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The Public-Good Variable

Can Public Engagement Boost State Support for Higher Education?

By David J. Weerts

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While the percentage of support supplied by state coffers has exponentially declined... it is still the case that public institutions need public support. That support is more easily attained and sustained if the general citizenry, especially those in public policy positions, such as governors and legislators, believe the universities in question make substantial societal contributions.

—Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor, State University System of New York

Over the past two decades, as state support for higher education has continued its downward slide, several commissions, declarations, and association reports have called on colleges and universities to be more productively engaged with state and regional needs. An underlying subtext of these reports is that the future of state support for higher education hinges on the willingness and ability of colleges to be active partners in transforming communities. But given the complexity of the higher education funding puzzle, is this really true?

Many factors figure into the funding equation. Evidence suggests that higher education financing at the state level is mediated by a state's unique historical, economic, demographic, and political context. Several studies have shown that funding is also strongly linked to a state's economic health and the relative priority of such competing needs as health care, corrections, and K-12 education (Kane, Orzag, & Gunter, 2003; Jenny & Arbak, 2004; Toutkoushian & Hollis, 1998; Rizzo, 2006; White & Crane, 2015).

Individual campuses also live within a larger postsecondary education ecosystem that tethers their fortunes to those of other system institutions. Add to this a political environment in which partisanship, legislative professionalism, and other political factors influence state support for higher education (McLendon, Hearn, & Mokher, 2009; Tandberg, 2008).

So commissions, declarations, and association admonitions notwithstanding, campus leaders may question whether a concerted engagement strategy could bolster state support amid these seemingly overwhelming macro factors.

To answer that question, I conducted a longitudinal study of how public engagement—defined by the Carnegie classification as reciprocity and mutual benefit with community partners (NERCHE, 2015)—might relate to levels of state appropriations for an institution. My strategy was to control for state economic health, partisanship, demographic trends, and other relevant variables.

A colleague and I analyzed state- and campus-level data from a twenty-year period and developed a model to understand the variations in state funding for institutions across and within states. We identified outlier institutions that received higher- or lower-than-predicted levels of state appropriations between 1984 and 2004 (Weerts & Ronca, 2012).

These outliers were determined by predicting levels of support for individual campuses based on state-level economic, political, and demographic variables—as well as campus-level variables, such as Carnegie classification, known to impact state appropriations for a particular institution. Outliers were those campuses that were not well predicted by the model, receiving either higher- or lower-than-expected support based on what our model predicted.

Then, with Spencer Foundation support, I went on to examine how practices and perceptions of public engagement might be understood among six outlier campuses that varied in their expected levels of state support during this

In Short

- Research institutions with higher-than-expected levels of state appropriations tend to be located in urban, politically powerful districts where community-engagement opportunities are prevalent.
- Such institutions have missions that are less research intensive; strong leaders who attend to community interests; and campus cultures that emphasize reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships with community and industry partners.
- Campuses with lower-than-predicted levels of state support tend to frame their outreach activities in more traditional ways (such as technology transfer and citizen preparation), have more intense research missions, and be located in remote areas.
- Leaders committed to engagement may be able to leverage their campuses' unique missions, locations, and institutional cultures to bolster state support for their campuses.

period (Weerts, 2014). To ensure an “apples-to-apples” comparison, I examined only public research universities that fell into these outlier groups.

I visited archives and interviewed campus lobbyists, staff from boards of trustees, governance-system executives, state legislators, budget officers, and gubernatorial representatives who could speak about a 20-year history. My goal was not to prove whether engagement caused dips or gains in support for a campus but how it fits within the larger state-funding equation.

What I learned from the case studies is that public engagement does indeed play a role in relation to state support for these campuses. But to make sense of the engagement-funding relationship, one must understand an institution’s unique location, mission, history, and place in the state’s larger political context. Higher education leaders who recognize these factors can consider how engagement relates to their own campus identity and state-relations strategy.

The following are key findings from the study and what they might mean for campus leaders.

ENGAGEMENT AS A COMPETITIVE STRATEGY

The most revealing finding from the study is that institutions that received higher-than-expected levels of support during the 20-year period often employed engagement as a competitive strategy to differentiate themselves from their sister institutions. In two of the cases, institutions had savvy, long-standing leaders who carefully crafted a vision and an integrated plan to serve the needs of local industries and emerging regional economies.

These leaders drew heavily on their local contexts, collaborating with business leaders and politicians to develop campus priorities. One interviewee referred to his campus as an “interactive university” that “joins with business and the general community, as well as high technology, and the arts and humanities.”

For example, one university focused strategically on the fields of plastics engineering and nanotechnology—areas that mirrored the interests of political and industrial leaders in the region. Another extended its reach into the arts community, working with non-profit partners to enhance cultural opportunities within the city.

At the other end of the spectrum, engagement as competitive strategy was less evident at institutions that received

lower-than-expected levels of state appropriations. Campuses in this category were less likely to be deeply embedded in their communities and were viewed by legislators and others as less central to the economic health of their regions.

Some were limited in their ability to build robust engagement agendas due to their location, mission, and history. These factors influence the extent to which engagement might be leveraged to bolster support for a particular institution.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A distinguishing factor among outlier institutions was geography. Institutions garnering higher-than-expected appropriations were located in urban, politically powerful districts where engagement opportunities were abundant and easily brokered. Some attracted significant media coverage of their efforts to promote regional social and economic progress.

Location also affected institutional power: Campuses in politically powerful districts built coalitions to support their engagement strategies and in some instances engaged power brokers in creating a long-term vision for the institution. For example, one campus leader created a presidential advisory board that drew on the perspectives of influential state and industry leaders to set an agenda for his institution.

Location related as well to the prospect of assembling a strong cross-sector coalition to support the institution. Institutions in the lower-than-expected category were located in remote, semi-rural areas with fewer community-engagement opportunities. Some leaders lamented that their institutions “didn’t get credit” for the work they did in the state or region, simply because they were not as close to the action as their urban-centered counterparts.

Political and industry leaders were more likely to connect with the centrally located, urban campuses simply because they were “easy to get to.” One leader of a campus that got lower-than-expected support complained that her institution—located in the “geographical and political boondocks”—had significant difficulty getting the attention of state and industry leaders.

KNOW THY MISSION, HISTORY, AND CAMPUS CULTURE

Favorable geography alone does not ensure that engagement can be leveraged to bolster state support for an institution, however. Rather, the values of reciprocity and mutual benefit must be embedded in the campus culture. This was most evident in examining the institutional mission and history of each campus.

A common element of campuses receiving higher-than-expected appropriations is that they were regional research universities with less-intensive research missions than sister, often flagship, institutions. In some cases, universities could successfully leverage their *non*-flagship status to advance their engagement agenda. Their flexibility allowed them to engage directly with their local communities. Holland (2005) suggests that faculty at such institutions are more likely to be rewarded for this work in the tenure and promotion processes.

Institutions garnering higher-than-expected appropriations were located in urban, politically powerful districts.

A university's history also informs the way institutional actors carry out their engagement agendas and how those agendas are interpreted externally and internally. History and mission can be leveraged in unexpected ways to advance engagement as a competitive strategy. For example, one institution's long-standing leadership and deep roots in its city created a platform for elevated levels of regional collaboration, giving it a head start in securing its niche as an engaged institution.

Meanwhile, another institution's *lack* of history allowed campus leaders to create a culture of engagement and garner political support for its work. This campus lacked a clear identity and strong core of traditional faculty, opening the door for an ambitious, politically savvy president to push community engagement with limited opposition. One campus leader explained:

Without any base of support, we married ourselves to the larger community. [The university] could be shaped into anything you wanted. It was incredibly unformed. We could do things. In many ways we didn't pay attention to the established faculty. We couldn't have done that any place else.

Campuses in the lower-than-expected group faced organizational-culture barriers that impeded engagement. One was a land-grant institution that was largely viewed among interviewees as less committed to reciprocity with its community. Land-grant institutions have endured substantial criticism as being out of touch, unresponsive, unfocused, and largely one-way in their approach to interacting with communities (Kellogg Commission, 1999). The land-grant campus examined in this study seemed to struggle with this image.

Meanwhile, the other two campuses in the lower-than-expected group were more elite institutions with engagement perspectives similar to those of private liberal arts colleges. A legislator and alumnus of one of these institutions commented that this campus had "been left to languish in its eighteenth-century view of the world."

CAMPUS IDENTITY: THE INSTITUTION'S PUBLIC-GOOD NARRATIVE

Underlying all of these elements is an institution's "public-good" story and how it is told and understood internally and externally. Internally, campus actors look to their institutional mission, history, culture, and campus setting to make sense of how they should interact with communities.

Outside stakeholders form images about the institution based on its past engagement with the community. They interpret the signals that campus leaders send to community leaders about the institution's commitment to this work. Together, these internal and external cues create a shared narrative about the institution's public-good identity.

Differences in these narratives were important in distinguishing between higher or lower-than-expected funding outcomes. All of the higher-than-expected campuses were seen as supporting "boots-on-the-ground" work with their

communities, which mirrored the Carnegie community-engagement classification (NERCHE, 2015). Campus actors and external stakeholders shared the view that community engagement was embedded in the ethos and core functions of these institutions.

In fact, the charter for one such institution emanated from a public demand for a community-focused institution accessible to students who were not admitted to neighboring elite, private colleges. During this institution's 20th anniversary year, a prominent media outlet ran a story declaring that "the university has demonstrated repeatedly that it seeks to mesh education with the needs of the community."

In short, institutions in the higher-than-expected support category fostered a consistent culture and image of being dedicated to the economic and social health of their communities. On the other side of the ledger, institutions in the lower-than-expected category had cultivated less place-bound narratives about their role in their communities and society at large. They were also less likely to emphasize reciprocity and mutual benefit.

For example, a land-grant institution in the sample was known for its historic roles in cooperative extension, outreach, and technology transfer. But these activities were largely perceived as being one-way: The university was seen as delivering expertise to the public rather than fostering reciprocal relationships.

Lower-than-expected-support institutions that more closely resembled private colleges carefully crafted public-good "brands" consistent with their image as "public ivies." These campuses described their public roles as "developing civic leaders to contribute to society." Campus leaders focused their efforts on developing undergraduate leaders through citizen-scholar programs, service-learning curricula, and volunteer opportunities rather than creating robust partnerships with community groups to address regional problems.

The study suggested that engagement "branding" was targeted at audiences tied to specific sources of revenue. Less selective, urban-based regional research universities relied relatively heavily on state appropriations as a significant percentage of their budgets. They projected a strongly place-based public-good narrative focused on serving state and regional interests. Theirs was a story of robust partnerships and community transformation.

History and mission can be leveraged in unexpected ways to advance engagement as a competitive strategy.

Public ivies, on the other hand, relied less on state funding in their overall resource portfolios. They positioned their public-good messages more to attract tuition dollars and private support than to garner state dollars.

This was especially evident among the selective public institutions that competed with private universities. As relative levels of state support for higher education declined, these institutions found a strategic advantage in focusing on civic learning, leadership, and volunteerism—values that resonated with their unique niche of students, parents, alumni, and donors.

Meanwhile, land-grant institutions were more likely to emphasize technology transfer and the ways in which their research contributes to society. Like the public ivies, in their messaging they placed themselves less in their immediate locations and more in a more national and international context.

SYSTEM GOVERNANCE: FRIEND OR FOE?

A leader's ability to attract state support through engagement may ultimately come down to the place of his or her campus within the state-wide governance system. It was quickly evident in this study that campuses with greater levels of autonomy and independence leveraged engagement to leap ahead of other campuses as a budget priority.

For example, in one state known for the independent nature of its colleges and universities and its weak state-wide coordinating body, a shrewd leader within a higher-than-predicted-support campus took advantage of his freedom to build political coalitions that advanced the mutual interest of his campus and region. Interviewees agreed that the weakness of the higher education coordinating authority enabled this leader to enlarge his campus budget while other state institutions were cut.

One respondent referred to higher education governance at the time as “a free-for-all” in which “you kind of came up with a program and you presented that to the governor and then the legislature, and if they liked it, they funded it.” It seems that engagement is appealing to legislators, and in the absence of significant barriers, it may propel a campus to the top of the class.

My study's findings, consistent with those of Tandberg (2013), were that campuses under coordinating boards may

be more successful in garnering state support than those in consolidated systems, because their relative autonomy enables them to lobby their district representatives directly rather than funnel requests through a centralized system. There were also indications that under politicized consolidated systems, institutions may have a similar opportunity. Finally, it was obvious in the study that some campus ambitions have been thwarted and others rewarded due to leadership turnover, board restructuring, and other factors.

The main take-away is that strategically minded campus leaders should consider how their campuses fit within larger political ecosystems and understand how they can leverage autonomy, political clout, and engagement to gain increased state support.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CAMPUS LEADERS

So are the higher education commissions, declarations, and reports correct in suggesting that public engagement may boost state appropriations for colleges and universities? The results of my study suggest that the answer is, “Yes, under certain circumstances.”

The following set of questions may help campus leaders think about engagement in relation to their overall state-relations strategy. If they can respond affirmatively to the following questions, they may have the opportunity to leverage engagement as a competitive strategy to bolster state appropriations.

- Is the campus located in a politically powerful district where engagement opportunities are prevalent and easily brokered?
- Does the institution's mission and culture support public engagement? Is it woven into the fabric of teaching, research, and service?
- Are campus leaders equipped to position the institution internally and externally as an engaged institution?
- Does the state-wide governance or coordinating environment provide autonomy and/or a favorable political climate for the development of an engagement niche?
- Is the institution's public-good story likely to attract support from state policymakers? Is it focused on reciprocity and mutual benefit for community transformation?

In 1996, C. Peter Magrath declared that

public universities must be financially stable and enjoy public confidence in order to perform their vital mission as the intellectual and educational service centers for America in the 21st century. But to earn this support, they must examine themselves . . . and then change and reform to better serve society.

This study echoes Magrath's call and aims to help college and university leaders understand the role that engagement can play in securing a better future for their institutions—but more importantly, for the larger public good. ☐

Strategically minded campus leaders should consider how their campuses fit within larger political ecosystems.



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