

and even joined as partners themselves by paying to outfit several rooms at UW-Fox Valley as engineering labs. Check off a win “engineered” by the system for the companies, their employees, the regional economy, and the state taxpayers. Systems and their boards would do well to be on a constant hunt for these kinds of opportunities to demonstrate that they can nimbly transport educational programs from one institution and region in the state to others.

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

Many systems contain a variety of institutions within them. These institutions may have different admissions standards; degree offerings; financial aid availability; cooperative learning, service learning, and internship opportunities; peer tutoring arrangements; career placement operations; study-abroad programs; graduation requirements; and on and on. The advantage this variety holds for students is the individual’s ability to find the most appropriate “fit.”

In 1970, 6.3 million undergraduates attended American colleges and universities. The projection is that by 2018, that number will have risen to 17.5 million.

They arrive with a much wider set of backgrounds, expectations, and aspirations than ever before, and the United States has institutions with features ranging from open admissions to highly selective, large to small, residential to commuter, to meet their needs. That’s all to the good for the prospects of democracy.

The increasing number and diversity of our student population raises new questions of what constitutes a quality higher education for every one of them. Think of the definitions of quality among the 18-year-old residential freshman who wants to study history and immerse herself in the full undergraduate experience of four-year campus life; a 26-year-old with a high school diploma looking to earn an associate degree related to a job he wants in the electronic gaming industry; and a 38-year-old single, working mother who needs 21 more credits to complete a bachelor’s degree in business administration so she can move up into the supervisory ranks.

These three students want different things out of a higher education. They want and need to get to those different *ends* using a wider variety of *means* than higher education

has broadly offered in the past. These means now include such techniques as online delivery, “flipped” classrooms, blended learning, accelerated semesters, collaborative learning, competency-based education, and prior learning assessment. Some of these approaches can help hold down the *cost* to the institution of delivering the degree and the *price* of earning it paid by the student.

Various campuses in public college and uni-

versity systems can serve as test beds and demonstration sites for one or more of these techniques, if they are governed by a forward-looking board that encourages experimentation, demonstrates an appropriate level of risk tolerance for the inevitable failure of some ideas, and supports redirection. Boards with these qualities, in collaboration with their system and campus heads, can lead a redefinition of quality in American higher education that focuses more on positive outcomes for the many than richer inputs for the few.

CONCLUSION

As the new AGB report states, system offices have no campus, students, or alumni; conduct no research; and field no athletic teams. Because of their nature, systems and their governance are commonly misunderstood by the general public, if they are not off the radar altogether. What should the relationship of a public system board be to the public?

An elected official in Wisconsin once lectured the system board of regents that he wanted them *not* to be advocates for the university, but advocates for the taxpayers. Board members have a responsibility to be both, recognizing that current and past taxpayers have invested in the system with the intent that it remains strong so as to offer a brighter future for generations to come.

Independent-minded governance in the public interest, along with informed advocacy by system board members, will burnish the reputation of these unmatched engines of American democracy and progress. In the current vernacular, their trustees play a critically important part in making them too good to fail. ■

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T’SHIP LINK: Thomas Meredith, “Public University Systems: A Checklist for Success,” September/October 2014.

OTHER RESOURCES: “Consequential Board Governance in Public Higher Education Systems” (AGB, 2016). “2010 Public Institution and University System Financial Conditions Survey” (AGB, 2010). *Effective Governing Boards: A Guide for Members of Governing Boards of Public Colleges, Universities, and Systems* (AGB Press, 2010).

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