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 accessi- bility 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 enrollment initiatives, many states are striving 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- ring from other institutions.

In order to access these students and provide the appropri- ate information from entrance into higher education institutions, states have developed several outreach initia- tives. For some states, including Tennessee, increasing ac- cess to 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 well (SCHEV, 2014). Beginning at this stage could help alleviate some of the challenges associated with academically underpre- pared students’ ability to access higher education for both traditional, non-traditional, and returning students. 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. Accessibility 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 of those with demonstrated financial need, a quality higher education degree or credential that is affordable could be obtained.

Key Element 2: Affordability

Secretory 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, Massy, & 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 prog- ress towards degree completion. These changes affect par- ticipation in and completion of educational programs. The access to graduation in a timely manner with 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 students that can be progressed through at 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, and how to further means of preparing students for this important transition. Financial aid counseling and informational guides are others. Underprepared students sometimes fall between the cracks in regard to financial 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- ship opportunities, students can develop 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 certicate programs and progress toward an associate or bachelor’s degree while working which could result in greater affordability for students and taxpayers alike (PCHE-CT, 2015).

State funding/appropriations have trended in recent years which for some institutions have caused an increase in tuition. States like Colorado and Arkansas believe that the student 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 affordable options to pursue a 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 institu- tion. 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. Accessibility 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 of 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 focus populations are incorporated into this type of planning and management of resources and assistance of those with demonstrated financial need, a quality higher education degree or credential that is affordable could be obtained.

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Key Elements of a State Master Plan in Higher Education
and investment. New York’s master plan stated the need for common metrics and accountability in regard to stu-
dent outcomes and accessibility. Colorado acknowledges that incentives for performance can improve account-
ability. Measures of accountability in CO include high
quality educational services, efficiency, decreasing attri-
tion, increasing retention, post-graduation success, and a
reasonable time to credential. However, accountability is measured, one thing is certain. Clear ex-
pectations for performance are needed to ensure student
success and positive institutional outcomes are experi-
enced.

Key Element 4: Success

Success can be defined in numerous ways. In Nevada, stu-
dent success is equated to institutional success. In Tennes-
see, success is defined as progression, degree completion,
followed by employment of the graduate. In Arkansas,
success is when students have reached their educational
goals. Additionally, persistence, retention, on-time com-
pletion, the acquisition of knowledge and skills as reflect-
ed in licensure or certification exams 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). Creating opportunity for success is the first step
followed by the actual commitment and eventual achieve-
ment. Connecticut would like to establish a statewide de-
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 in 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 seen 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-
kanas, 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
advisors. One aspect of student success that should be fo-
cused 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 institution to PBF, and one state does not
use this model. Performance-based funding provides in-
centives 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 al-
most as the new workplace of the future.

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 Higher Education: How Can We Know
(Chaffee, 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 implicit 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
(CCHE, 2012). However, decreasing the time to degree
will ultimately decrease the overall costs of obtaining the
degree (PCHE-CT, 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 unfill-
tered 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, affordability,
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
strategic/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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE-BASED FUNDING STATES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>2 year institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NV</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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