



Higher Education Reorganization: To Move a Pachyderm ...

ROBERT A. WEYGAND

There are few places where higher education is in such turmoil as it is in Massachusetts, where Gov. Mitt Romney has proposed profound changes in the administration of the state's public colleges and universities. His plan calls for abolishing the University of Massachusetts System as we know it and the system president's office, and creating a new secretary of education overseeing K-20 education, as well as seven regional higher education boards linked to regional economic development councils in those same locales. This would be in addition to the existing state Board of Higher Education structure.

The hierarchy proposed in Massachusetts would work this way: presidents of individual campuses would report to their campus board of trustees, the chair of which would be appointed by the governor. Those chairs, in turn, would form regional higher education district boards. These district boards would then be answerable to the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, which would answer to the new secretary of education, who of course, would report directly to the governor.

The governor contends that greater collaboration with regional economic development boards will make higher education more responsive to the workforce needs of the regions and the state. He suggests that decentralization of administration, the addition of personnel and creation of multiple boards will create greater efficiency and achieve his vision of what higher education should be in Massachusetts.

Opponents argue that the proposed administration is inefficient, that it will create more, rather than less, bureaucracy, that it wastes education dollars, and is really a thinly disguised ploy to remove the politically powerful University of Massachusetts System President William Bulger from office.

Radical reorganizations dampen faculty and staff morale and productivity.

Re-examination of mission and reorganization can be healthy exercises in government, especially when one is confronted by the hard economic choices that Romney and the Massachusetts Legislature are faced with today. But reorganization is not healthy when its sole purpose is to eliminate powerful people or personnel. Furthermore, radical reorganizations, like the one proposed in Massachusetts, usually do not render immediate financial savings. But they do dampen faculty and staff morale and productivity. And most importantly, they undercut grassroots support for moving large systems in desired directions.

In fact, what's more likely to work in higher education is the "pachyderm approach," according to University of Southern Maine President Richard Pattenaude. You can push and prod a pachyderm to move in a particular direction, says Pattenaude, but you will expend a lot of energy, perhaps even hurt yourself in the process. Maybe after some time, you will move the large animal in the direction of your choice. Or conversely, you can

carefully select your desired destination, place a bowl of peanuts there, and watch the speed at which the pachyderm moves in your targeted direction. In other words, if you want to move a large animal—or a higher education system—a well-thought-out set of incentives and disincentives is far more effective and efficient than pushing and prodding.

Unfortunately, the issue facing Massachusetts has become one of personalities: Romney and Bulger. While the media is enjoying this rift, the victims will be students. This controversy must shift from a debate about powerful individuals to a debate about the quality of educational opportunity for Massachusetts residents. This will require strong leadership from both sides, as well as the Legislature, which will eventually play the most pivotal role in resolving the controversy.

Massachusetts and the nation are facing a third year of economic downturn, crises around the globe, reduced consumer confidence and, now, a controversy in higher education. Parents and students need strong leadership that comes from understanding, sensitivity and a firm desire to improve the quality of education. Personality conflicts have no place in this arena. This situation should be resolved quickly, and to the benefit, not the detriment, of the students of Massachusetts.

Robert A. Weygand is president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and publisher of CONNECTION.