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*The authors explore the difficult position of a public regional university that is part of a multi-university, single-board system. It describes initiatives taken by the University of Southern Maine to establish external linkages, assesses outcomes to date, and discusses the challenges posed by the existence of a statewide higher education system. Within the system are forces that simultaneously pull apart and bring together, which requires rethinking of the mission/role of the systemwide board and office and of the traditional centralization/decentralization issues if we are to resolve the dilemma of campus advocacy and system loyalty.*

# Repositioning the Public Metropolitan University in a Multicampus State System

*The University of Southern  
Maine Experience*

Public universities are entering a new, intense period of competition, scarcity, and accountability. We have endured budget cuts before, but now there is something far more powerful at work in the public sector. The loss of federal and state funding does not simultaneously embrace a changed mission or reduced scope of action and focus. It is simply a withdrawal of public support. In a sense, we are being privatized. A transformation is occurring, often without planning or clear intent.

Recently a colleague noted that when he was appointed president, he considered his university to be state-supported. As budgets got worse he called it state-assisted. Now he feels it is most accurate to call it state located. Doomsday humor aside, it is a simple fact that public universities are being asked to continue their traditional activities, add new responsibilities (particularly those related to economic development), and do all this with funds deeply eroded by inflation at the same time that tuition has been greatly increased. In the case of Maine, we have fewer appropriations dollars than in 1990, and a 72 percent increase in tuition.

Metropolitan universities, still the "new kids on the block" in multicampus state systems, are particularly affected by the changing environment for public higher education. Though located in population centers with increased demands for new and expanded programs, including graduate education and economic development, they typically have been funded at levels well below the land grant institutions. The complex challenge faced by metropolitan universities is to simultaneously increase the productivity of their program operations while sustaining or improving quality, to improve their positions within the multicampus system to counter the erosion of state appropriations, and to expand their capacities to obtain outside funding and private support.

This challenge can indeed be daunting, given the near impossibility of shifting allocations among campuses when total resources are stagnant or declining, and also given the limited track record of most metropolitan universities in raising private funds. We often lack the proper structure, funds, expertise, traditions, and resources to seek external support aggressively and effectively.

This article explores the difficult situation of a public regional university that is part of a multiuniversity, single-board system. The University of Southern Maine (USM) has sought to generate support for its activities and needs by establishing stronger ties with its communities and constituencies. Doing this without the ability to appoint people of substance and import to a local Board of Trustees has called for considerable creativity. One suspects that there are other institutions similarly situated, or even those with their own boards, who might benefit from USM's experience.

## The Context

The University of Southern Maine is a regional, comprehensive, public university enrolling approximately 10,000 students on three campuses. It was founded in 1878 as the Gorham Normal School and has had the typical growth experience of institutions like it across the country. Degree authority ranges from the associate degree through juris doctorate, and there is an extensive public service program. Located in the most populated and fastest growing region of the state, USM finds itself in regular competition for resources with the state's flagship land grant and sea grant institution, the University of Maine, located 140 miles to the north in a relatively rural area. With about the same number of undergraduate and graduate students, the University of Maine has almost twice the state appropriation and total budget, and three times the number of degree programs as USM.

### *University of Maine System Structure*

The University of Maine System is governed by a single board of trustees whose 16 members are appointed by the governor with confirmation by the senate. (Three positions are de facto.) The board is remarkably free of politics and intervention by constituency groups, and it governs the seven-university system that includes the University of Maine. About half the trustees are alumni of or have some other direct affiliation with the land grant institution, while none have a direct connection with USM. Taken together, the University of Maine System campuses enroll approximately 31,000 students. The board is responsible for typical governance and policy issues. Relative to other states, the campuses of the system have a fair degree of autonomy, i.e., funds come to the campuses in a block, there are no position control activities, there is no line-item funding, and end of the year savings are retained by the campuses. At the same time, authority to set tuition levels and broad-based fees, as well as to initiate or discontinue degree programs, rests with the board of trustees, not the campuses. Maine also has a separate technical college system and a free-standing maritime academy.

### *New Campus President*

USM's president arrived in July 1991 with the intention of repositioning the campus within the system and making fundraising part of his primary agenda. His arrival coincided with the first of six reductions in state appropriation to the system that were to occur over the next three years. This ongoing fiscal crisis created a system participation/campus advocacy dilemma for the president that continues to influence USM's approach to strengthening links with external organizations and institutions. Recognizing that good will from the public and legislators toward a university system is a function of the sum of good will generated by the individual campuses (the Tip O'Neil "all politics is local" concept), how could a win/win situation be created in which increased state support for the system also benefits the individual campus in tangible ways that can be recognized by its community and business supporters? If nothing changes for the campus as a result of being a good system member, how can community linkages that generate advocacy on behalf of the campus be sustained?

At the time of the president's arrival, a consultant's report had just become available that was to be a basis for building a case to support external fundraising. The consultant's report, however, was disappointingly clear in its recommendation. It indicated that USM lacked the structured and ongoing external support network necessary for any broad-based public activity, including fundraising. There was little tradition of public advocacy. The creation of the statewide system in 1968, which still has not been fully accepted by the people of Maine, clouded the issue further. It was obvious that any effort to launch an advocacy initiative or a major fundraising effort such as a capital campaign would not be successful unless external support was greatly increased.

### **The Plan**

In the spring of 1992, the university published its first five-year strategic plan and in it stated that the creation of external linkages would be a priority for the next few years. The following efforts were key components of those activities.

### ***Boards, Boards, Boards***

As a starting point, the president became involved in many public, non-profit boards. These included the symphony, the museum, Chamber of Commerce, a state-wide economic development foundation, United Way, and so on. The purpose was to not only fulfill the university's responsibility for public service but also to provide a venue in which the president could meet and work with key people in southern Maine. Simultaneously, all members of the president's staff, as well as deans and directors, were urged to become more involved in similar activities. Over a five-year period this resulted in gaining extensive knowledge of the community as well as greater visibility for both the president and the leadership group at USM.

### ***Direct Connections with the Business Community***

In July of 1991 the university had already formed, with the cooperation of several strong supporters within the community, a small group called Corporate Partners. Corporations wanted more information about the university, closer contact with it, and the opportunity to advocate for it. A self-governed group, it charges minimal dues, is staffed by a member of the university development staff, and has working committees. Through careful support and cooperation, Corporate Partners had grown from 15 to more than 150 members by 1995. Corporate Partners now helps raise money for the annual fund, sponsors meetings and interactions with the community, and advocates to the governor and the legislature on behalf of the university. Its interests are appropriately focused on economic development and business support.

### ***President's Advisory Council***

Lacking a local board of trustees or any other similar device, USM's leadership group concluded it needed to create the Council of Visitors, a local advisory committee consisting of people of influence and knowledge. From the perspective of the university system, the council could not seem like a campus-level board of trustees, so the word *council* was used rather than *board*. Since this type of organization does not have fiduciary responsibility nor policy control, it can be a challenge to

sustain. The task is to generate a sense of ownership for the university among individuals who, by and large, have not had direct governance experience with it. The council now numbers 27 members who are recognized leaders not only in the region but throughout the state, meets three times a year, and is viewed as the primary advisory group to the president. To date the council has not been asked to either give or raise money. In addition to the council, USM's schools and colleges have established many advisory groups of local business leaders.

### ***Collaboration among Regional Higher Education Institutions***

In the Greater Portland area there are five institutions of higher learning accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, of which three are private and two are public. In the past there has been little communication and virtually no cooperation amongst them. In a state with limited resources, much value is placed on collaborative activities. Sensing the importance of this, as well as the possibility for greater efficiency from joint operations, the president of USM gathered the presidents of the other institutions together in early 1993 and suggested that some informal alliance might be created. A number of models exist within New England, including the highly successful consortium in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Greater Portland Alliance of Colleges & Universities (GPACU) was formed and has as its centerpiece a free exchange of student enrollment amongst its members. More importantly, it was warmly received by the community and viewed by the advocates of each institution as a wise effort at cooperative activity and resource sharing.

### ***Collaboration with Regional Economic Development Organizations***

The late 1980s and early 1990s presented the Greater Portland area with a declining economy and serious economic problems. It was important for the university to participate effectively in efforts to rejuvenate the economy. After extensive discussions with the Chamber of Commerce, the regional Council of Governments, and other community leaders, USM joined with a dozen other local organizations to found the Greater Portland Economic Development Council, a collaborative of institutions that sought to enhance the regional economy. The key undertakings to date have been the creation of a business incubator focused on environmentally-oriented businesses and a comprehensive planning process for economic growth.

## *The Media*

The president of USM, supported by the university's communications staff, began to meet with the editorial boards of all newspapers and television stations in the region. Over a period of 18 months a better and more informed working relationship was established and has been maintained. Moreover, each time a major report or undertaking is forthcoming, the president meets with the senior leadership of the major media outlets. This, of course, is a somewhat tricky business, but to date it has resulted in more news coverage for the institution as well as a broader based understanding of the institution's priorities.

## *USM Foundation*

Currently the university is forming its own not-for-profit USM Foundation to serve as a fundraising and support entity for the university. Board members will be local and appointed by the president. USM's Vice President for University Advancement will serve as executive director. It is hoped that the USM Foundation will both enhance our fundraising efforts and provide a meaningful opportunity for citizens to participate in building the future of the university. The creation of the foundation also reflects the need for meaningful interaction with the community that a university without a local board of trustees lacks.

## **Long-run Planning and Integration Initiatives**

Outreach activities and the need for a greater buy-in by external groups are critical to the long-run health of any educational institution. USM has recently completed a second five-year plan: *USM in the 21st Century—Building a Better University During a Time of Challenge*. Finalized in April of 1996, this five-year plan recognizes USM's increased reliance on tuition revenues and lays out strategies to focus mission, increase enrollments, and improve quality. Two specific actions are under way to enhance the momentum already achieved. First, a performance budgeting plan is being put in place that asks each department to state its goals and indicate how they align with long-term university priorities. It is hoped that this will lead to departments turning outward to their stakeholders for support. Second, it is expected

that each program and department, where appropriate, will create an external advisory committee. These committees will not only offer consultation but will be an additional means by which people from beyond the walls of the institution can become supporters of our work. This is all part of weaving the university into the fabric of the community—and the community into the fabric of the university.

### **Outcomes at USM**

Have our efforts at USM been successful to any degree? We think so. Both admissions and enrollments are rising. A focused fundraising campaign built around a specialized library collection successfully raised \$1.5 million. The annual fund grows steadily and is setting new records each year. But there are many qualitative aspects of the question that are hard to measure. Both membership and active participation in Corporate Partners are steadily increasing. Active, committed participation in the Council of Visitors is very strong. The sense of ownership and the belief that the university is a valued partner in the broader community have never been higher.

The most tangible evidence that USM's efforts are beginning to produce results in increased community support is a new fundraising feasibility study conducted during the fall of 1995 and the spring of 1996, with findings that were startlingly different from the 1991 study. Those interviews concluded that the university was now positioned to seek community support for significant fundraising, credibility had been raised, and there was a sense of ownership by the community in the university. Naturally there were weak points here and there and the level of intensity was not consistent. But the report concludes: "...USM's image has improved greatly in the last five years as it has become a more serious and professional institution... [and has] reach[ed] out in service to the community, area businesses, and their employees."

These results are most gratifying. They demonstrate that a clear focus on the issue, a broad-based strategy, and sustained energy can impact a university's standing in its community. But, nonetheless, these have been achieved without the tools available to a free-standing public or private institution. The lack of a board of trustees makes it challenging to engage the community in a powerful way. But institutions that take the path that USM has chosen will find they can build support.



Still, USM has not seen the distribution of state appropriations altered in any way. Indeed, the feasibility study noted above observed that "as USM attempts to serve more students while receiving the same proportion of a shrinking public pie, many interviewees expressed support for USM becoming more independent from [the system]." Stagnant funding for the system has made that difficult to consider, along with serious fiscal problems on two of the other campuses in the system.

## **System Challenges**

Many multicampus systems were created, at least in their current form, around the same time that most public metropolitan universities emerged with a clearer identity. Legislators, boards of trustees, and, indeed, citizens of a state seem to be of at least two minds when it comes to public university systems. On the one hand, they want the campuses in their respective areas to receive both the resources and the recognition they deserve, and they don't want scarce resources wasted on administrative functions, including those centralized in the system office. On the other hand, they also want a single voice speaking to the legislature, consistent and comparable standards across all campuses (e.g., easy transfer of credit), and collaboration rather than bickering among the campuses. A single board of trustees and a systemwide chancellor's office can get in the way of the first set of wants but may be essential to the latter.

There are forces that simultaneously pull apart and bring together a public university system. Balancing those competing forces is the system's version of the campus advocacy versus system loyalty dilemma. In a turbulent political environment, how can the system recognize campus aspirations and encourage quality performance, responsiveness to constituencies, and programmatic innovation at the campus level, where the real work of learning, teaching, research, and service occurs, while retaining centralized decision authority? When fiscal resources are stagnant or even declining in real dollars, how can the system alter historical allocation patterns that are integrally intertwined with the perceived status of individual campuses, while ignoring changing realities and emerging needs of, for example, the "new" metropolitan universities that are often the most visible symbols of the changing market geography of

higher education in many states? How can the system encourage and reward campus-level entrepreneurial behavior as well as intercampus collaboration, two characteristics that often seem to be in conflict?

To begin, trustees, system and campus administrators, and key stakeholders can reconsider both the role in governance and operations of the multicampus system office vis-à-vis the individual campuses, and the opportunities for significant cost savings that might be realized by centralizing specific operational functions. Changing political, fiscal, and technological realities may suggest that the arrangements in place today that made good sense when designed ten to twenty years ago are inadequate for the next ten to twenty years. At the very least, political realities alone indicate that many statewide systems are being forced to consider how they can become more responsive and more effective.

Rethinking the mission/role question for a systemwide board of trustees and office is key. The system should deliver at least three benefits to the state. It ought to govern its university campuses in the public interest, keep costs low and centered on educational and research priorities, and provide leadership in enabling the campuses to meet the state's highest priorities. But in fulfilling those responsibilities in pursuit of statewide priorities, university systems increasingly look like many large, distributed private sector organizations. Can university systems rely on facilitative leadership, incentives, and programmatic leverage to achieve intended outcomes rather than the classical assumption of governance authority? Should campuses be given greater autonomy to mount new programs or set tuition rates? Can systemwide services operate as true service entities that see the campuses as their customers rather than centralized command and control units? Can assessment of both campus and systemwide services become ongoing, serious, and open (public), a true performance budgeting mentality, one that is implemented in collaboration with campus-based customers? And can the allocation of at least some portion of the state appropriation to the university system be plausibly connected to performance outcomes?

On the other side of the dyad, if the ground rules for the system/campus relationship are redefined, will the university campuses be positioned to operate differently to take advantage of new incentives, and will they be prepared for greater ac-

countability in terms of statewide goals and priorities? How will campuses that have historically been competitive and self-protective, including metropolitan universities, respond to incentives for collaboration?

Reconsideration of traditional centralization/decentralization issues should also occur in two ways. First, which management functions and services should be centralized at the system level and which should be decentralized to the campuses? Second, which functions and service systems should be standardized across the state rather than left to the discretion of the individual campuses? The changing environment of higher education, especially recognition of the large numbers of students who take courses from more than one campus of a statewide system, and the increasing opportunities that can be found in telecommunications and information technology, suggest that this is a propitious time to engage in such an exploration. Granted, the tradition of campus autonomy cherished even by relatively young metropolitan universities can be sorely tested by such discussions. But, to more effectively serve students across state systems, some service functions should be increasingly standardized at the same time that campuses are given increasing autonomy to control their own futures.

For both the system and the metropolitan university campus, current views of multicampus systems often are politically and administratively ambiguous. Nevertheless, emerging new relationships can seem more uncertain than the predictable but unsatisfactory system/campus alliance that currently exists in many states. It may take a modest leap of faith, and new collaborative leadership skills, to believe that more intense and effective campus advocacy can coexist with increased intercampus collaboration. Or that greater standardization of systemwide functions and services can accompany increased policy autonomy. Still, given the changing political and economic context within which we work in public higher education, there may be little choice. Terrence MacTaggart, the new chancellor of the University of Maine System, is pushing forward energetically and creatively along this front, calling his effort, "Efficient System, Entrepreneurial Campuses."

The dilemma of campus advocacy/system loyalty will become even more acute over the next two years for all campuses in Maine's multicampus system be-

cause of an increasingly turbulent political and fiscal environment in the state. While a state commission report in late spring of 1996 called for increased investments in higher education, two former trustees issued a public statement that labeled the University of Maine System “experiment” a failure and proposed disbanding the system as well as creating a voucher arrangement that could be used for either public or private institutions. Simultaneously, more than a dozen bills have been submitted in the 1997 session of the legislature that would substantially restructure the system, including some that would eliminate the chancellor’s office and allow individual campuses to run their own affairs. Chancellor MacTaggart, who assumed his position in May 1996, has been aggressively downsizing the chancellor’s office and he and the board of trustees are exploring a number of ways to rebalance system and campus relationships to encourage campus-level innovation, increase productivity, and demonstrate greater responsiveness to community needs and interests.

We believe that the State of Maine will ultimately benefit from the presence of a university system, even if it presents challenges to individual campuses. It is up to campus leadership to find the way to succeed.