

Annual Meeting of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)

**Comments for the Panel on University Systems:
How Can System CEOs Best Work with Campuses?**

*San Diego, California
November 15, 2004*

How can system CEOs best work with campuses? It seems that I have been waiting all my life to deliver comments in public on this subject.

I am an experienced citizen of systems. Excepting my four years on the faculty at Harvard, I have spent my entire 36-year professional career in two particular systems, and from time to time I have engaged with many, many folks in other systems. I do have views. The good news for you is that I will not try to convey all of them here.

It is well known to all who have ever worked in a system that tension and friction between system offices and campuses is endemic and frequently intense. There are lots of reasons, some structural and some personal. I believe that the friction can be minimized and the tension can be made constructive, if folks operating at the two levels can keep two ideas central to their actions.

First, I commend this point to CEOs of systems and to their top-level staff members:
Your system is not a university.

Clark Kerr was a brilliant leader of higher education, and his legacy is great; but this is a point on which he was mistaken. There might exist some abstract concept that would qualify as Kerr's "multiversity," but it is not nearly a university.

A university is a physical and human community. It cannot be separated from its place, nor can it be really broadened beyond its place. It works because of the countless individual, daily interactions among students, faculty, and staff who share a common culture and a common set of purposes within that space. It makes no more sense to gather Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSF into a single structure and to call them "one university" than to gather Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego together into a common political structure and to call them "one city."

Of course, there are reasons for placing a common political and legal structure, called "California," over the three cities that I have named, but that structure exists to accomplish things other than to supersede the local leadership of communities. In fact, a governor and other state-level leadership can succeed only by respecting the local needs, local culture, local imperatives, and local opportunities of their state's constituent communities.

It is the same in systems of higher education. The system is not a university; its members are the universities, not just campuses or components or stores.

Now I have a parallel, simple message for university CEOs and their top-level staff: *Your university is not the only important one in the state.*

It is no accident that the concept of the system arose in the period after the Second World War when there was great pressure to expand America's public resources for higher education. Apparatus was needed to project demand, to coordinate budgetary planning, and to construct and staff wholly new institutions. Legislatures and governors certainly were not going to do this job themselves, and it seemed natural to delegate it to leaders who were familiar with the nature and standards of the most successful public universities within the state.

In fact, systems have proven adept at enlarging the enterprise while maintaining good standards of academic consistency and performance. What has been achieved in the past five decades is one of the great educational success stories of all time. And this job is not over in quite a few states of this nation.

In all states where systems exist, there are several -- sometimes many -- public institutions of higher education. All of them are important to their communities and their regions, to their faculty and their staff, and to the students they serve. They have distinctive opportunities and needs, but all cannot realistically make their own cases annually or biennially to the legislature. The legislature will inevitably insist otherwise. A mechanism must exist for coordinating the missions and interests among institutions and for formulating and defending bundled requests for public funding. The public has a legitimate interest in the comprehensive efficiency and competence of the whole system of public higher education, and no single institution can address those interests on its own.

In other words, if systems did not exist, they would have to be invented. Grudgingly, I admit it.

And I urge my colleagues in university-level leadership to admit it, too. The system CEO and his or her staff have an important job to do, and they need your active help to get it done. It is in your interest that higher education be perceived as both essential to the public good and skilled at its mission. Your legislature, your governor, and other state leaders will obtain more of their impressions about these things from the work of your system leadership than from the efforts of you and your local colleagues.

So I repeat: Your university is not the only important one in the state. Just understanding and operating on this message can lead to respect for the mission that the system carries out on your behalf.

Most of the historic tension within systems is rooted in discrepancies between the ambitions of a single university and constraints imposed by a system's coordinating concept. In most circumstances, this tension is inevitable and healthy, but skill and good will are still needed to manage it. A good starting point for both sides is recognition of the two principles that I have discussed here.

I will stop at that for this occasion. Thank you all for listening.