. When this occurs, the system head is overshadowed. Best practice suggests that these situations are most constructively handled up-front by the board at the time of hire, when expectations and lines of authority can be made clear and potential conflicts minimized or averted. In reality, there may need to be a unique understanding reached privately between the system head and the flagship president regarding the times when the latter's input will be desired for maximizing system effectiveness. Conversely, there are instances in which the system head overshadows the campus leadership of the flagship president. In the end, common sense

BALANCING CENTRAL AUTHORITY WITH INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION, AUTONOMY, AND CREATIVITY

One of the key benefits of a system is to enable a comprehensive approach to decision-making while retaining the flexibility that allows different campuses to address common needs according to their particular strengths. The danger of a system is that it can result in too great a centralization of power, effectively diminishing the creative drive of individual campuses. The challenge to a higher education system is to achieve a balance that reaps the benefits of collaboration without stifling the motivation that allows individual institutions to meet state challenges through the development of their own distinctive strengths. Even as it provides a framework of statewide goals for education, research, and service, a system must allow each institution to contribute to broad system goals in its own way, drawing on its unique mission, culture, and strengths as well as characteristics of its particular region.

In the course of leading a system-wide plan, as well as in the more general course of events, a system head must establish clearly with campus leaders (in writing, if necessary) who has responsibility for what issues. A system head must be sensitive to a campus chief executive's needs and responses to a given situation; he or she must recognize when to allow a campus leader to take the lead in handling an issue that has arisen on his or her campus.

The very location of the system office can have an important symbolic effect in delineating between system and campus concerns. It is important that the system head and the board maintain that sense of critical distance from any given campus, particularly a flagship, even if located in the same community. It is possible for a system to become conflated with a flagship, particularly when athletics are involved. Both a system head and board need to recognize and resist this distorting tendency and maintain the separation required for principled and effective governance.

Institutional boards exist in several public university systems. Some of these boards are advisory to the system board; others have prescribed governing responsibilities. In addition, nearly every public college and university has a related foundation board that helps raise and manage private monies on behalf of the institution. Clear delineations of governance authority (again, in writing, if necessary) are needed, and opportunities for regular communication should be encouraged by respective leaders of each board, the system head, and institutional executives.

System board

- *Understand the mission of all institutions, their service area, programs, and unique circumstances.* Institutional missions should be reviewed periodically by the system board and updated as necessary (as should the statement of mission for the system). In addition, the board should have a clear understanding of the educational quality of each institution's academic programs, including its institutional and major program accreditation status, as well as its status against a regularly updated set of peer institutions. Lastly, the board should urge differentiation in policies whenever appropriate, for example, in tuition levels, and fiscal and management flexibility.
- *Focus primary attention on system-wide policies and priorities.* System boards need to operate primarily as the governing board for the higher education system. At the same time, the board is the governing body for each constituent institution of the system. As such, it may be

Balancing central authority with institutional differentiation, autonomy, and creativity

System board

- *Understand the mission of all institutions, their service area, programs, and unique circumstances.*
- *Focus primary attention on system-wide policies and priorities.*
- *Listen to and respect local institutional governance.*
- *Avoid any tendency to micromanage single institutions or the system office.*

System head

- *Treat individual campuses in a fair and transparent manner.*
- *Create financial incentives.*
- *Delineate clearly who has responsibility for what issues.*
- *Use data effectively for planning and decision-making.*

Institutional executives

- *Understand reporting relationships.*
- *Help keep the university foundation focused on the right activities.*

necessary for the system board to approve institution-specific plans or budgets, or attend to a crisis. Board meetings should be rotated among all system institutions, and members should take the opportunity to get familiarized with the institution and senior staff. Individual board members should attend commencement or other major ceremonies held at individual institutions.

- ***Listen to and respect local institutional governance.*** Where an institutional advisory or governing board exists, the system board should develop a specific statement of duties and powers for the local board (even if created by state law) that makes distinctions in responsibilities as clear as possible so as to increase effectiveness at each level of governance.
- ***Avoid any tendency to micromanage single institutions or the system office.*** System board members need to resist any temptation to over-engage in the execution of a system initiative or project, thus interrupting or intruding upon the management responsibilities of system staff. The system head and the system office must function as the primary contact with system institutions. In addition, system rules and regulations that dictate institutional policies and practices and seek uniformity of practice can go too far and create resentment and push back from campuses, particularly if they are promulgated without institutional input.

System head

- ***Treat individual campuses in a fair and transparent manner.*** If there are differences in resources distributed or in research expectations and support, these must be clearly stated in writing, and the rationale for the differences must be clear.
- ***Create financial incentives.*** The system head should have a modest amount of funds available as an incentive for campuses to formulate their own ambitions in alignment with the priorities of the system and the state, and to promote collaborations that improve educational services and increase efficiencies.
- ***Delineate clearly who has responsibility for what issues.*** The board, system head, and campus chief executives must reach a clear agreement about what are campus issues, what are system issues, and what issues could involve both the system and campus to a significant

degree. For example, in times of economic austerity, tough financial decisions affecting campuses tend to be made at the system level, but the campus executive should have autonomy in deciding how those tough decisions are implemented on individual campuses.

- ***Use data effectively for planning and decision-making.*** A sense of shared understanding and purpose can help a system head and campus chief executive reach common accord about such matters as the amount and kinds of information a system can reasonably request of its campuses. It is particularly important that a system office be able to trust the accuracy and consistency of information received from campuses. A system office can supplement institutional research capacity and use data to prod institutions toward system goals and mission fulfillment.

Institutional executives

- ***Understand reporting relationships.*** Campus executives in a system may feel that they serve many “masters,” including the system board, system executive, and a local governing or advisory board (if one exists). Although negotiating several layers of authority may seem confusing, unnecessary, or duplicative, campus executives are ultimately accountable to the system head and system board for their own and their institution’s performance.
- ***Help keep the university foundation focused on the right activities.*** Although related foundations are legally separate entities from the host institution, campus executives can be critically important in ensuring that a foundation focuses on fundraising and fund management in an ethical manner, and that it refrains from asserting perceived prerogatives in institutional governance. Although the foundation exists to serve the institution, nothing the foundation or the foundation board does should contradict or circumvent system priorities. In best practice, the campus executive should ensure that a memorandum of understanding exists between the foundation and the institution that clarifies responsibilities and working relationships, and that it is shared with the system office.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND DIRECTION

To be effective, a public college and university system must develop and convey a clear and compelling vision of a state's higher education needs; that vision must provide a common direction for the public universities that constitute the system; and it must establish a strategic plan for achieving the vision and advancing the well-being of the state and its citizens through higher education. The system plan needs to focus on statewide issues, for example, student access and success, agriculture, health care, economic development, or technological capacity and skill.

In formulating a plan to achieve the state's higher education needs, a public university or college system needs to engage many constituencies in defining a state's public priorities and identifying the role of a state's higher education institutions in addressing those priorities—drawing on leaders of state government, as well as business and industry, and the leaders of system institutions. Having individual institutions at the table and achieving their buy-in during the planning stages helps ensure productive collaboration as the plan develops. Campus leaders should have the ability to chart the particular course their institution will pursue in helping to meet state needs. Having done so, they must commit to specific goals and timetables, and they must periodically report progress in meeting their goals.

System board and system head

- ***Oversee the development of a plan outlining the strategic goals of the system.*** The plan should be clear on the responsibilities of the system's universities and colleges in achieving those goals. The planning process should include external stakeholders such as public officials and leaders of business and industry.
- ***Develop an implementation plan for achieving the goals of the system's strategic plan or system initiatives, assigning explicit responsibility for particular tasks and including benchmarks for assessing progress.*** The implementation plan should recognize the different missions and strengths of different campuses. While the criteria of evaluation will differ for each institution, each must be held accountable for contributing to system goals. A plan, for example, to increase institutional retention and graduation rates (and overall system rates) or to close achievement gaps among different groups, should recognize the differing student demographics and levels of student preparation at each institution.

Strategic planning and direction

System board and system head

- *Oversee the development of a plan outlining the strategic goals of the system.*
- *Develop an implementation plan for achieving the goals of the system's strategic plan or system initiatives, assigning explicit responsibility for particular tasks and including benchmarks for assessing progress.*
- *Sustain a focus on the state's or system's strategic goals with external stakeholders.*

Institutional executives

- *Align institutional planning with the system strategic plan.*

• ***Sustain a focus on the state's or system's strategic goals with external stakeholders.*** Work with public officials, civic leaders, and leaders in business and industry to build support that sustains a focus on the plan and ensure their support and commitment to long-term strategic goals such as college readiness, degree attainment, and economic development priorities. Help assure a broad, “non-parochial” view among institutional and elected leaders, as well as the board itself.

Institutional executives

- ***Align institutional planning with the system strategic plan.*** With a system plan in place, each institution should establish a campus plan to determine how it will contribute to reaching the system's goals, drawing on the institution's distinctive strengths and culture.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Assessment at all levels is critically important for assuring accountability and improving performance. The system head, campus executives, and the board itself should all be assessed.

One of the system head's responsibilities is to assess the performance of campus chief executives in the context of the system goals and the institution's particular progress in helping achieve those goals. The evaluation should be conceived as part of a process of developing a better means of supporting a campus chief executive and fostering a sense of partnership. To ensure the effective operation of the system, it is important to conduct fair and principled assessments of campus chief executives for both the short and long term. The system head should regard the evaluation of campus chief executives as an opportunity to engage in a continuing dialogue focusing on the content of a shared educational vision and strategies for achieving the system's goals.

Likewise, effective system boards see the evaluation of the system executive as a means, both to provide support and improvement and to gauge how well the system is fulfilling its core purpose of meeting the state's needs for higher education.

Performance Assessment

System board

- *Set high expectations of the system head in meeting the state's strategic goals.*
- *Establish clear expectations that align board policy with campus head evaluations.*
- *Engage in periodic self-assessments of the board's own performance.*

System head

- *Develop a clear evaluation process for holding campus chief executive officers accountable.*

Institutional executives

- *Welcome regular performance reviews from the system head.*

System board

- *Set high expectations of the system head in meeting the state's strategic goals.* Monitor the progress of the system chancellor or president and conduct annual evaluations, as well as comprehensive evaluations, every four to five years. Use the system mission and goals of the system strategic

plan, as well as additional leadership goals mutually developed by the board and system head, as a framework for evaluation.

- *Establish clear expectations that align board policy with campus head evaluations.* Evaluations should be tied to mutually agreed-upon goals related to institutional mission and strategic plans. Boards should ensure that stated goals and behaviors are the actual behaviors being evaluated. For example, if collaboration among institutions is expected, the system board should ensure that campus heads will be evaluated on how well they achieve collaborative activities, and not on criteria which foster competition.

- *Engage in periodic self-assessments of the board's own performance.* System governing boards often hold annual retreats but infrequently use the retreat to do a thorough self-critique of their performance, reflectively or prospectively. Boards should ensure that their retreats accomplish these purposes. Regular and rigorous self-evaluation is necessary for maximizing board effectiveness and creating a sense of common purpose.

System head

- *Develop a clear evaluation process for holding campus chief executive officers accountable.* Assuming the system head has the delegated authority to conduct evaluations of institutional chief executives, the system board should have full opportunity to review the evaluations and ask questions. Local governing or advisory boards within a system may add a layer of complexity but need to be centrally involved in the evaluation. Evaluations should be conducted annually, with more comprehensive evaluations that solicit input from a significant number of internal and external stakeholders conducted every four to five years. While a system head may provide an important listening ear for a campus chief executive, theirs is, at heart, a professional working relationship that requires feedback and assessment of performance as essential ingredients for success.

Institutional executives

- *Welcome regular performance reviews from the system head.* Campus chief executives should insist that performance reviews take place in the context of system goals as set forth in a strategic plan. They should use these reviews as occasions to focus on the institution's contribution to that plan and to improve campus leadership performance.

CONCLUSION

Public higher education systems have evolved considerably. Once they were considered essentially bureaucratic agencies, managing state institutions, “keeping everyone happy and advocating for more money.” Today, the most effective systems identify and lead a state or system strategic agenda that addresses the critical needs of the state, its regions and communities, and its citizens, leveraging institutions to respond to the agenda in their own unique ways.

Systems are increasingly regarded as essential for ensuring the continued vitality of higher education in addressing public purposes in the years ahead. It is therefore incumbent upon all of the major players to seek unity of purpose and maximization of joint effort through productive working relationships. Tensions and conflicts will inevitably arise. But by creating and sustaining an expectation and atmosphere of trust, candor, integrity, and public accountability, the major players of a system can manage the tensions and resolve differences, thus enabling the system to move forward. In the end, it is not about credit, blame, winning, or losing; it is about serving students, citizens, and communities, and fulfilling public purposes.

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The National Association of System Heads (NASH) is a membership organization of Chief Executive Officers of the 52 public higher education systems in 38 states and Puerto Rico. The goal of the association is to improve the governance of public higher education systems. Its member systems enroll the lion's share of college students nationwide-about 70% of all four-year college undergraduates. A major commitment of NASH is to work with K-12 systems and civic leaders to build statewide K-16 vehicles to promote and carry out a coordinated, standards-based education reform strategy. www.nashonline.org

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