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Mission Differentiation vs. Mission Creep: Higher Education's Battle Between Creationism and Evolution

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Introduction

Legislators who work on higher education policy often face the unusually difficult but important task of helping to define the right mix of public institutions (and their requisite missions) to serve their state's interest. The difficulty arises because individual institutional interests, including those in a legislator's district, may not coincide with the best and most efficient interests of the state. The public purse can afford only so much of any public good, including higher education; thus, legislators must often balance the ambitions of "their" college or university against those of the state as a whole. Achieving this balance is critically important because higher education is an essential component in every states' agenda for progressing economic, social, and cultural vitality, and decisions by state legislatures about how to constitute the states' higher education system will help shape every state's future. Said slightly differently, mission is actually a finance issue and thus must be in sync with all other higher education finance policies – tuition, appropriations, and financial aid policies.

One policy effort often used to strike the right balance for this set of issues is captured by the term *mission differentiation*. Until recently, there was general

agreement on what *differentiating institutional missions* meant: that within the rubric of public higher education there would be an array of types of institutions, each with a

clearly designated mission, and a clear expectation that institutions would seek excellence but would do so within their designated mission. In recent history we have generally put institutions into three categories: community colleges, baccalaureate colleges or universities, and research universities. This model was either invented or solidified in 1964 in the California Master Plan, which adopted this tripartite approach to differentiating missions in California and led many other states to follow suit.

It became the modern way to define mission within the public system of higher education, with the system often organized to be overseen either by separate governing boards for each type of institution, by a coordinating board for the entire structure, or by some combination of both. To a great extent, this system has remained in force for the last half century, at least in terms of philosophy.

Prior to this intentionally differentiated system, however, American higher education had already established a hierarchy of institutions within the public sector. Most states had what would be considered a flagship research university, much as most do today. In addition, all states had a land grant college or university, established with federal assistance under the Morrill Act of 1862. States also had established a number of normal schools to prepare teachers, and some states and localities had established business and trade schools to prepare people

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with the specific skill sets required in the unique work environment of their state or city.

It is easy to understand, therefore, how our current concept of mission differentiation evolved from these less intentional but still differentiated sets of institutions.

The impetus for more intentionality in defining missions evolved because of the rapid growth in the demand for higher education, both from individuals who sought higher levels of education and from a racing economy that required the higher skill levels associated with college-educated workers. As demand for more better-educated individuals emerged, the less intentionally differentiated system simply no longer met the needs of society. The original research universities, which were the most prestigious institutions within the public higher education hierarchy, were not particularly interested in providing pedestrian programs for rather average folks. They were more accustomed to serving the best students, offering the most notable programs and services.

As a result public institutions with less prestigious missions sought to expand their missions to service a greater share of the demand. Normal schools, which existed solely to prepare teachers, became baccalaureate colleges. Baccalaureate colleges became a new type of institution known as the “comprehensive research university,” which focused on baccalaureate and graduate education but with only a modest research role.

Perhaps most significant, however, was the invention of the community college within the sphere of American higher education. Many community colleges evolved out of previous public trade and technical colleges. Others evolved as an expansion of locally controlled secondary schooling in the U.S., offering the first two years of general education toward the baccalaureate, culminating in an associate of arts or science degree, or up to two years of vocationally oriented education, ending in a certificate or applied associate degree.

As a result, over the past half century, public higher education in the U.S. expanded dramatically, mostly in an organized fashion, and in primarily two ways.

- ▶ First, many new institutions were created, with clearly defined missions.
- ▶ Second, the missions of many institutions were expanded, ostensibly to meet emerging needs,

both with respect to student demand and to respond to increasing demands for multiple types of institutions to serve their community’s economic development needs.

Why Mission Creeps

As mentioned above, one of the ways in which the increasing demand for higher education was met was by expanding the missions of institutions, a term that is often referred to as *mission creep*. In public policy circles, as with many other issues, two camps have evolved regarding the tendency for almost every institution to seek an expanded mission. There are those who believe *mission creep* resembles an invasive species; that is, it is evil, adapts readily to the environment, and expands voraciously, crowding out everything that is good. Others see *mission creep* as an inevitable and positive development that allows institutions to grow, consistent with the growing needs of their communities.

And as with most public policy disagreements, evidence from the past suggests there is merit to both perceptions.

Without doubt, institutional avarice, rather than state need, drives much of the interest of individual colleges and universities to broaden their mission. American higher education values a hierarchy of institutions, which thus entices institutions to wish to expand or redefine their mission to move up the hierarchy. College or university presidents want to make their institutions a better place under their leadership – and one of the most common ways in American higher education to become *better* is to climb up the hierarchy by changing the mission of the institution. The same can be said of the lay leadership of institutions – the governing board. Just like the president, they want the institution to improve under their watch, and one clear definition of improvement is expanded mission.

Forces outside the institution, however, also foster the expansion of mission, often with good cause. The communities served by an institution may be rapidly changing and need a broader array of services than reflected in the mission of their local college or university. Boise State University (BSU), for example, has expanded from a community college in the 1960s to a comprehensive university late in the last century to a major research university today, serving more students than any other

institution in Idaho and amassing a funded research portfolio nearly as robust as the state's flagship institution, the University of Idaho. Absent this growth at Boise State, it can be argued that Boise would not be the economically vibrant city that it is today. Understandably, the Boise community today is very appreciative of the expanded role, service, and prestige of Boise State. So, too, are the state legislators that represent the Boise community, many of whom helped justify and garner state support for this expanded mission over time.

Yet not all within Idaho have been ecstatic about the growth of Boise State's mission. Lost, for all practical purposes, has been the community college role and mission originally served by BSU – so much so that the state is now establishing a new

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community college in the region. Some wonder whether having two institutions do the job originally designated for one is the most efficient strategy for Idaho, while others argue that this is both the cost and advantage of

growth. And without doubt, the expanded mission at BSU has led to overlap in the mission with Idaho's other two research institutions. Some believe this redundancy is an unnecessary and costly duplication of effort, while others see it as fostering productive competition between these three institutions.

Again, one can build a legitimate case for either perspective, and the issue comes back to that difficult task of balancing the efficient use of limited public resources with the legitimate demands for growth in valued public services.

Part of the demand for mission creep also comes from forces essentially beyond the control of either the institution or state policymakers. The increasing requirements of professions or specific disciplines can force a change in mission. Currently, for example, a number of fields of study that have traditionally resulted in an applied associate's degree are beginning to migrate to the bachelor's degree. Such fields include fire and police science and a number of allied health fields. Traditionally, these programs have been provided at the community college level. As a result, some community colleges may have to expand their

mission regarding degree levels offered in order to maintain their mission with regard to preparing students in specific applied areas of study.

This is no less true at the four-year college and university level, where fields like pharmacy, nursing, and physical therapy have forced institutions into expanding their missions as these fields have required higher levels of degrees for those who work in them (sometimes legitimately but sometimes not). Similarly, some universities have been reluctant to offer applied baccalaureates, which they consider below their status; yet who is to offer these programs as they evolve and become desired within the workforce if institutions with the mission to do so refuse to accept their legitimacy? In such circumstances does a state make it clear that institutions that currently serve that mission must step up to the plate? Or does it let the missions of other institutions expand to bridge the gap?

The Consequence of Mission Creep

We see increasing pressure behind *mission creep* – community colleges seeking to become baccalaureate colleges, baccalaureate colleges seeking to become universities, modest universities seeking to become significant research universities, and research universities seeking to become “world class.” Expanding institutional missions, however, comes at significant cost, of which every legislator should be aware and should weigh against the prospective benefits of expanded mission. The costs of expansion are not hypothetical; they are real, as

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proved by the experiences of institutions whose missions have been expanded in recent history. As missions expand, therefore, tuitions must increase, institutional appropriations must increase, and the need for financial aid thus increases. More costs more.

When community colleges expand from offering associate degree programs to also offering baccalaureate degrees, two negative consequences

occur. As reflected in Table 1, the most obvious consequence is that the education at these institutions becomes more expensive, both to the state and to the students. Whether right or wrong, states provide substantially lower subsidies, per full-time equivalent student, to community colleges than they do to colleges and universities that offer higher levels of degrees. So it is axiomatic that increasing degree authorization will increase state support.

Table 1. Per-student Cost (Tuition and State Appropriations) at Various Types of Institutions of Higher Education

Type of Institution	Tuition	Appropriation/ FTE	Total
Community college	\$2,272	\$6,725	\$8,997
Four-year	5,836	9,178	16,014
Research university	5,836	14,289	20,125

The recent expansion of the role and mission of Utah Valley University (UVU) provides an example. Originally a trade school designed to serve returning G.I.s after World War II, it became a technical college in 1967 and a comprehensive community college 1987. In 1993, it was granted baccalaureate degree-granting authority and became Utah Valley State College (UVSC), and in 2008 was granted authority to offer degrees at the master’s level and became Utah Valley University. Without doubt, UVU is providing a much broader array of programs and services to its community and to Utah today than in the past, but it is also doing so at much greater cost. In 1987, when UVSC became a comprehensive community college, it operated on \$5,755 per student (total unrestricted funding in 2007 dollars). Twenty years later, in 2007, shortly before gaining university status, UVSC was operating on \$7,375 per student, a 28 percent increase over those two decades. And with the advent of its new university status, the state provided the new university with a \$10 million (20 percent) bonus in state appropriation.

A delayed but almost inevitable effect of expanding the mission of community colleges is the loss of focus on the original mission of serving students interested in securing vocational and technical certificates and applied associate degrees. Boise State University provides one example; Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., offers another. Fort Lewis is an exceptional state baccalaureate college in the

liberal arts tradition, recognized by *U.S. News and World Report*. Today, however, it would be virtually impossible to discern that this institution was once a community college with a traditional community college role and mission. No longer is this an “open admissions” institution, as it was as a community college. Today, it is reasonably selective in whom it accepts. No longer does the institution offer the associate’s degree, and certainly no terminal trades programs remain. Without doubt Fort Lewis College serves its community and Colorado well. But it does so in very different ways than it did as a community college, and many of its former services are no longer available to the local community.

Mission creep is even more expensive when an institution moves from college to university status because teaching loads are reduced substantially. Typically, the teaching load for a full-time faculty member at a baccalaureate teaching college is four or five courses per term, compared to two or three courses per term at a master’s-level teaching and research university and one or two courses per term at a research-intensive university. In exchange for the reduced teaching load, the state is ostensibly receiving a substantial increase in research scholarship, but it is doing so at substantial loss of teaching productivity.

Conclusion – Mission Creep Happens

Missions of institutions in your state will evolve. This will occur for a variety of reasons – some of which make sense for the institution but less sense for the state, others of which make sense for the state but less sense for the institution, and some of which make good sense for both the institution and state. Between 1995 and 2006 the number of research universities in the U.S. increased by 54, a 64 percent increase. This increase occurred primarily as a result of comprehensive universities expanding

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their mission to include a stronger research focus. During that same period, the number of comprehensive universities actually declined by 80. The number of baccalaureate institutions increased by 60, a 70 percent rise, as a number of previously two-year, associate-degree-granting institutions – mostly community colleges – expanded their mission to offering the baccalaureate (Table2).

Table 2. Changes in the Number of Institutions by Type (1995-2006)

Institution type	1995	2006	Percent change
Associate-degree	951	1,059	11%
Baccalaureate	86	146	70%
Comprehensive	341	261	-23%
Research	85	139	64%

The challenge for state legislators is to understand the tradeoffs involved – increased cost for increased service – and whether the balance between these makes sense, in terms of the public good that these institutions are charged to serve. States that are underinvested, compared to others, in research capacity may find it beneficial to establish additional research institutions. On the other hand, states that face a projected substantial increase in the demand for associate and baccalaureate degrees should beware of the greater cost incurred if those degrees must be granted in expensive comprehensive or research universities. Nevada, which is facing the most precipitous projected increase in high school graduates of any state over the next decade, recently created a new baccalaureate college, so the state will be able to absorb a large share of the increased demand at a relatively cost-effective institution, rather than at the state’s more expensive research-intensive universities.

Historically, balance has been achieved in state education policy through mission differentiation: defining clearly in state policy, practice, and financial support what the state believes institutions individually and the public system of higher education collectively should focus on in order to serve the state’s best interests. This concept remains as viable today as it has in the past, yet it needs to be taken as a guide rather than as a mandate. The late Harold Enarson, who served as WICHE’s executive director, as the president of Ohio State University, as a commissioner for the

Colorado Commission for Higher Education, and as a wise counselor to many in the policy community, once said that the job of good policymakers is not to define the future but rather to “discipline the inevitable.” Mission differentiation provides legislators with a strong tool to provide such discipline within their state system of higher education and still live comfortably with the inevitable outcome.

About the Author

David A. Longanecker is the president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in Boulder, Colorado. WICHE is a regional compact between 15 Western states created to assure access and excellence in higher education through collaboration and resource sharing among the higher education systems of the West. Previously, Longanecker served for six years as the assistant secretary for postsecondary education at the U.S. Department of Education. Prior to that, he was the state higher education executive officer (SHEEO) in Colorado and Minnesota. He was also the principal analyst for higher education for the Congressional Budget Office. Longanecker has served on numerous boards and commissions. He has written extensively on a range of higher education issues. His primary interests in higher education are: access, promoting student and institutional performance, teacher education, finance, the efficient use of educational technologies, and academic collaboration in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. He holds an Ed.D. from Stanford University, an M.A. in student personnel work from the George Washington University, and a B.A. in sociology from Washington State University.

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