



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
LEADERSHIP & POLICY

SELF ASSESSMENT

Increasing the Effectiveness of Postsecondary Coordination

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A Companion to “On Balance: Lessons in Effective Coordination from the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges – An Organizational Perspective”

A Framework for Understanding Effectiveness

Public organizations charged with coordinating higher education institutions face a complex set of tasks. Whether coordinating institutions within one sector or across sectors, such organizations play vital roles in promoting a state’s capacity for policy leadership to meet the growing need for an educated citizenry. National experts have emphasized that effective policy capacity requires coordinating entities that can articulate mission and goals, devise strategies for meeting them, and use resources, including relationships with state leaders, to influence policy. Our case study subject, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, was selected because of its track record of focusing a diverse constituency on a valuable public mission and using its resources strategically to facilitate large-scale policy changes aimed at making progress toward the mission. Its effectiveness rests in large part on its continual attention to relationships in order to mediate and balance the needs of various state and local parties.

For states interested in improving existing coordinating organizations or designing new ones, we suggest that an assessment of the current context can illuminate possibilities for improvement. Multiple factors interact to create forward momentum and can be leveraged in myriad ways. Thus, the self assessment questions are designed so states can more clearly understand the factors at play in their own situations and more strategically evaluate short-term and long-term opportunities.

The most critical component in evaluation is honesty. No coordination effort will work if the context is not well understood. Accepting the existing starting point will lead to much better outcomes than attempting to coordinate within a “wished for” context. Over time, of course, better options may become available, but for today you must work with what you have.

Recognizing the different circumstances across states, the self assessment questions do not presume a “right” answer, although clearly there will be circumstances where one condition would be preferable to another. Nothing is beyond improvement; some states will just have a considerably longer road to travel.

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The self-assessment questions fall into three categories: the state political and economic context, the design of the coordinating body itself, and the organization and leadership strategies used by the coordinating body. These factors are generalized from the Washington experience. They do not reflect an exhaustive review of the research or experiences of other states.

1. State political and economic context. The political culture of a state shapes expectations about the role of government, the degree of centralization of power, the level of legislative oversight, the function of interest groups – expectations that affect how postsecondary education operates. These cultural aspects of state contexts change slowly if at all. Economic aspects of a state’s context may change somewhat more readily as industries shrink and grow and state fiscal circumstances improve or worsen. Differing economic situations will place different demands on higher education institutions. Those seeking to improve postsecondary coordination must understand the constraints and opportunities presented by their own prevailing state contexts.

2. Institutional design. Coordinating bodies have specific formal governance structures and rules, usually created by statute. These can be changed, given sufficient time and political will, and many states are making or considering such changes. States should be aware of (a) how well institutional design, and the formal powers it bestows, matches public expectations about basic distributions of powers and functions and (b) the implications of institutional design for the kinds of funding, people and relationships needed to make it work.

3. Organization and leadership strategies. The leaders of coordinating entities must devise strategies for success while understanding the constraints imposed by the existing political and economic culture and the institution’s design. The best design can be wasted, or undermined, by poor leadership and poor choice of strategies. Conversely, gifted leadership can overcome serious deficits in formal power. Unless the formal design is so flawed that even gifted leaders can’t make it work, attending to organizational leadership offers more and shorter-term opportunities to increase effectiveness of the coordinating function.

The following questions are intended to help individuals in other states, or those working with other states, understand what opportunities may exist to improve the coordination function. We organize the questions by the three-part framework of state context, institutional design, and organizational leadership to make it clear at what level these potential change agents might need to focus their attention.

How to Interpret the Self-assessment Results

The instrument is not designed to produce a quantifiable score but rather, to get users to think about the relative strengths and weaknesses, or the assets and deficits, that are facing a state with regard to postsecondary coordination. It is akin to an environmental scan in traditional strategic planning. Rather than identifying a “wished for” context, one must begin with what exists.

It will be important for users of the self-assessment to think in terms of assets and deficits both within and across the three “buckets” of state context, institutional design, and organizational leadership. Changes in some areas may be more attainable than in others and improvements in one area might be able to compensate for deficits in others. The findings are highly state-specific and there are no right answers. But it is important for those invested in the coordination function for a specific state to take a holistic view across the three categories. For example, institutional design features that work well in a state with a highly collaborative political culture, like Washington, may not work well in states with hyper-partisan political cultures or with faculty unions that are more active in state-level policy than is the case in Washington.

Users of the self-assessment should look for opportunities to address identified deficits. It may be possible, for example, to influence state contextual factors by mobilizing populations that have not been sufficiently engaged, perhaps by demonstrating links between postsecondary issues and other high-priority issues or by communicating problems in more meaningful ways. Another possibility is to consider some temporary, ad hoc structures to work around identified deficits in the short term while longer-term solutions are developed. Effective coordination is difficult – hence the genesis of this case study subject. The self-assessment is intended to illuminate possibilities for improvement – even as it will likely point to some daunting challenges.

We caution users that the strategies that emerge from this assessment may well require a long view of the change process and associated patience. Those working in government often experience that policy change occurs at a snail’s pace. The same may be said of organizational change. Legitimate, meaning widely accepted, change takes a long time to take effect. Keeping an eye on the long-term objectives will be important, as the pace of change can be slow and distractions numerous.

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Key Questions for a State's Self-assessment

State Context

This set of questions begins by inquiring broadly about the economy of the state, the political culture, and the degree of oversight that characterizes the power relationships between state government and postsecondary institutions, including the coordinating entity. Much of this will be simply background information as these features are not likely to change, but they are a critical part of the background understanding. Responses to these questions should clarify the extent and level of state involvement in postsecondary education and whether authority is concentrated with the governor, the legislature, or passed on to a coordinating entity (CE).

1. What are the basic drivers of the state's economy? Have those been relatively stable over time?
2. Generally speaking, are policy and fiscal matters traditionally handled locally or at the state level; i.e., is the accepted locus of decision making largely centralized or decentralized?
3. Are state laws generally adopted in a broad frame with details left to the agency or local level to work out or are they highly detailed and specific?
4. Is the political atmosphere highly polarized around partisan lines? If so, has higher education become part of the politically partisan debate?
5. Does the governor traditionally play a strong institutional role in influencing the postsecondary system?
6. Is the postsecondary culture one of competition or collaboration among institutions?
7. To what extent do local colleges compete against each other in the legislative arena, either via the college representatives or via local legislators?
8. What level of oversight do lawmakers typically provide to the existing CE?
9. To what extent is the CE expected to centralize priorities, operating procedures, programs, and policies across the constituent institutions? Are expectations geared towards an articulated state vision or local differentiation?

Institutional Design

Institutional design, or formal governance structure, likely reflects state culture to a great extent. Therefore, it is important to consider answers to the previous section when assessing institutional design. For those states that have an existing coordinating entity, reviewing the design elements will be helpful for understanding the authority that the board has been granted. For others it may suggest alternatives for their state. Major topics for consideration here include the statutory basis of governing bodies, the scope of authority over fiscal and policy decisions, and relationships to other education entities. These questions should help clarify whether the CE has sufficient authority to match its charge and the expectations for its performance. Different combinations of these design components offer different opportunities for effective coordination but some options may be constrained by state context.

10. What is the scope of the stated mission and purpose of the CE? Is it comprehensive or more narrowly prescribed? What does the scope of the mission imply for relationships with other educational institutions?
11. Does the statutory basis of the governing board facilitate implementation of a coherent statewide agenda?
12. Is the CE role primarily designed as a regulator or a facilitator of constituent institutions? Do the assigned tasks reflect the role?
13. How is funding distributed from the state to colleges? Does the CE have a meaningful role in determining distributions or is it a pre-determined formula approach?
14. How much control does the CE have over the use of system resources? Can it meaningfully influence the use of institutional resources in pursuit of systemwide priorities? To what extent is resource use pre-determined by legislative or gubernatorial mandates?
15. What is the mix of state and local revenues for the system? How does this mix affect the ability of the CE to build a cohesive agenda?
16. To what extent is the CE dependent on other educational agencies to fully achieve its mission?
17. How much control does the coordinating entity have over hiring its own staff?
18. What is the role of local trustees? Are they elected? Appointed?

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Organizational Leadership

Once the context and design elements are understood, a CE can begin to better understand the type of coordination role it might most effectively play. For some states coordination is effectively achieved by helping myriad local entities stay relatively united at the policy level while respecting the local differences. Other states may find that extensive control is vested (historically and/or in statute) in the legislature and thus legislative relations might take center stage in the management of relationships and setting of organizational strategies. The critical component for this section is seeking alignment of the CE with the authority, expectations, and resources at its disposal. For any state, the principal leadership challenge is to set the organization on a path to fulfill its mission. Important elements in this section include mission clarity, cultivation of support from key constituencies, and development of a staff with the requisite skills to meet the mission.

19. How actively does the CE seek to identify a mission of value, focus on it, and communicate clearly about the mission?
20. Does the CE board appropriately apportion its time between strategy/policy oversight versus rulemaking given its mission?
21. Does the CE staff appropriately apportion its time between strategy/policy oversight versus rulemaking given its mission?
22. Does CE leadership exercise its leadership so as to earn or keep the appropriate level of confidence from lawmakers?
23. Are external constituencies identified? Are working relationships cultivated?
24. How well does the assignment of roles and responsibilities to CE staff align with the expectations of state lawmakers for the degree of centralization of the system?
25. How well does the assignment of roles and responsibilities to CE staff align with what college leaders expect and will be comfortable with?
26. Do senior CE staff have appropriate professional backgrounds to work effectively with colleges and lawmakers, as appropriate to their assignments and expectations of the CE?
 - a. Do governmental relations staff understand the culture of the capital?
 - b. Do budget staff understand the legislative appropriations process and campus fiscal management?
 - c. Do educational program and policy staff understand the campus culture?
27. Does the CE and do the colleges have a well-coordinated approach to dealing with outside constituencies, such as business and labor?
28. Does the director have the interpersonal skills to understand and balance state and local perspectives, including working effectively with internal and external constituencies?
29. Is there good information flow within and across the CE and the colleges?
30. Are local trustees utilized to help express system priorities to the public and to lawmakers?
31. Does the CE have sufficient data capacity to understand systemwide performance in relation to state and local needs?

Putting the Pieces Together

Once you have considered the above questions you will begin assessing what the combination of factors means for your state. As a starting point in putting the pieces together, we suggest considering these two questions:

1. Does the CE's institutional design, (i.e., the formal structure and powers) match the expectation by state lawmakers for the mission and functioning of the CE?
2. Does the capacity of the CE organization, (i.e., leadership, staffing, relationships) allow the CE to discharge its formal mission and duties?

The range of possible combinations of answers to these questions is boundless and there is no one best set of answers. We believe that thoughtful consideration of these questions can help those engaged in working to improve postsecondary coordination better understand the relevant context, the value of core design, and ways to align organizational operations with expectations.



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