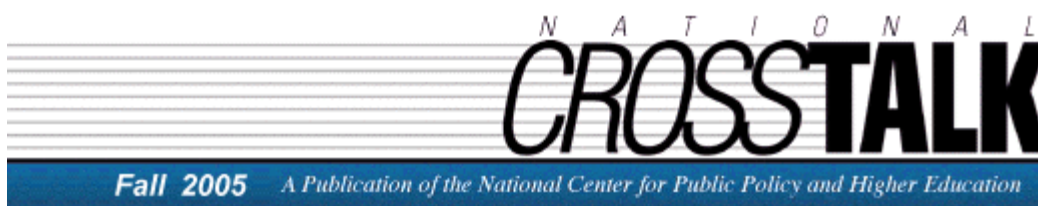




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## Nine Principles

### Serving the public good in a time of changing governance models for colleges and universities

By Joseph C. Burke



Talk about public higher education has taken a different—some say dangerous—turn. Advocates spawn and spin a variety of new models mostly for flagship universities. They include student vouchers, charter or enterprise campuses, and performance compacts or contracts. Though the concepts differ, all involve more dependence on private markets and fundraising and more campus control over their operations, and especially student tuition. All would alter the traditional relations between state governments and public campuses by creating new hybrid

institutions, much more private in funding and marketing, yet hopefully still public in purpose.

The talk currently centers on Colorado, Florida, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and Washington. The discussions often include leaders mostly from flagship universities, and some state officials, with little publicity or participation from the general public.

Public higher education is too important to the society in a knowledge and information era to leave its form—and inevitably its function—to largely private talks between some state officials and university leaders. Before the talk turns to actions in some states, with the inevitable fallout that may cascade across the country, it is time to step back and discuss a set of principles to cling to in what could become a tidal wave of change.

When talk turns to change, the parties throw everything into the mix, in a classic case of the "garbage can theory" of decision-making. What complicates this mixture is that state and campus leaders clash on what to toss and what to keep. The talk also divides public higher education, with leaders of research universities advocating it and colleagues from community colleges and regional comprehensives afraid of its consequences.

Radical change—especially change done to colleges and universities—demands drastic consequences to drive action. One of Burke's Laws states that the interest of academics in change is in direct proportion to the distance from their campuses. The

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case for some change in public higher education appears compelling, if at times exaggerated. The share of state funding going to higher education has declined dramatically; and the prospects for a return to previous levels appears dim. Burgeoning enrollment in many states exacerbates the problem, as does the inevitable rise in higher education costs, resulting from clinging to traditional teaching technologies in an age of new learning techniques.

Calls for change come from flagship public universities. Speeches from presidents and chancellors trace the dismal descent of their campuses from state funded, to state assisted, to state related, to a final destination as state located. They propose a bargain between campus and capital: more autonomy over university operations, especially tuition; more accountability to states for improved performance; and level—even lower—but stable funding.

Community colleges and regional comprehensives are seldom part of the discussion and unlikely to benefit. Their leaders fear the proposals would undermine the public sector's clout in state capitals by privatizing one of its powerful parts. Proponents of the new models reply that increased funding would require a radical reformation in state tax systems to cover the new economy, which remains unlikely. Besides, under their plans everyone benefits and no one gets hurt. If public research universities require only level, even reduced, state funding, increased appropriations become available for the other public colleges and universities.

The real danger of these bargains comes from making dramatic changes in the governance without a collective discussion of their consequences. Before continuing separate talks between some state and university leaders about remodeling higher education go too far, a representative group of business, civic, government and education leaders in each state—and perhaps in the country as a whole—should convene to give some collective thought to the following principles.

#### **1. Limited authority means less accountability.**

State officials frequently forget that more authority means more accountability; less authority means less accountability. The bargaining of more authority for more accountability merely extends the reinventing government movement that transformed the old accountability of control by bureaucratic regulations to the new concern with desired results. States can hold leaders of public colleges and universities accountable for performance only by giving them the authority to manage their internal operations. Despite this truism, some states still require designated results from public colleges and universities, while retaining detailed regulations.

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Deregulation should depend not on special charters or compacts, but on an assessment of management capacity and internal controls of a college or university. The second element of the new accountability demands improved performance on designated priorities. States should extend management authority to, and demand performance accountability from, all public colleges and universities. They should lose this authority only when they abuse that responsibility and fail to produce the required results.

#### **2. Deregulation is possible; autonomy is not.**

The only autonomous organizations are those that are fully self-supporting, which leaves out all colleges and universities. Even constitutional autonomy has its limits, for the power of the governor and the legislature over funding limits its exercise in practice. Calls for campus autonomy for public universities sound self-serving in state capitols. More freedom in budget transfers, funds carry over, personnel systems, and capital financing is not only possible but also achievable, but autonomy is not.

### **3. In accountability, more is seldom better.**

Too many accountability programs turn back the clock to complying with regulations rather than producing results. Too many detailed reports obscure critical results. Too many indicators mean no priorities. An accountability report with scores of goals and indicators suggests a document designed to demonstrate external compliance rather than institutional performance.

### **4. Public higher education is too important to society to leave its form and funding largely to private negotiations between state officials and university leaders.**

Business and civic leaders, who recognize the relation between authority and accountability, resources and results, should take the lead with state and university officials in preparing public agendas and discussing new models for higher education in each state. Business and civic leaders can make a convincing case in state capitols. Besides, many of them are also college and universities trustees, who should consider public needs and campus concerns.

### **5. Public universities must demonstrate that they care more about serving the public good than raising their peer prestige.**

Too many flagship universities pursue the resource and reputation model of excellence advocated by *U.S. News and World Report*. As the signs of public ownership receded with diminished revenues, the danger rises of a loss of public purpose. Any new model of governance must meet the test of enhancing the capacity of public universities to meet student and state needs and not just to compete with private institutions for peer prestige. The architectural admonition is correct: Form should follow function.

### **6. Market demands and the public good are not synonymous.**

Market demands are usually short-term and respond to individual wants, while the public good is usually long-term and reflects collective needs. Leaving accountability and performance in higher education to student, business and other markets does not always add up to the public good. Rising markets often mark momentary fads. Colleges and universities must continue critical programs that society needs but does not want.

### **7. The toughest accountability test for top research universities after remodeling will be support for student access and school improvement.**

Articles in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* on class in America suggest that the role of higher education in social mobility has declined. Upper class students educated at the best elementary and secondary schools, often private, increasingly fill the admission slots in the most selective public universities. Student access and school improvement go together. Several public universities in Virginia, North Carolina and Texas have committed funds to ensure that qualified students from poor families can enroll. Though commendable, these programs will not work without a continuing university commitment to help in raising the public schools in their states to a level that makes many more of their graduates acceptable to flagship universities.

Those universities should ask themselves three questions. How selective in admissions should public universities become? Should they be as selective as their markets allow? And how engaged are they in collaborative efforts of school

improvement? Their answers should not depend on what prestigious private colleges do, but on what public universities should do to serve the public good.

**8. Preserving the unity of public higher education is an educational and political necessity.**

Although public research universities are more likely to benefit from the new governance models, all proposals should support the best interest of all sectors of public higher education. Unity, not division, is essential for higher education success as well as clout in state capitols.

Most of the new models are available only to top research universities. Their student demand, which far exceeds their capacity, allows them to benefit from sizeable tuition increases. Out-of-state demand often permits tuition levels above full cost. Flagship universities can also raise substantial sums through private fundraising and sponsored research.

These universities can pursue their own interest while helping their colleagues in community colleges and comprehensive universities. They should champion delegating operating authority to all public colleges and universities. They should also pledge to lobby for increased higher education funding, even after compact agreements on their own appropriations.

**9. Governors and legislators in most states will not allow public colleges and universities to set their own tuition.**

Control over tuition is "the gold standard" for public universities in pursuing the new governance models. But governors and legislators fear it may become a "free standard" allowing universities to raise student charges to unacceptable levels. The debate should not remain largely an argument over tuition. National higher education associations and those for state legislators and governors should sponsor the development of models that combine tuition levels, family income and state appropriations.

Higher tuition will provoke discussion about university costs and the use of tuition revenues. How much of the revenue will go to undergraduate education as opposed to graduate studies and research?

I stop at nine principles, remembering Premier Clemenceau's quip about President Wilson's 14 Points: "Even God had only ten!"

Let me end with a proposition, not a principle.

The global reach of knowledge and information means that higher education knows no boundaries, even those of states!

Remodeling public higher education deserves national as well as state deliberation. When problems and possibilities become increasingly common, remodeling even a part of public higher education becomes a concern for all, and not just some states. Public higher education is a state matter, but it is also a national necessity. If no man remained an island in John Donne's day, surely no state retains that luxury in our day.

We should think more about confirming principles before changing governance practices in public higher education.

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