ON THE APPORTIONMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE GOVERNANCE FUNCTIONS WITHIN MULTI-CAMPUS UNIVERSITIES AND UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS

December 2013

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ABSTRACT

Most public universities in the United States are formed into systems, containing more than one university or campus. There are clear rationales for these systems, including overall planning and coordination, budgeting efficiency, and effectiveness of dealings with the state government. The distribution of internal governance functions between the system level and the individual-campus level has, however, been a source of continual tension for understandable reasons. Although there can be no hard and fast rules for the division of administrative functions between the system-wide level and the component campuses, a number of governance principles can be laid out. What is done in a particular instance should recognize commonalities and differences in mission among and within systems, the histories and the maturities of the campuses composing the system, state government constraints, governing board structures, and changing conditions, among other circumstances and needs.

Keywords: University Governance, University Systems, Subsidiarity, Decision Processes

INTRODUCTION

Most public universities in the United States are formed into university systems of one sort or another (Lane & Johnstone, 2013; NASH, 2013; Lee & Bowen, 1971). The origins and natures of these systems vary widely, and their histories often have substantial political components (McGuinness, 2013a). The functional purposes of university systems are typically to provide planning and coordination across the system, to provide a single interface with the state government, and to propose, receive and administer a single state budget for the system. The single state interface and budget should largely preclude political contention among the individual components of the university system at the state-government level. In these important respects, the formation of public universities into systems has been generally very successful.

However, this success has not come without tension and struggles within the university systems themselves. It is inherent in the nature and environment of public university systems that there will be pressures and contention with regard to the relative statuses of the component universities and campuses[1] and over the respective roles of system-level and campus-level governance. The system-wide administration works directly with the state government and is thereby more directly influenced by, and subject to, the political process of the state. Many of the interactions between the system leadership and the state government play out in the public sector and the media. These roles of the system-wide administration should shield the individual campuses within the system from direct political influence, which is a considerable benefit. However, those on the campuses tend not to recognize this sheltering, but instead place the "blame" for results of government and political actions on the system-wide administration itself. This often, and perhaps even always, leads to a situation with a degree of misunderstanding and mistrust between the campuses and the system-level administration. That mistrust is intensified on the campuses by seeming remoteness of the system-wide administration and Board of Regents or Trustees. Mistrust can occur in the other direction as well.

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[1] Some systems are composed of multiple universities and/or colleges, while others are single, multi-campus universities. For convenience I will denote components of systems as "campuses", including both individual universities or colleges and also campuses that are parts of multi-campus, single-university systems.

Many of the pressures on the system-wide administration are public and political and mostly at the state level. Most of the values of the campuses and most of the pressures on them are academic. Because of that dissimilarity the two tiers of governance can readily have different priorities in approaching issues. Differences in perceptions and priorities can be accentuated to the extent that the system-wide officers do not themselves have academic and campus backgrounds and understanding.

Amplifying these inherent tensions, there are major and broad forces of state (Lee and Bowen, 1975), national, and global change that provide not only tensions and needs, but also major opportunities. Prime among these forces at present are

- sharp reductions in per-student public funding in most states,
- the need, even in the face of reduced state funding, for continued and improved access for in-state students without regard to their abilities to pay,
- generation of replacement sources of revenue, most of which are obtained at the campus level,
- new capabilities of instructional technology utilizing the internet, and
- increasing globalization of higher education.

The first three of these forces necessitate change, a fact that compounds the tensions and contention between the two tiers of system governance. The latter two trends present opportunities for beneficial change. In those two areas, many experiments are currently being carried out on widely different scales and in many different venues and modes, but it is still unclear which approaches will ultimately be most useful and successful. The uncertainties can compound tensions between layers of governance, and add to confusion about areas of responsibility.

A particular source of tension is the formation of new campuses within a public university system. Existing campuses tend to see the new campus as a diversion of state resources for the university system, whereas the system office will see it more as a necessary means of fulfilling enrollment obligations and enhancing geographical coverage within the state (Berdahl, 1998).

Johnstone (2013) has identified a number of specific tensions between systems and member institutions, and has recommended allocations of certain specific functions among state governments, system offices and individual college or university campuses. The purpose of this paper is to take a broader look at principles which should be brought to bear on the allocation of administrative roles between systems and component campuses, with recognition that the specific allocations will of necessity depend upon the type of university system and state and local situations.

STRUCTURES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN TIERED ADMINISTRATIVE GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

a.   Differences among Public University Systems.
There are wide enough variations in the natures and missions for public-universities so that it should be apparent from the start that no one governance structure nor one division of responsibilities among tiers of governance will work best for all public-university systems. Some of the important differences among systems are the following.

- The missions of systems and their component campuses vary greatly. The components or the systems themselves may be research universities, four-year comprehensive universities, two-year colleges, and/or universities with specialized missions and/or constituents, e. g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities or HBCUs, polytechnic institutes, the California Maritime Academy. There may or may not be a design for transfer of students within or among systems; these designs tend to be state-specific.

- In a few systems all the all component universities and/or campuses have the same mission, but most systems are composed of universities and/or colleges with different missions. Examples of the former are the University of Illinois system and each of the three California systems (University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges). Examples of the latter are the University of Texas, Texas A&M, and University of Houston systems, as well as the State University of New York. By sharing a single mission, systems can concentrate on that mission and share and ensure that best practices toward that mission spread among campuses. Systems containing campuses with multiple missions, e. g., with both two- and four-year colleges, should be better able to foster articulation and transfer within the system.

- Systems differ as to whether they were created by amalgamation of existing institutions or by generation of new campuses from within[2], or a combination of these and/or other methods. The original formation of the State University of New York and the University of Wisconsin system are examples of amalgamation. The University of California is almost totally an example of new campuses having been formed from within, and the University of Texas system and the California State University are examples of combinations of approaches. Amalgamations combine institutions that have different histories, values and traditions, and possibly different missions. There thus will be issues of adaptation of culture and approaches, as well as a possible need for a generation of faculty to turn over before the hiring standards and/or mission of the new parent organization are met.

- Systems and the campuses within them can be at different levels of maturity. In a typical scenario an entirely new campus is initially under the care and close supervision of the system office, and then, as a CEO is appointed for the campus and the administration fills out and students come, the administrative responsibilities are progressively turned over to the campus leadership and administration. Thus the role of the system-wide administration is usually greater for younger campuses.

- There may of course be state government constraints and/or other externally imposed structural elements that affect the division of administrative responsibilities. States differ widely with regard to whether there is a State Board of Higher Education, and if so what the responsibilities of it are (Millett, 1984).   In some states, notably Michigan, California and Minnesota, some or all universities have constitutional autonomy. In Ohio, a Chancellor and a State Board of Regents advisory to that Chancellor were created recently after the public universities of the state had been in existence for many years (Garland, 2009). In California there was for many years a Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), advisory to the Governor and the Legislature; however, there is at present no such coordinating mechanism, following the recent removal of all funding for CPEC.

- There are significantly different governing board structures for different public university systems (McGuinness, 2013b). For example, North Carolina and Florida have boards at both the system and individual-campus levels, Utah has both a board for the Utah System of Higher Education and boards at the levels of the constituent public universities, Ohio has the aforementioned advisory board at the state level and other boards at the level of the universities themselves. Most states do not have tiers of boards.

b.   Principles and Some Consequences for the Allocation of Administrative Governance Responsibilities.
Three quotes are appropriate for starting a discussion of the distribution of administrative-governance roles within multi-campus university systems:

"It was my conviction, both as chancellor and president, that the campus was the basic loyalty unit; that 'universitywide' was an essential superstructure in service to the campuses; that we needed 'one university' but one university with a pluralistic system of governance; that the campuses should control item-by-item decision making under general policy guidance unless there was a good reason to the contrary; that the chancellors should be the 'executive heads' of their campuses as the Board of Regents had decided in 1951." (Kerr, 2001)

"In the best kind of university system, the system office functions as a kind of corporate office and does not become an operating entity. The system does not offer academic programs or engage in research. The system does not confer tenure or award academic degrees. The system does not have a football team. Academic programs and decisions concerning them are campus based. The academic leadership is on the campuses and the chancellor [i.e., the system head] does not function or represent himself or herself to be the chief academic officer of the campuses. In fact, if the chancellor understands the job, he or she will make sure that the visible academic leadership is vested in the presidents of the component institutions. In this ideal, the system provides services, including planning, architectural, engineering, budgeting, financial and investment, and legal services. The system undertakes lobbying efforts. It is the continuing responsibility of the chancellor to evaluate the performance of the presidents and maintain a high quality of leadership across the system." (Flawn, 1990)

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[2] These two means of creating systems and/or the campuses within them have also been called Consolidated Systems and Flagship Systems (Lee & Bowen, 1971; McGuinness, 2013). The term Flagship System seems now to be outdated; for example, the flagship campus concept does not apply well to the University of California given the growth in stature of the component campuses. The more essential concept for such systems is that new campuses are formed from within the system, rather than by amalgamation or consolidation.

"The universitywide system has no alumni, no students, no faculty, no sports teams, no one to cheer for it." (Kerr, 2001)

Recognize the Value of Subsidiarity. These statements are all manifestations of a general governance principle that has come to be known as *subsidiarity* (Føllesdal, 1998; Bermann, 1994; Visher, 2001-2). In essence, the principle is that administrative functions should be handled and decisions made by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized authority capable of handling the matter effectively. I have previously invoked this principle in connection with board-level governance in university systems (King, 2013a; Birgeneau, et al., 2012) and faculty shared governance (King, 2013). It is at least as applicable to administrative governance in universities and probably even more so. Among the results of adherence to subsidiarity should be more informed decisions and less remoteness of governance. The best level of governance for decisions to be made is where there is the most direct information about the body or bodies affected, with sufficient awareness of the various relevant policies and organizational factors.

The logic of subsidiarity is most compelling for complex, multi-tiered organizations and for organizations where the most valuable human resources for carrying out the mission are on the front line, e. g., the faculty. Public university systems are manifestations of both these criteria.

Among the logical consequences of the subsidiarity concept are that it makes sense :

- to put the development and execution of academic programs and academic initiatives on campuses where the faculty are,
- to put the administrative support for research where the research is located (i. e., on campuses),
- to put community relations with campuses, while state government relations are at the system level and federal relations are divided on the basis of whether the matter applies to the system (e. g., legislation) or to a campus (e. g., specific research),
- to put student services on campuses,
- to put responsibility for designing and carrying out of fund-raising activities, alumni relations, relations with industry and technology transfer operations with the campuses since attachments of alumni, friends and corporations are with the campuses,, and
- to put the primary selection of administrative officers, in general, one administrative level above the level of the officer, but also with approval of principal officers one level higher.

Centralize the Management of Policies and Decentralize Management of Operations. Pelfrey (2012) has observed that, in simplest concept, the organizational principle of the University of California in recent decades has been that "campuses manage programs and the Office of the President manages policies". This maxim makes good sense for a single university composed of campuses having the same mission, and it makes good sense as a point of departure for university systems in general. However, it should be considered as one of several guidelines and may at times conflict with some others, e. g., subsidiarity. For example, it can be best to oversee very large multi-user research facilities and organized research involving multiple campuses at the system level so as to recognize and manage conflicting campus interests. It can make sense to create specific policies at campus levels within policy envelopes (i. e., allowable ranges of policy) that have been developed at the system or university-wide level.

Develop System-wide Decision Processes that Involve the Entire System rather than being centered on the System Administrative Office. It is not necessary, or even desirable, to categorize all responsibilities and decisions as being placed either with the campus administrations or with the system-wide office. Best practices can be shared, a firmer basis of understanding for decisions can be generated, and in some cases even decisions themselves can be made through system-wide or university-wide groups that have appropriate representation (e. g., all the campus CEOs, all the Provosts, all the Campus Librarians, all the Chief Information Officers, etc.) from the constituent campuses within the system. These groups should include the system-wide counterparts as well. This approach can make for sounder and more knowledge-based system-level decisions (another manifestation of subsidiarity). Processes of this sort make good sense for setting academic standards, developing academic, research and personnel policies and policy envelopes, library and information technology cooperation and practices, and many other purposes. I do not mean to imply that the ultimate decisions should best be made in all such cases by consensus or vote of the system-wide group (although that is a possibility), but that the factors bearing on the decision should be aired fully in such a group. Greater involvement and consultation tend to create better decisions as well as greater acceptance of decisions.

People in Either Tier of Governance Should Understand the Needs and Situations of the Other Tier. A common understanding should make it more likely those in both tiers of system governance have common priorities and a recognition of how to work together better toward common goals. In a Jeffersonian sense, a full and common understanding should lead to less disagreement over ultimate decisions.

Development of common understanding among persons in different tiers is by no means automatic; it requires careful design and maintenance. Some approaches that can be effective are the following:

- Emphasize experience and success in campus-level administration as a desirable attribute for those recruited into positions at the system level.
- Rotate key employees between the system and campus levels for periods of time.
- Utilize the system-wide discussion and decision processes described in the section immediately above. System-level officials should participate fully with the campus officials in these groups. It is probably best for such meetings to be convened and chaired by one of the campus officers, so as to lessen hierarchical sensitivities.

Have a Single Channel to the State Government for System-wide Matters. One of the main reasons for the formation of university systems has been to present a single voice and set of requests to the state government and thereby to accomplish prioritization and selection of initiatives within the system itself rather than through a political process at the state-government level. It is striking that so many state governments have seen the wisdom of that practice and that some have even created public-university systems from existing separate public universities. For public university systems, the single-channel route to the state government is something to be nurtured and preserved, and administrative governance should reflect that fact. There should be one office of state-government relations for a public-university system, not several. Concomitant with the single channel, there should be a single state budget for the system, thereby avoiding budgetary competition at the state-government level among different elements of the system. It follows that the state budget should be formulated, sought and supported at the system level by evaluating, synthesizing, and prioritizing campus requests. Decisions apportioning funds among the individual campuses should then be made at the system-wide level and not by state government.

Furthermore, since tuition for in-state students is invariably a major political issue, it should be set by whatever process pertains at the system-wide and state levels, preferably the former. In some situations, there may be more flexibility and the opportunity to delegate setting tuitions for out-of-state and/or professional and graduate students. Some other examples of issues affecting an entire system that require a single channel through the system-wide governance structure are a mission change for one or more campuses and the way in which enrollment obligations of the system to the state will be accomplished (and the enrollment distributed among campuses).

Ensure that Different Bodies at the Same Level of Governance Correspond in Function. In systems with tiers of boards, the administrative functions of the system office and of the component campuses should correspond to the division of responsibility between the main system board and the campus boards. Conversely, the division of responsibilities among tiers of boards should match what is optimal for administrative and governance effectiveness and efficiency, and for the success of the academic enterprise (King, 2013a). In institutions with structured shared governance (i. e., Academic Senates and the equivalent), faculty consultative roles should be at the level to which administration has been delegated (King, 2013b).

Promote Academic Quality. It is vitally important that the quality of teaching and research (for research universities) be promoted by the administrative structure. This is a strong argument for subsidiarity, since the faculty members are the front line of academic quality and accomplishment. In general, enhancement of academic quality calls for attention to the needs of faculty and to strong and positive faculty participation in the approval and review processes for academic programs and the appointment and review processes for individual faculty members. These functions are operationally best performed locally, although a manual for academic standards and criteria for faculty assessment can be beneficial at the system level, as is the case for the Academic Personnel Manual of the University of California (University of California, 2013).

Articulate among Components of the System and between the System and Other Systems. For systems containing different sorts of universities and colleges with a plan or intention for students to be able to transfer among them, e. g., taking the first two years at a local two-year institution followed by transfer to a four-year institution to complete the bachelor's degree, it is important for administration to facilitate that transfer. Since campuses are unlikely to do this well when left on their own, there is a need for a substantial coordinating role at the system level.

Seek Budgetary and Financial Efficiencies. Carrying out some activities on a system-wide level and thereby on a larger scale can gain financial efficiencies. An example is purchasing, for which a larger scale can lead to lower-price agreements with vendors. Efficiencies that can be gained through economies of scale should be weighed in comparison with the benefits of local campus option and determination. If the uniformity gained through central coordination inconveniences or encumbers faculty members, such as by remoteness, inflexibility and/or long response times, it may well be better to forego the fiscal efficiency in favor of decentralization to support the needs of the academic program.

Recognize that Some Functions Have to Be Carried Out at Multiple Levels. As one example, there should be a central legal office to represent the system and to assure consistency of legal interpretation and advice within the system, but there must also be a mechanism for providing general legal advice to campus leaders. Similarly, there is a need to have media-relations offices for individual campuses, but there also a need for effective media relations at the system level. Admissions to a campus should be carried out on that campus, but there may also be system-wide function coordinating admissions policy across the system. Also, there should be consistency of policy and terms for licensing of patents and copyrights, which thereby generates a system-level role in addition to operational roles of campuses in licensing and technology transfer. There may also be international activities at both levels, but of different sorts. As noted by Lane (2013) it can make sense in terms of scope and efficiency to oversee student-exchange programs at the system level. On the other hand, more complex and thorough relations between or among pairs or small groups of international universities are probably best carried out at the campus level.

CONCLUSION

There are no hard-and-fast rules for the division of administrative functions and responsibilities between the system-wide or all-university level and component campuses in university systems. What is done should recognize commonalities and differences in mission, horizontal vs. vertical system structures, the histories and the maturities of components of the system, state government constraints, governing board structures, and changing conditions. There are nonetheless some useful principles that pertain. These involve the benefits of subsidiarity, centralization of developing policies vs. decentralization of operations, basing system-wide decisions upon processes that involve the entire system, having a single channel to the state government as well as a single state budget, assuring that different bodies involved in governance have functions that correspond to one another, promoting academic quality and articulation, seeking budgetary and financial efficiencies, and recognizing that different aspects of some functions necessarily must be carried out at multiple levels of governance.

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