Key Elements of a State Master Plan in Higher Education

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Key Elements of a State Master Plan in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
A master plan in higher education is developed to address the academic and workforce needs of a particular state. The master plan helps serve as the roadmap for implementation of proposed strategies to reach state goals in education and degree attainment. In Tennessee, Drive to 55 is a state-wide effort to increase the number of Tennesseans with a higher education credential to 55% by the year 2025. In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the key elements within state master plans, an independent review of ten state plans was conducted. The states involved in the analysis were Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, New York, Colorado, Arkansas, Nevada, Louisiana, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The informal review revealed four key elements of state master plans in higher education: accessibility, affordability, accountability, and success. A consensus to reach underserved, underrepresented, or nontraditional students could be found among all ten states. Increasing accessibility to higher education can help abridge achievement gaps and eliminate disparities. Through responsible planning, management of resources, and assistance of those with demonstrated financial need, a quality higher education degree or credential that is affordable could be obtained. Accountability is measured in various ways by the ten states; however, clear expectations for performance are needed to ensure student success and positive institutional outcomes are experienced. A key element of success was noted to be college readiness and characteristics of students including determination and grit. Nine out of the ten states reviewed had some form of performance-based funding measures in place; providing incentives for institutions to help students successfully complete degree programs.

Key Elements of a State Master Plan in Higher Education
A Master Plan in Higher Education is developed to address the academic and workforce needs of a particular state. In Tennessee, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) is tasked with Master Plan development with involvement from both the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and the University Of Tennessee Board Of Trustees. Together, these organizations look to the future of higher education in the nation and in the state. The Master Plan helps serve as the roadmap for implementation of the proposed strategies. President Obama has a goal that the United States will produce the highest percentage of college graduates by the year 2020. The Lumina Foundation, which is an independent and privately endowed organization, has a similar initiative: Goal 2025. This project is an effort to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates, or credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025 (Strategic Plan, 2013). Tennessee has its own initiative: Drive to 55, which is a state-wide effort to increase the number of Tennesseans with a higher education credential to 55% by the year 2025.

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the key elements within state master plans, an independent review of ten state plans was conducted. The states involved in the analysis were Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, New York, Colorado, Arkansas, Nevada, Louisiana, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The evaluation yielded multiple commonalities among and between states, a few unique findings based on state demographics/characteristics, potential trends for the future, and an assessment of metrics or how outcomes are measured. This review is not exhaustive. However, it may help guide those who are interested in the future of higher education; a future that may include an independent university governing board.
Key Element 1: Accessibility

Access to higher education is access to opportunity. By making post-secondary education more readily available, states can make the benefits of success obtainable for all (SCHEV, 2014). Entry into college can serve as a gate-way to opportunity and future economic/academic suc-cess (NYSED, 2013). Multiple master plans in higher education discuss accessibility as a key element in order to achieve the overarching education goals of the state. While the strategies for accomplishing increased acces-sibility may vary, the “who” of accessibility efforts are made quite clear. A consensus to reach underserved, un-derrepresented, or nontraditional students can be found among Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, New York, Colorado, Arkansas, Connecticut, Louisiana, Nevada, and Massachusetts. Though nearly all high school gradu-ates are targeted by higher education institutions through recruitment initiatives, many desire to institute a state-wide culture of college going in various subpopulations (THEC, 2015). These populations include low income students/families, academically underprepared students, adult learners, first generation college students, minority students, military veterans, geographically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students transfer-ning from other institutions.

In order to access these students and provide the appropri-ate information and resources, entry into higher education institutions, states have developed several outreach initia-tives. For some states, including Tennessee, increasing ac-cess for the aforementioned underserved students is built into the funding formula. Outreach often begins at the elementary and secondary level; working with students and families in PK-12 education to prepare them both academically and financially for the future (SCHEV, 2014). Adult learners are a targeted subpopulation that could have a dramatic impact on the economic and civic well-being of the state. These individuals demand additional flexibility, support, and guidance (THEC, 2015). Adults often have families of their own and work full-time, which makes pursuing higher education a difficult task. One way that adults can have increased accessibility to higher education is through online learning and online courses often allow adult stu-dents flexibility in scheduling their classes because they can work when it is convenient for them and they do not have to depend on reliable transportation to and from classes.

Technology does not come without obstacles for this population of students. Online courses can be more ex-pensive than their on-ground counterparts making affor-dability a concern. Technology requires a certain level of literacy that non-adult digital adults may not possess. Online learning also requires access to broadband inter- net connectivity that may not be available in certain ru-nal areas. This access can cost up to $1000 per annum per student (LBR, 2012). With all the challenges that can surface with state initiatives concerning online offerings, the flexibility and options of distance learning become a more vital element in both quality and scale (Agarwal, 2015). Increasing accessibility to higher education for both traditional and non-traditional students can help increase or main-tain enrollment for institutions of higher education. Technical or programmatic changes or pathways often the initial point of access into higher education and thus should not be taken for granted (LBR, 2012). States wanting to increase the num-ber of individuals in the state with degrees, certificates, or credentials expect this will take place over the spectrum of institution levels.

Taking prior learning into consideration, whether it stems from post-secondary colleges or from on-the-job training, can increase student progress. Credential attainment and hence serve as an incentive. Accelerated programs of study may also entice adult learners; decreasing the time to degree completion may be less daunting. States also need to be aware of demographic changes in regard to accessibility efforts. Age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability to pay should not be the deciding fac-tors in higher education accessibility (SCHEV, 2014). By increasing accessibility to underserved populations, achievement gaps could be abridged and disparities elimi-nated (MDHE, 2016). Making higher education more accessible has the potential to communicate the value in obtaining a post-secondary credential and create a cycle of students investing in higher education (SCHEV, 2014). Accessibility is intricately tied to another key element in master plans: affordability. Increasing accessibility allows institutions to serve more students and to better serve the community, but it is only one part or one goal of strategic master planning.

Key Element 2: Affordability

Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, was quoted as saying, “The degree students truly can’t afford is the one they don’t complete, or that employers don’t value” (blog.ed.gov). In reviewing master plans from various states, affordability surfaces as a major concern. There is a gap between college costs that students and their families are asked to pay and what they can actually afford (Sullivan, Mackie, Massey, & Sinha, 2012). Initiatives are in place to help limit the students’ need to borrow money for higher education and potentially graduate debt-free. The cost of higher education does not just reside in tuition and fees (NYSED, 2013). Changes in a student’s home and/or family life have the potential to disrupt his or her financial status and therefore ability to pay and subsequently pro-gress towards degree completion. These changes affect par-ticipation in degree progressions. The cap on the number of credits accessible in a given year and the way in which a meaningful degree is then hindered. Financial aid becomes the only viable option.

Eligibility for financial aid can begin as early as high school which is why states have made it a point to target the population that can be prepared for higher education through a student’s own pace during the final years of secondary education concerning how to apply for finan-cial aid, how to prepare and implement a budget in col-lege, or even to further the means of preparing students for this important transition. Financial aid counseling and informational guides are others. Underprepared students sometimes begin the process in a stressful manner in the application aid, especially when the scholarship/award is merit-based (PCHE-CT, 2015).

Leaders in Nevada believe the state cannot afford a grow-ing lifelong dependence on social services and corrections. Access to and the ability to afford higher education based on income and available financial aid is a focus of their master plan. Connecticut believes in the concept of “earn and learn”. Through work-based learning and paid intern-ships, students can gain real-world soft-skills, work experi-ence, and lessen financial pressures. This tactic could be viewed as maximizing efficiency without sacrificing qual-ity, all while allowing any student loan debt accrued to be more manageable after graduation (ADHE, 2015). Ten-nessee and Virginia both incorporate transfer pathways for traditional, non-traditional, and returning students. These pathways often include common pre-major courses so that a student can potentially pursue higher education anywhere in the state without “starting from scratch” and having to pay for additional courses. Students can also begin with certificate programs and progress towards an associate or bachelor’s degree while working which would result in greater affordability for students and taxpayers alike (PCHE-CT, 2015).

State funding/appropriations have trended down in recent years which for some institutions have caused an increase in tuition. States like Colorado and Arkansas believe that a adequate resource allocation can improve college affordability. Aligning resources from PK-12 to colleges and universi-ties in an attempt to meet the same goals could provide resources needed to pursue higher education. Tennessee receives state appropriations through an out-comes-based funding formula, which has the potential to increase the accountability and productivity of an insti-tution. Initiatives such as Tennessee Promise and Drive to 55 are making an effort to render higher education a more feasible option for individuals in the state. Lottery scholarships in Arkansas and various other states are help-ing to support students whether the award is merit-based or need-based. Affordability is an important consider-ation in the ability of students to enroll in and complete higher education. The investment on the front end could lead to an impact on the quality of life and standard of liv-ing post-investment (ADHE, 2015). Through responsible planning and management of resources and assistance for those with demonstrated financial need, a quality higher education degree or credential that is affordable could be obtained.

Key Element 3: Accountability

Accountability can be defined as ensuring state and in-stitutional goals are met in which the goals are to be attained are usually included as well. For instance 2825 is the proposed “due date” to meet Tennessee’s educational attainment goals. Govern-ment and high school students are responsible for setting goals in which the goals are to be attained are usually included as well. For instance 2825 is the proposed “due date” to meet Tennessee’s educational attainment goals. Govern-ment and higher education institutions are responsible for setting goals and monitoring progress towards them. Tennessee is held accountable through quality-assurance funding and a productivity oriented outcomes-based funding formula. Multiple stu-dent focus populations are incorporated into this model of funding model and may be altered based on changing demographics. Accountability is also measured through the use of job placement standards. Virginia would like boards are responsible for setting goals and monitor-ing progress towards them. Tennessee is held accountable 

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Key Element 4: Success

Success can be defined in numerous ways. In Nevada, stu-
dent success is equated to institutional success. In Ten-
sessee, success is defined as progression, degree comple-
tion, followed by employment of the graduate. In Arkansas, success is when students have reached their educational goals. Additionally, persistence, retention, on-time comple-
tion, the acquisition of knowledge and skills as reflect-
ed in licensure or certification, have been identified as key indicators of success for students and higher educa-
tion institutions. To optimize student success for college, work, and life one must be adequately prepared (SCHEV, 2014). Career opportunities for success is the first step followed by the actual commitment and eventual achieve-
ment. Connecticut would like to establish a statewide definition of college or career readiness (CCR). New York and various other states use the common core curriculum as a means to prepare the state's students for college. High quality instruction and assessment at both the secondary and post-secondary level could decrease the average time to credential attainment by decreasing or eliminating time invested in remediation (NYSED, 2013). By lessen-
ing the need for non-credit bearing courses, success can be achieved at less cost (affordability) to the student and achieved in less time (NSHE, 2010).

Student transfer, as a student exiting one institution to complete a degree/credential at another institution, is now used as a means to measure success in multiple states. At one time this practice was often viewed as a loss in re-
tention, but when policy and practice can align, student success regardless of location is an accomplishment for all stakeholders (THEC, 2015). Several states including Ar-
kansas, Colorado, and Nevada believe the reallocation of resources to increasing student support services will aid in the success of students. In some institutions in Nevada, students are charged an academic success fee which can be used for tutoring, mentoring, and extended availability of advising. One aspect of student success that should be focused on is fiscal responsibility and providing financial literacy guidance (WVHEPC, 2013). Of the ten Master Plans reviewed, seven states currently have performance-based funding (PBF) in place at two and four year higher education institutions, one has PBF at two year institu-
tions, one state instituting PBF, and one state does not use this model. Performance-based funding provides incentives for institutions to help students successfully complete degree programs (NCSL, 2015). An educated population can aid in the economic growth of a state (NYSED, 2013). A culture of lifelong learning can im-
pact the state’s civic, social, cultural, and economic future (NYSED, 2013). An educated and diverse workplace allow-
gs for global competiveness (CCCHE, 2012). States agree that students who display certain characteristics have a greater tendency to succeed. Those traits include: time management skills, problem-solving ability, persistence, resiliency, a sense of responsibility, grit, determination, communication skills, planning, and goal-setting.

Outcomes and Metrics

Quality domains in higher education often include inputs (student and faculty characteristics), processes or experi-
ences, and outcomes (Chaffee, 2014). Higher education metrics for measuring success and ensuring accountabil-
ity fall within the processes or experiences domain. In the book, Improving Productivity and Accountability in Higher Education (2012), the following are noted as being com-
monly used performing metrics: graduation rates, com-
pletion/enrollment ratio, time to degree, costs per credit/ degree, and student/faculty ratio. Degree completion or graduate rates were explicitly mentioned within the state master plans of MA, CO, LA, and NV. This met-
ric was implicitly mentioned within the other plans reviewed under the umbrella of "student success." Time to degree is a frequently used metric of performance and many insti-
tutions adopt the 150% (6 year) graduation rate goal (CCCHE, 2012). However, decreasing the time to degree will ultimately decrease the overall costs of obtaining the degree (PCHET, 2015). Colorado specifically would like to increase productivity and therefore decrease the cost of degrees produced in the state. College participa-
tion and progression are metrics used in MA, TN, LA, and NV. Workforce alignment and development and job placement are mentioned within master plans in MA, TN, and LA. Additional unique metrics include research productivity/innovation, number of students graduating from high school in the state, college readiness, retention, transfer rates, and decreasing remedial education at the post-secondary level. Whether the state has performance or outcomes-based funding is also a commonality among institutions. Outcomes are essentially student-learning based and may include professional examination pass rates, critical thinking ability, graduate satisfaction, and employment placement. Fain (2012) reports that unilter-
ated comparisons of certain outcomes or metrics can be misleading because they do not take into account the in-
coming characteristics of students.

Conclusion

This informal review revealed four key elements of state master plans in higher education: accessibility, affordabil-
ity, accountability, and success. In regard to accessibility, subsets of students are often targeted to increase enroll-
ment and degree completion. These students include low income, academically underprepared, adult learners, first generation students, minority students, military veter-
ans, and students with disabilities. Strategies for making higher education more affordable involve financial aid, scholarships, financial planning and counseling, intern-
ships, “earn and learn” opportunities, transfer pathways between institutions, and efficient resource allocation. Accountability is essentially meeting preset goals. Greater accountability can be sought through quality-assurance or performance-based funding. Measuring outcomes such as attrition, retention, and job placement rates are a few tactics that surfaced during the ten state master plan re-
views. Success is determined in various ways. Some of the student/ institutional success measures consisted of college or career readiness, degree progression, persistence, and completion, employment, knowledge/skill acquisition, licensure/certification pass rates, transfer pathways, and instilling the importance of lifelong learning. Metrics are used to indicate whether success has been accomplished and if accountability can be confirmed. Table 1 includes state characteristics in regard to performance-based fund-
ing.

Table 1

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