

# The West Virginia Experience

## Creating a sustainable public agenda for higher education

By Brian Noland

**T**HE DIVERSE INSTITUTIONS that comprise the American system of higher education are currently operating in an extremely volatile policy environment marked by shrinking state support for operations, rising tuition costs, fluctuating commitments to financial aid, and constant institutional efforts to garner essential resources while concurrently reducing operating costs. While these pressures are unrelenting, the demands on higher education to serve the multiple missions of teaching, research and service have amplified as states increasingly turn to universities to serve as drivers of innovation and economic development. These pressures are inflated by the growing state and federal focus on productivity, college completion, and heightened calls for accountability.

As institutions struggle to adapt and respond to these uncertainties, policy leaders have urged states to establish a public agenda for higher education that is focused on developing clear and consistent policy mechanisms whereby institutions work strategically to meet statewide, rather than institutional, goals. At the core of this call to action is the need for institutions to work in a coordinated manner to meet the nation's growing demands for higher education. Concerns over this need have been amplified by the declining position of

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the United States as a world leader in human capital production. Consequently, critics argue that higher education must re-evaluate and modify its mission so that it meets the educational, economic and workforce demands of the nation. Unless institutions are accountable to these changing demands, many fear that they will lose legitimacy and relevance in the face of an evolving educational

marketplace in which the for-profit sector is actively creating and expanding market opportunities.

While there is an understanding and appreciation of the need for states to forge a public agenda for postsecondary education, there has been scant attention paid to how states actually develop, implement and sustain an environment that engages institutions in finding solutions to these broad public

policy challenges. The remainder of this essay will focus on actions taken by policymakers in West Virginia to establish a public agenda. While the policy experience is unique to the state, it contains a variety of elements common across state systems of higher education.

### Creating a Public Agenda— The West Virginia Experience

In 2006 the state's coordinating body, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, began a strategic planning process that resulted in the creation of "Charting the Future: A Master Plan for West

Virginia Higher Education." Built upon civic, corporate and community partnerships, "Charting the Future" outlined the state's public agenda for higher education and focused on addressing critical policy challenges facing West Virginia such as: leaks in the education pipeline, the loss of knowledge workers, blurring institutional missions, increased student debt, and changing job market demands. Concurrently, the state synchronized master planning with the creation of an incentive-based funding formula and the development of new accountability metrics for postsecondary education. Together, these provided the basis for West Virginia's public agenda and served to frame the conversation about the role of institutions across the system in addressing statewide goals.

The public agenda in West Virginia is predicated on the recognition that the democratic and economic viability of the state rests on educating more underrepresented (e.g., first-generation, low-income, rural) students. West Virginia is among those states with the lowest levels of postsecondary educational attainment and the highest number of underrepresented students. U.S. Census data demonstrate that West Virginia has the lowest percentage of adults with a bachelor's degree in the country, ranks 48th with respect to the percentage of people ages 25 to 34 with an associate's degree or higher, and has the sixth highest percentage of citizens living below the poverty line. A recent study by labor economist Anthony Carnevale estimates that the state will need to produce at least 20,000 more residents with postsecondary credentials by 2018. To reach the more aggressive goal set by Lumina Foundation for Education, 60 percent degree attainment across the United States, West Virginia would need to increase the number of adults with postsecondary credentials by approximately 400,000.

Consequently, one of the initial steps undertaken to ensure that higher education is accessible to all West Virginians was to develop partnerships with legislative and executive leaders



to reframe and restructure the state's complement of financial aid programs. West Virginia has historically demonstrated a strong commitment to financial aid; the state ranks fifth nationally according to a recent NASGAAP survey of grant aid per full-time equivalent student. While the state has a rich complement of need- and merit-based aid programs, it faced mounting cost and demand pressures at the onset of the master planning process that placed the sustainability of the largest aid programs in jeopardy. Given the integral role of financial aid as a support structure for the public agenda, higher education leaders worked vigorously with elected officials to restructure these programs and protect and promote the goals of student access and affordability. Faced with escalating cost pressures in the merit-based financial aid program—the PROMISE scholarship—higher education led a series of reform efforts that restructured the program, yielding both additional funding and programmatic stability, thereby negating the annual need to raise academic eligibility standards to maintain budget solvency.

By forging a partnership with legislative leadership, higher education was able to build support for the programmatic goals of PROMISE, as well as the need for increased funding to support the public agenda. As a result, over the course of five consecutive legislative sessions significant annual improvements have been made to the state's financial aid programs, with more than \$20 million in new revenues appropriated to support student access and affordability. Furthermore, during the 2011 legislative session, additional need-based aid funding was provided to offset potential declines in the federal Pell grant program.

Once these structural changes were made to the aid programs, the next step in the implementation of the access goals of the public agenda was the simplification of the college application process. In order to ensure that students and families were aware of financial aid opportunities, the state launched and intensively marketed a one-stop web-portal that provided information on planning, applying and paying for college. Modeled after a similar effort in North Carolina, the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) was launched in October 2009. Funded through a seed grant from the legislature, CFWV enables middle school students, high school students and adults to explore college and career options, apply to college, and find financial aid.

In addition to the traditional students who enroll in college after high school, policy attention was also given to the 173,000 adults in the state with some college but no degree. In conjunction with institutional leaders and Shepherd University President Suzanne

Shipley, chair of the system's Council of Presidents, the RBA Today initiative was launched. Through direct marketing of the program to adults who had completed 60 or more hours of credit but did not complete their degree, RBA Today (which enhances the state's existing Regents Bachelor of Arts program) has provided a flexible and accelerated degree alternative that supports the broad public agenda goal of diversifying the state's workforce.

In addition to the items noted above, the system has been active in its pursuit of federal and external grant opportunities. Rather than piecemeal federal programs such as GEAR UP and the College Access Challenge Grant, the state worked to coordinate activities under a unified planning structure via the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's Division of Student Success and P-20 initiatives. In concert with institution staff, the commission has deepened its outreach efforts to underserved communities and strengthened its policy relationships with our P-20 partners.

The second area of emphasis within the state's public agenda focused on cost and affordability. Like many states, West Virginia has struggled to protect affordability in an era of fluid state support. Over the past two decades, the landscape of funding for higher education has been characterized by rising costs, shrinking public appropriations, and an increased hostility to the tuition increases that inevitably follow. With a systemic budget malaise that often prevented policymakers from looking beyond short-term solutions to long-term problems, policymakers yearned for more effective education and fiscal policy. This tension was ultimately mitigated with the passage of Senate Bill 595 in 2008, which called for higher education to develop and implement the finance and accountability goals inherent within "Charting the Future." This legislation cemented the partnership between the legislature and higher education, as both entities worked in concert to develop policies that contained incentives linked to the goals of the public agenda such as college completion, degree production, and increasing the enrollment rates of adult students.

As a result of these efforts, higher education was better positioned to provide the legislature with a series of data-driven benchmarks to assess performance, as well as to articulate the need for sustained investments to promote the competitive health of the system. The creation of a unified finance policy clarified the inherent link between state support and student-generated revenues and demonstrated that, absent state appropriations, fee increases may be needed to protect the core components of the public agenda. Such increases were avoided in the short term as the system was able to successfully negotiate with the governor and legislative leaders a multi-year commitment to hold higher education harmless from budget reductions, in return for concurrently freezing tuition and fees for the 2010-11 academic year.

The third area of emphasis within the state's public agenda is the focus on student learning and accountability. A key part of our focus in this area has been to deepen the alignment across both the secondary and postsecondary levels of our education system. Such P-20 efforts are centered upon curricula alignment, early identification of college readiness, early remediation of academic deficiencies while students are enrolled in high school, and enhanced professional development via faculty exchanges. To support these objectives, the commission developed a series of report cards for parents, students, policymakers and the general public that demonstrate the quality and performance of public higher education. These reports address numerous accountability indicators such as academic preparation, participation, affordability, educational outcomes, and staffing. Much of this work formed the foundation of the state's participation in Complete College

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America, the SREB college completion initiative, and former Governor Joe Manchin's Complete to Compete initiative as chair of the National Governors Association. Under Manchin's leadership, significant focus was placed on college completion, a policy realm that is a particularly large challenge for West Virginia, where the systemwide six-year college completion rate is below 50 percent. In order to bring attention to the issue and develop a clear plan for addressing it moving forward, higher education leaders have developed a systemwide taskforce that cuts across institutions and brings together business and university leaders, faculty members, K-12 representatives, and students to identify barriers to completion and develop plans for achieving the state's goals.

The final area of the state's public agenda, economic growth and innovation, strikes to the core of the changing expectations placed on our nation's system of postsecondary institutions. As noted in a broad array of articles published by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, the success of institutions will be determined by the extent to which they serve as drivers of economic expansion, job creation and human capital development. In order to remain competitive in an increasingly diverse global marketplace, institutions must strive to utilize the creative capacities of their faculty to drive innovation, research and service to our communities.

As part of West Virginia's efforts to implement the economic imperatives of the public agenda, presidents from across the system worked in concert with members of their respective governing boards to highlight the importance of investing in applied science and research to stimulate economic growth and job creation. Over a four year period, \$60 million in state funding was secured for research via the Eminent Scholars Recruitment and Enhancement initiative and the "Bucks for Brains" Research Trust Fund. Each of the programs requires institutional matches of state funds, thereby doubling the impact of the initial state investments. Targeted toward the state's two research institutions, Marshall University and West Virginia University, these programs have assisted institutions in their efforts to recruit scholars with demonstrated research competitiveness in specialties that build on their core research strengths.

In addition to these efforts, the commission, in conjunction with the Battelle Memorial Institute, is working to redevelop the West Virginia Education, Research and Technology Park, which served as the former international headquarters of the Union Carbide Corporation. The Park serves as the backbone of the state's growing economic and community development efforts and provides a venue through which the resources of the institutions can be brought to bear in a collaborative manner with regional industries to create new economy businesses in West Virginia.

### **Contextual Issues—Impacting Policy Outcomes**

One of the items central to the development of the public agenda in West Virginia was the establishment of a shared commitment among legislative, executive and external constituencies for the goals of the public agenda. As the plan evolved in West Virginia, members of institutional governing boards also became integral partners in the process. Key legislation was passed in 2009 which required the professional

development of board members as a condition of service, provided an impetus for partnerships across institutions, and brought the influential voices of the boards into the policy discourse. Through the annual Board of Governors summit, system leaders in conjunction with the staff of the Association of Governing Boards brought attention to critical elements of the public agenda, such as completion and cost efficiencies, as well as a deeper sense of board responsibilities beyond the confines of the individual institutions. The importance of boards as active partners in this policy journey cannot be overstated.

Despite the challenges facing West Virginia, a higher education policy strategy focused on critical areas of need and cooperation with other agencies has helped improve the outlook for the future of the state. The state has been fortunate to have economic stability in a time of severe national fiscal constraint, but the challenges other states are facing has brought a keen awareness on the part of higher education leaders and state policymakers to be proactive about setting policy and program strategies. In the end, the success of the public agenda in West Virginia can be traced to the fact that the state developed a plan, worked the plan, and strategically aligned policy and legislative initiatives to implement the plan. From small actions such as adjusting the agenda of board meetings to align with the goals of the plan, to linking staff performance reviews so that individual performance connected to planning outcomes, the state has placed an unwavering focus on the goals of the public agenda.

### **Conclusions**

The paradox of American higher education is that while the pressures on academe to serve as both the great social equalizer and a vehicle for economic development have increased, the economic commitment provided to the corpus has decreased. In many states, funding for higher education has declined significantly as a result of the Great Recession, a trend that will only grow more troubling in the years to come. Current economic pressures are forcing institutions to redefine their missions and become more efficient in the delivery of their services. While the demands on higher education are increasing, the economic capacity to handle these demands is decreasing.

The decades of shifting the funding responsibility away from state appropriations and toward students' resources have not been the result of a well planned or thoughtful policy discourse. Given the critical role that higher education plays as a facilitator of human capital development, policymakers must remain attentive to the diverse needs of all students requesting access to postsecondary education. Unless careful and deliberative attention is given to the establishment of a public agenda for higher education that builds consensus and support for its broad goals, the academy will continue to suffer a loss of support in the American polity. ♦

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Brian Noland is chancellor of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

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