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Guidelines for states considering reorganization of postsecondary governance

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Over the years, leaders in several states have made postsecondary governance changes without first conducting a thorough evaluation of how well their existing policies and structures align with the state's education agenda and the public interest. Consequently, there are numerous examples of governance revisions that failed to meet the expectations of the people who proposed them. Evolving public expectations and new policy environments require changes in many existing state structures. State leaders who fail to assess these contextual factors risk hampering the capacity of their state and its postsecondary education system to compete in the new policy environment.

“State coordination of postsecondary education is one of the most complex, difficult balancing acts in state government.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Policy leaders should clearly identify the core problems that are driving proposals to reorganize postsecondary governance and consider whether other strategies would more effectively address the concerns.

States leaders should weigh the short- and long-term benefits and costs of restructuring higher education governance and understand the implications for the state, postsecondary systems and institutions.

The challenge for states is to develop postsecondary structures and policies that foster appropriate institutional autonomy, as well as institutional responsiveness to public priorities.



Considerations for state leaders

States considering postsecondary governance reorganization should take into account the following guidelines:

Focus first on ends, not means.

Clear goals and objectives need to precede reorganization. Reorganization is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Reorganization without a sense of purpose or direction may be more damaging than maintaining the status quo. If reorganization debates are framed by good information about the state's demographic, economic and education trends, the conversation is more likely to focus on the ends to be achieved than on arguments about means, turf and power.

Be explicit about the specific problems that are the catalysts for the reorganization proposals.

In governance debates, rationales for change can be expressed in lofty terms disconnected from the problems that led to the proposals. In some cases, the real issue is a specific concern, such as perceived inequities, other problems in financing policy or failure of an existing structure to curb institutional turf battles and unnecessary duplication of high-cost graduate and professional programs. In other cases, the issue may be state leaders' sense that the existing structure is inadequate to help the state confront major policy priorities, such as workforce development or P-20 reforms. Whatever the issue, the problem may lie elsewhere (for example, in the politics of the legislative process), and not in the postsecondary education structure itself.

Ask if reorganization is the only or most effective means for addressing the identified problems.

Reorganization is necessary at times and can be an effective way to signal new directions, assert new leadership and provide a framework for new policy initiatives. But other alternatives, such as strengthened leadership by boards and executive officers or new financing and accountability measures, need to be considered carefully.

Weigh the costs of reorganization against the short- and long-term benefits.

What are the short- and long-term implications of pursuing governance reorganization? It may take five to eight years for a newly organized system to begin to function effectively and yield anticipated results. Major reorganization often is proposed to achieve efficiencies, but little account is taken of the extraordinary costs and reduced productivity stemming from the uncertainty and low morale of persons affected by the changes. Large-scale organizational change requires extensive consultation and rebuilding of the formal and informal networks essential for effective governance. All these processes are the basic costs of change.

Recognize that a good system balances state and societal needs and the needs of colleges and universities.

The assumption that one viewpoint must rule is dangerous. Some officials argue that institutional autonomy is an absolute good and that state involvement on behalf of the public interest must be kept at a minimum. Others believe state priorities must rule and that they need to constrain institutional autonomy. The challenge for states is to develop structures and policies that foster appropriate institutional autonomy, as well as institutional responsiveness to public priorities.

Distinguish between state coordination and institutional governance.

Coordination is concerned primarily with the state and system perspective – the framework within which governance takes place. Governance, on the other hand, relates to the direction by boards of trustees and presidents of individual colleges and universities or systems of institutions. This distinction is important because states often try to solve coordination problems with governance alternatives or vice versa.

Examine the total policy structure and process rather than only the formal postsecondary education structure.

States often will change the postsecondary education structure (that is, abolish or restructure a state coordinating board) when, in reality, the source of the problem lies elsewhere (for example, the state civil service requirements or the enactment of inappropriately detailed mandates by the state legislature). As part of the examination process, states should review the roles of the governor, executive branch agencies and legislature with respect to postsecondary governance.

State coordination of postsecondary education is one of the most complex, difficult balancing acts in state government. There are no simple answers, no absolutes. While lessons can be drawn from other states, there is no perfect model. Conflicts are the reality. The challenge is to resolve those conflicts as close to the operating level (that is, at the campus or through cooperation among campuses) and as close to the real problems as possible. Once issues rise to the level of the governor and legislature, political instead of education values tend to dominate the debate. Finally, what worked at one point, with one set of actors, may not work at another point. State leaders need to periodically evaluate the adequacy of their governance systems and undertake carefully considered changes when necessary.

Note: This guidance brief was revised and reprinted from the original version published by Education Commission of the States in 2002.

Related ECS Documents

Recent Changes to Postsecondary Governance in States: 2011-13, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/09/33/10933.pdf>

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