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Leading Large Systems

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Selected Papers: Leading Large Educational Systems

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Leading Large Educational Systems

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April, 2002: The State University of New York (SUNY), the City University of New York, (CUNY) and the California State University (CSU), represent the three largest systems of higher education in the nation, if not the world. These systems of higher education stand at a crucial juncture in their efforts to reshape educational policy and philosophy and to transform higher education for the 21st century. This is also a time in which Boards of Trustees around the country are becoming more concerned with internal matters and directly involved in running of these large systems. Trustees have recently scrutinized a range of diverse issues: from setting the number of units in the BA degree, to setting policy on whether or not remediation courses should be taught. Trustees, like the general public, are concerned more and more with quality, access and outcomes and, currently, the tough choices that must be made as the nation and its component states deal with declining resources for higher education.

It is against this backdrop that we want to talk about the challenges facing the leadership, both Trustees and Chancellors, in public higher education today. We attempt to identify some critical areas where educational leaders must pay particular heed, if public university systems are to continue to be the "engines" that drive innovation and social and economic change for millions of Americans.



System Devolution: Increased Campus Autonomy

Trustees and Chancellors have some clear mandates. They must accelerate efforts to increase campus autonomy, fiscal responsibility and accountability to the local campuses. Many of the systems were often "over administered" by administrators from afar who often failed to understand the "cultures" and missions of individual campuses. This evolving process (which is underway in SUNY and the CSU) will result in less duplication of function at the core, and should result in the transfer of much needed resources to the local campuses. Smaller campuses fearful of losing their autonomy, or worse being closed, should be encouraged to form strong regional alliances and associations with larger institutions, especially in the private sector. With the growing use of technology some campuses will not be limited to traditional proximal relationships. They will be better able to form alliances that match their particular expertise with the needs of their partners.

Commitment to Diversity

The Chancellors (backed by their Trustees) must reaffirm in unambiguous terms their unwavering commitment to diversity in all its forms (racial, ethnic, age, gender, class etc), but without the use of preferences and quotas. The greatest challenge will continue to be in the area of racial/ethnic diversity, which must always to be valued as a source of strength to be nurtured and developed, not by lowering standards of excellence and merit, or by pandering to philosophies which will continue to reinforce the destructive patterns of yesteryear that our vibrant democracy has striven valiantly to overcome. Chancellors King, Goldstein and Reed must work tirelessly with many key external constituencies: the press, legislatures from state and local governments, trustees, and alumni for example, to create the climate that will encourage those innovative campus Presidents to create bold new educational initiatives and garner new resources. Universities and colleges need to rebuild and buttress partnerships with other public (especially K-12) and private institutions, as well as to experiment with new ways of

rearticulating the academy's sense of shared commitment to core democratic values. In our attempts to downplay our differences we often neglect to stress the fact that it is our rich, pluralistic heritage which still sets this republic apart as one of the noblest experiments in modern world. This commitment to diversity as the cornerstone of democracy must be continually explained to our publics. The three Chancellors must become spokespersons for this issue, as diversity is this nation's destiny; failure to embrace it could be our nation's major loss.

Rebuilding Shared Governance

This challenge will be formidable. It will require us to rethink a concept, unique to higher education, but which has become less flexible in the face of rapidly changing economic, political, and administrative forces buffeting the academy. The various stakeholders (trustees, senates, presidents, alumni, students, et. al.) often are locked in internecine conflict as campus faculty and administrators more and more must move swiftly to make decisions that faculty see as their own. New role definitions and clarification are required. The Governors must lead the charge in establishing the new parameters with their attendant responsibilities. One idea is to establish at some and empower at others, existing local governing boards (trustees) on individual campuses. This system currently works in New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan, to mention a few states. Further, it solidifies efforts at devolution and shifts decision making to more horizontal rather than pyramidal forms of governance. In reassessing the role of "shared governance" The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB, 1996) Commission's Report on the Academic Presidency is still instructive.

Selecting and Cultivating Transformational Leaders

The Chancellors must be given a pivotal role in the selection and evaluation of the transformational leaders that the academy now needs. Some of these leaders will, of necessity, come from outside the academy, and outside the traditional academic trajectories of department chairs, deans, academic vice presidents etc. These new leaders can bring a sense of boldness to the rather conservative institutions of higher education. But academic leaders from within must also be identified, nurtured and cultivated through faculty fellowships and internships within and outside the academy. All three have such processes in place already, but they need to be strengthened. Training at Harvard's, Carnegie Melon's, Bryn Mawr's leadership institutes is a necessity for this cadre of leaders, as are the excellent workshops done by American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Kellogg, the American Council of Education (ACE), etc. The Chancellors must also establish initiatives to identify, nurture and support this new breed of leader and sell them to their trustee and faculty colleagues. Finally, it is most important that Chancellors develop broad, creative criteria for evaluating the current and future presidential leadership. For example, criteria should be reflective of presidents' holistic efforts at transforming their institutions, especially when tough choices must be made. On the contrary, presidents who have lost major support in their institutions should not be retained interminably, as it the continuation of their tenure tends to drain the morale of their campus community and stultifies any effort at "collaborative change".

Innovators And Facilitators Of Technology

The Chancellors must lead the charge for the new technologies in higher education, not only for its potential to transform our society into vibrant communities of perpetual learners, but also for its potential to expand our vistas globally, and to shrink stratification boundaries within the college or university. Undoubtedly, there will be some resistance from some constituencies within the academy, but faculty senates, and to a lesser extent collective bargaining units, must be creatively engaged in the process of managing this reformation and engaging everyone in the new interactive learning paradigms. Showing how technology plays a role in broadening access and furthering excellence may influence these leaders. The Chancellors must lead initiatives to find new resources to fund such efforts as well as provide "seed monies " to buttress and mainstream efforts in this regard.

Long Distance Leaders

In leading the socially responsible organizations that universities and colleges will increasingly be more and more challenged to become, the Chancellors must create a "culture" where trust and openness based on mutual respect are characteristic of their interaction with the governing boards and the campus presidents who will look to them for guidance and direction. These Chancellors must be widely respected and recognized in the larger community as the undisputed spokespersons for the system; they must be able to convince and woo alumni to contribute more of their time and financial resources to their alma maters, while reassuring a skeptical public that higher education remains a worthwhile investment. That investment transcends a fiduciary one. These leaders must be, as psychologist and psychotherapist John O'Neil notes, in his book, "Long Distance Leaders" able to apply the skills and principles of self renewal to their own lives and careers so that their organizations (institutions) will change one by one. We concur. Public higher education in America stands at a pivotal crossroads in expanding the democratic culture for a new generation which, more now than ever, must be socialized to responsible citizenship, and to coexist globally and peacefully with others. This daunting challenge to expand the human potential of this nation can only be done if the clarity of purpose of our national and educational goals is articulated. The Chancellors must ultimately be prepared to lead the nation in helping us all change the way we think about the role of public higher education in our society.

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