



ATG¹ Brief | Leadership blog post, March 2020

Institutional Individualism and System Citizenship: Building ‘Better Together’

By David Rosowsky, Ph.D.

Those who know me well know of my profound respect for our nation’s public and land grant universities and systems and both the knowledge and the opportunities they create – through mission and mandate – for their communities, the State, the nation, and the world. Never has the role of our great public universities – in teaching, research, and service – been more important or more needed. We are called by the grand challenges around environment, climate, food, water, energy, national security, poverty, and human health, and population health. But we are also called for leadership and light around democracy, justice, civility, and peace. The greatest of our public universities and systems will rise to these challenges and callings, rally their intellectual and human capital around finding solutions and pathways, engaging those resources and *harnessing collective energies for the greater good*.

That’s fine. Even noble. But *how?* And *how today*, given present challenges and realities?

Public university systems are facing the same challenges as individual universities, plus some of their own. Like all of higher education, they are facing increased scrutiny and criticism (and in some cases skepticism) from external constituents, declining public support, and internal strife arising from resource constraints, trends in student interests and choices of majors, efforts to redeploy resources toward strategic priorities or emerging opportunities, and a sense of changing priorities that have left some of the most cherished academic disciplines that have been part of our great institutions for centuries feeling threatened or marginalized. No matter how many times administrators or those with oversight responsibility such as higher education coordinating boards, trustees, or legislators say “it’s not personal and it’s not a value judgment, it’s about responsible resource management,” this is often precisely how it is perceived by those who feel most affected (marginalized, undervalued, disenfranchised). And even those not directly impacted may feel more vulnerable and less secure, knowing that they, too, may feel impacts of downsizing, rightsizing, or priority-shifting in the future. Public sentiments that are challenging the value of higher education today certainly are the result of our failure to advocate and promote our missions, roles, value, and real impact. But they are also a product of increased financial pressures, uncertainty, and anxiety.

¹ *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM’s Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

Shared governance, tenure, and many of the traditional structures found in US higher education (and that made US universities some of the best in the world) present additional challenges. Vagaries in the definition, understanding, and realization of shared governance, coupled with decreased public support and increased politicization of many issues directly affecting the operation of colleges and universities, as well as an acceleration in turnover in presidents and provosts in the last decade, have given rise to more frequent clashes between shared governance groups and university administrations. Increased media attention and the rise of social media have provided greater and more widespread coverage of each of these incidents. Any perceived violation of shared governance at the institutional level becomes a shared national debate. While still the best system in the world, it nonetheless cannot be immune from review, reassessment, revision where appropriate, and reaffirmation. At the very least, it's time to clarify this important compact between (typically) boards and faculty. Surely such clarity will lead to fewer conflicts, greater understanding of shared goals and shared responsibility, and greater ability to navigate toward solutions in the *best interest of the institution*.

But university systems face other challenges as well. They must address issues of multiple campuses with or without shared services, often very different institutional types, issues of centralized or decentralized policies, and maintaining commitments to access and affordability in the face of diminishing State support. Systems must increasingly balance their statewide access mission with the fiscal inefficiencies of offering redundant, under-enrolled, or legacy programs. They must be strategic in where they invest, where they disinvest, how they resource, and the expectations that are set for each campus – all while articulating and maintaining a system-wide mission, priority set, and identity, one that all of the campuses can buy into and get behind. Balancing making people feel valued, included, relevant, and part of the greater system mission against communicating financial realities, changing landscapes, and need for real change can be especially difficult in these large, complex, multi-institutional (and institutional type) systems. In part this is because there are extra layers of administration and more opportunities for misinformation or misunderstanding that can impede successful implementation of initiatives to achieve strategic system-wide goals and realize needed change at both the campus and system levels.

Systems may be overbuilt (too many campuses), or underleveraged (campuses underperforming or not effectively coordinated or well integrated into the system), or no longer optimally distributed geographically across the State. Many of these challenges are inherited. They result from decisions made at a time where systems expanded to serve all corners of the State, and from which no student would need to travel an excessive distance to enroll. And the reality is that few system boards or legislative bodies today are willing to make the difficult and unpopular decision to close a campus, particularly those located in small communities. The ramifications (economic to the community, political to the legislator) could no doubt be significant.

Some systems maintain multiple nursing or engineering programs (some of the more expensive programs to operate), even those at campuses that are close to one another. Some include multiple R1 research universities. Some include multiple D1 NCAA athletics programs. Some lack cohesive (or understood) articulation and transfer agreements among and between campuses, or the ability to create real opportunities for students to access programs at multiple campuses when completing degree programs.

Even board governance (structure) can vary. Obviously this, too, affects the degree to which a system can function as a system and the degree to which campuses feel part of that system. It also can affect how the State views and works with the system and its campuses.

With the myriad challenges, and the expectations that (a) resources from the State will be stagnant or decline, and (b) public scrutiny as to the value of higher education will remain high, how should systems think about their role in the years ahead? Beyond lobbying for State support, beyond articulating the important role of public higher education as a public good and an economic driver, what will be necessary to ensure a stable and prosperous future, one that delivers on the system's promise and fulfills its best destiny to the State and its citizens?

Beyond places for teaching and learning, public colleges and universities play critical roles in economic development, cultural enrichment, knowledge creation, and life quality elevation. Our great public universities and systems are more than the engines of our economies; they are the great enablers of our society. What system priorities, goals, and strategies will ensure systems not only survive, but *thrive*? How will systems adapt to changes experienced throughout higher education and throughout society? How will systems respond to changes in connectivity, volume of information and speed of access to that information, the ways in which people process and learn, and expectations of everyone from the general public to the companies employing graduates, the 24-hour news cycle and trends away from fact-based reporting or reason?

Systems are positioned to have the greatest impact if two conditions are met: (1) they maintain a comprehensive collection of institutions and institutional missions that meets the needs of and otherwise serves the broadest set of the State's population, and (2) the member institutions feel *connected to the overarching mission and goals of the system*, and that they seem themselves reflected, valued, and contributing.

The best system mission will lift all campuses. It will be responsive and responsible, it will be compelling and persuasive. It will be actionable and accountable. It will be forward-leaning and forward-looking. It will generate support and excitement. But above all, it will engage, it will create opportunity for, and it will lift all campuses.

Systems are facing significant challenges, inclusive of (but not limited to) the challenges facing their individual campuses. Fiscal realities, political pressure (and shifts in priorities with new administrations), high turnover in campus leadership, changing demographics and increasing competition for students, the need to adapt educational programs and program delivery, the need to continue to improve retention and graduation rates, and the need to constantly remind constituents and legislators about the value and importance of public higher education all must figure into the System's priorities and strategy set. And all of this must be done while being respectful of shared governance, inclusive of all people, and operating under decreased state support and increased federal regulations for oversight and compliance (generally unfunded mandates), maintaining the infrastructure and instructional capacity to ensure high equality teaching/learning as well as student success, wellness, and safety, and keeping costs affordable.

(Insert deep breath here)

While there likely will be significant challenges for many systems as they seek to right-size, focus their mission, reduce costs, increase efficiencies and eliminate redundancies, and develop new sources of

public and private support, I believe the best systems will do far more than survive or even thrive in the decades ahead. I believe the best systems will dominate the higher educational landscape in terms of degrees granted, in terms of intellectual contributions and scientific discoveries, in terms of access and affordability, and in terms of measurable and enduring benefit to their States and to society. Their impact will be profound. I continue to believe in the power of public universities and systems to provide access, opportunity, and promise of a bright future to communities across the State. In the case of our great university systems, this will require leadership, vision, and creating a *shared system-wide commitment*.

My recommendations for systems and their leaders? Decide on priorities the system can afford and realize. Commit to those priorities and watch for mission creep, program proliferation, administrative redundancy, and over-promising to the State. Understand, articulate, promote, and celebrate the individual missions and successes of each of the campuses. Foster and support *system citizenship*. Own your mission and help others to as well.



David V. Rosowsky is Professor of Engineering at the University of Vermont and served for six years as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. These personal reflections are based on 15 years of experience leading organizational and institutional change in higher education. Prior to joining UVM in 2013, he served as Dean of Engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and before that as Head of the Zachry Department of Civil Engineering at Texas A&M University. He previously held the A.P. and Florence Wiley Chair in Civil Engineering at Texas A&M University and the Richardson Chair in Wood Engineering and Mechanics at Oregon State University. He is a Fellow of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Structural Engineering Institute, and the Institute of Science, Technology, and Public Policy at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. In 2019, he was a Fellow and member of the inaugural cohort of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) Institute for Leadership and Governance in Higher Education.

Twitter: @DavidRosowsky

LinkedIn: David Rosowsky