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Collaboration, Not Competition

March 14, 2014

By [Nancy L. Zimpher](#)

We've got plenty of data to support the value of a college degree, but the value of higher education systems -- in contrast to single institutions both private and public -- more often lies in the eye of the beholder.

That is certainly the case in "[Are Systems Bad for Flagships?](#)" -- a recent essay in this space arguing that state-operated systems are harmful to "the health of public flagship universities and to the states and regions they serve."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The authors of the column have asked the wrong question, and in doing so, presented readers with an outdated, myopic perspective of higher education today. Rather than pitting campuses against systems, we should be asking, and many of us in the field *are* asking, "What can public higher education do to better collectively serve our students and our states?"

After all, that's what public colleges and universities were created to do. And we continue to uphold these basic virtues by increasing access to advanced learning, preparing students for successful careers, expanding research and innovation, engaging with communities to address critical societal needs, and, increasingly, driving economic development. Systems are especially valuable, as they are best suited to coordinate these efforts on behalf of a network of institutions, discouraging excess competition among campuses for resources, and preventing any unnecessary duplication of both effort and cost.

The insinuation that flagship campuses are more capable or entitled than their counterparts is simply not true. Ironically, the book cited in the last week's column, [Higher Education Systems 3.0](#), explores how systems can be transformed to meet today's needs, making a convincing case for the fact that systems are more important than ever in terms of using collective impact to address society's greatest challenges at a scale.

Unfortunately, the essay's authors have cherry-picked from the book's contents in order to support an apparent bias for the otherwise failing notion of flagships, leaving readers with a fraction of the full story.

For example, the column quotes this book excerpt from Jason Lane: "In many ways, systems have become very functional, but not very strategic. They have become bureaucracies, not leaders, conduits for communication, not agenda setters." Lane's argument, though, is cut short, and the column casts his statement and others as a criticism of systems, rather than a call for modernization as it was intended.

The full story is this. Currently, there are 49 multicampus systems operating in 37 states, according to the National Association of System Heads. The institutions within these systems served approximately 30 percent of all postsecondary enrollments in the U.S., and nearly 75 percent of all students attending four-year public colleges and universities.

Major research universities, or what we can presume the column authors view as flagships, are part of these systems too, and they are critical contributors to our economies and our communities. That much is unquestionably true.

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But they are not going it alone, nor do they possess the capacity to do so. The roles of community colleges, comprehensive four-year universities, and others are just as vital to educating and employing citizens as well as creating jobs, driving the economy, generating research, and supporting community growth. These institutions – all traditionally represented within systems – may not have the heft or prestige of a flagship, but that does not discount their value.

In fact, the strategic placement of diverse campuses alongside one another within a system represents higher education in its most effective form. Systems that are actively sharing resources, collaborating on degree programs, working with employers to tailor their offerings to work force needs, and strategically deploying assets across the system to bolster communities and economies are better-equipped to serve their shared stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, communities, and businesses – than any one institution alone.

Such systems have, in other words, successfully moved from a thousand points of light to concentrated engines of coordinated, coherent interventions to support and drive change. That is collective impact and, as SUNY and others nationally are proving, it is our sector's only way forward.

A few pages from SUNY's playbook exemplify this. We are expanding access, increasing completion, and ensuring success for all students by working with our partners in K-12 and within communities to strengthen the educational pipeline, from cradle to career.

Our faculty are working side-by-side with Fortune 500 companies and local businesses to expand cooperative education opportunities for students so that, come graduation, they are the most qualified candidates for jobs in their field.

We are building our research and innovation infrastructure with networks of excellence that bring together SUNY scientists – students and faculty alike – with industry experts and national labs, so that our best ideas have every advantage in the commercialization process.

And an unprecedented partnership with Governor Andrew Cuomo and state legislative leaders has led to the designation of SUNY campuses as 10-year tax-free zones for new businesses.

These achievements are all a result of a focus on collaboration – not competition – among New York's public universities and our partners across the state. Promulgating the concept that flagship campuses are owed some kind of privileged treatment is counterproductive to the progress our sector has made toward having a greater collective impact on our students and our states.

BIO

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