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## Why a system? Understanding the costs and benefits of joining together – Column

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The ubiquitous discussions about reforming higher education rarely address or even acknowledge the single most prominent feature on the organizational landscape: the university system. In fact, one of the best-kept secrets in American higher education is that nearly half of our college students are educated in colleges and universities that belong to systems. It is essential, therefore, that we understand well the costs and benefits of such systems. It is important, particularly in this era of financial constraints, that we exploit their strengths to help achieve the best results possible with the resources available.

What is the value of organizing universities into "intercollegiate federations" or "educational holding companies"?

The answer to that question is complicated by the fact that no two of the nation's university systems are identical. They exist in such bewildering organizational variety that it's hard even to define what constitutes a system and what does not. But if we accept as a defining characteristic of the system that it consists of two or more institutions with a single governing board and a single chief executive officer who is not also CEO of one of the constituent institutions, then there are 52 such systems in 38 states. While all are public, the systems range from those resembling a single university with branch campuses to loose confederations of virtually autonomous institutions bound together by little more than shared apprehension about what their governing boards might do next.

Why am I convinced that university systems offer advantages that extend far beyond mere organizational tidiness? My reasons are based on my experience as a student, faculty member, campus head, and system head; on my conversations with many colleagues, including fellow members of a "stealth association" known (or, perhaps, little-known) as

the National Association of System Heads; and on my continuing efforts to understand and explain a relatively new type of organization that is both critically important and widely misunderstood.

My primary example is the 13-institution University of Maryland System (UMS) because it falls somewhere in the middle of the "centralization spectrum" and because I am familiar with it. This system is also relatively young, having been established in 1988, and therefore exhibits many of the interesting, if occasionally melodramatic, stresses and identity crises characteristic of adolescent creatures. The UMS is not unique, I believe, but shares some fundamental features with other systems. The following five features provide an important starting point for better understanding--and judging--the effectiveness of systems.

Synergy. Linking universities and research institutions together in a system might be considered the educational analog of connecting integrated circuit chips to create supercomputers or telephone networks. By itself, each chip is a fascinating and technologically useful assemblage of transistors, resistors, and capacitors. Properly connected, however, a group of chips can perform wonders. Similarly, in a university system there is enormous potential for enhancing, even transforming, the performance of individual institutions through coordinated effort. This synergy has particular significance for the students and the states we serve. For students, it means greatly enhanced opportunities for coursework (either on-site or through interactive video networks), for research experience (in laboratories at sister institutions), and for support services (through such mechanisms as integrated library systems). For the states, it means the ability to tap easily into the combined brainpower of multiple institutions to address economic, environmental, health care, and other public service needs. One example of such synergy is the joint effort by 11 institutions in the University of Maryland System to improve elementary and secondary education in math and science, which was recently supported by a \$6 million grant from the National Science Foundation.

Strategy. Closely allied to a system's synergistic value is its strategic value. By setting common goals, assigning complementary roles to the constituent institutions, and coordinating tactics, system members can more

successfully meet their individual objectives than if they operate at cross-purposes. Fund raising provides a useful illustration of how valuable strategic, systemwide effort can be. A coordinated approach to philanthropic prospects is likely to yield better results for each institution than a free-for-all assault on donors. The UMS experience, for instance, offers compelling evidence: a coordinated campaign has resulted in a tripling of private support for the system's institutions.

Systemwide strategies are also an important element in academic planning. Again using the UMS example, we have begun reducing redundant academic program offerings throughout our system in order to reinvest United resources in high-priority areas. We are currently either eliminating or reconfiguring well over 100 programs, a monumental streamlining that never would have occurred among autonomous institutions. The result will be a family of institutions with more sharply focused missions in a system with an expanded capacity to meet its clientele's needs.

Efficiency. Although it may be self-evident that a system of institutions functioning coherently can be more efficient than those same institutions operating independently, realizing this potential is not easy. It is about as likely that a group of autonomous institutions will spontaneously take concerted action as it is that a pile of lumber will spontaneously form a house. The Second Law of Organizational Thermodynamics has not been repealed. Realizing a system's potential for efficiency requires creative design and decisive leadership capable of overcoming the strong centrifugal forces that characterize most systems.

System efficiency and institutional autonomy are often seen as antithetical. Most member institutions in a system aspire to offer a full array of administrative services, for example, even if that means replicating many times over a function that might be performed by a single unit for multiple campuses. In the UMS, we are exploring the possibility of creating common service centers for administrative operations such as procurement, human resource management, and environmental health and safety. We believe these centers can not only reduce costs but also improve the quality of service, without inevitably expanding centralized bureaucracy.

Accountability. For higher education in general--and public higher education in particular--"accountability" is the watchword for the '90s. Legislators, taxpayers, tuition payers, federal funding agencies, and donors are all demanding that we be responsive and responsible in our use of the resources they provide to us. Some would argue that systems are, because of their size and complexity, intrinsically less accountable than freestanding institutions. It is true that where bureaucracy widens the gap between consumer and provider, accountability often diminishes. However, systems do not, in and of themselves, create such a gap. On the contrary, effective systems can facilitate strong client relations. In addition, the system structure can help ensure that accountability does not stop at the campus walls. While individual institutions attend to their particular clienteles, the system leadership can make sure that the needs of the state as a whole are being met.

The key to accountability is making sure that responsibility and authority are linked at the appropriate level within the organization. As chancellor of the University of Maryland System, I do not determine the specific tuition or enrollment levels for each constituent institution. I do, however, recommend to the Board of Regents tuition and enrollment targets and policies designed to ensure broad access to our programs for citizens throughout Maryland.

Integrity. Like Janus, the central administration for a university system must keep watch both internally and externally. The internal watch ensures accountability, while the external watch ensures institutional integrity. It is the responsibility of the system leadership to head off undue and inappropriate intrusion into the operations of the member institutions. The system structure creates an important and rarely appreciated line of defense against efforts that might compromise institutional integrity--whether from a legislature intent on dictating curricula, an executive branch seeking to influence appointments, a corporation trying to circumvent procurement processes, or irate citizens demanding curbs on academic freedom. Shielding the institutions from such assaults so they can flourish may be a system head's most important task; it is certainly the most thankless.

Synergy, strategy, efficiency, accountability, and integrity--these are the objectives to which systems should be dedicated and against which they should be judged. These are, broadly speaking, the areas in which the system model can "add value" to the educational enterprise. Unfortunately, systems are often designed and evaluated based on unrealistic expectations and parochial interests. Some expect too much of university systems: the system structure will not, for example, automatically eliminate academic turf battles or elevate the reputations of the member institutions. Some expect too little: a system is only worth having if it is greater than the sum of its parts and if it provides enhanced service to its clientele.

American higher education is noted for its quality and for its organizational diversity. There is, I believe, a direct correlation between the two. Therefore, I am not an advocate of increasing the already high "market share" that public university systems have achieved. Instead of more or bigger systems, we need better systems--and we can only make them better if there is broad agreement on their functions and goals and on the proper criteria for evaluating them.

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