

On the Durability of The Master Plan in the 21st Century, or
“If it’s breaking, why isn’t anyone fixing it?”

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February, 2004

Introduction

In September, 2002 the Center for California Studies at California State University, Sacramento hosted a conference called “Envisioning a State of Learning: Moving California’s Master Plan for Higher Education into the 21st Century.” We planned this conference to examine whether the Master Plan for Higher Education, which was hailed in 1960 as an enlightened and visionary strategy for the challenges of its time, is still viable today given all that has changed since then. The issues raised at the conference gave considerable cause for concern about the capacity of entrenched governance approaches to deal with contemporary problems. For example, we learned, among other things, that:

- California has no plan for accommodating the enrollment growth that constitutes “Tidal Wave II”;
- the Master Plan fosters more attention to maintaining distinctions among the segments than to cooperation among them that would better serve students;
- the transfer process between community colleges and four-year universities is cumbersome and problematic for students;
- statewide coordination of higher education is inadequate;
- alignment between K-12 and higher education is poor;
- unacceptable differences in educational achievement persist across ethnic/racial groups;
- accountability for the outcomes of higher education is largely absent; and
- the California Master Plan is no longer seen as a model for higher education governance in many states and countries.

It should not be surprising that the structures put in place in 1960 are overwhelmed by today’s issues. The requirements of a higher education enterprise are fundamentally different today. In 1960 our public colleges and universities served a small and homogeneous portion of the young adult population. Today’s public colleges and universities must serve a large and diverse population of students whose demographic characteristics and attendance patterns are profoundly different than in 1960. And they must do so within a more competitive environment – both with respect to other postsecondary institutions and other demands on public resources. The political will and public dollar that funded the Master Plan expansion of the 1960s and 1970s are not as plentiful for today’s higher education challenges.

What is surprising, however, is that most of the problems and most of the criticisms of the Master Plan that were voiced at our conference have been heard consistently for 30 years. So, rather than ask whether the changes of the last 40 years have strained the Master Plan beyond its capacity, the more salient question facing Californians who worry about the ability of the state to effectively educate its people is:

Why has the original Master Plan for Higher Education successfully withstood repeated challenges to its assumptions and values as the world around it has changed fundamentally, and what kinds of threshold changes will be required in order for a new approach to higher education planning to take hold?

Before I present my theory of the Master Plan's durability, let me illustrate the concerns that have been raised over the years. Let me also observe that the fundamental feature of the Master Plan was the formalization of three separate segments of higher education (University of California, the state colleges – now the California State University, and the California Community Colleges) with carefully differentiated missions and admissions criteria. Eligibility was limited to the top 1/8 and top 1/3 of high school class rank for UC and CSU, respectively, and for the community colleges to “all who could benefit.” This structure was envisioned as an efficient means to accomplish the fundamental commitment of access to all who could benefit.

The Master Plan envisioned that the community colleges would provide the first two years of baccalaureate education to the majority of college-bound students and therefore required the four-year institutions to reduce their proportions of lower division students and increase the proportion of upper division transfers from the community colleges. Based on 15-year enrollment growth projections, the Master Plan “redirected” an estimated 50,000 lower division students from the four-year institutions to the community colleges with the promise of transfer. The Master Plan assigned the UC exclusive right to award the doctorate and other professional degrees and gave CSU the authority to award baccalaureate and masters degrees. CSU could award the doctorate only jointly with the UC. At the time, this strict differentiation of mission was unique to state governance of higher education and was seen as necessary to promote orderly growth and reduce wasteful competition among institutions (more on this later).

Reviews and Critiques of the Master Plan

Formal legislatively-sponsored reviews of the Master Plan were completed in 1973, 1987, 1989, 1993, and 2002. In addition, analytical reports on the condition of California higher education in the context of the Master Plan were prepared by the UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education (1992), the California Higher Education Policy Center (1995 and 1996), RAND (1997), California Citizens Commission on Higher Education (1998), the California

Education Roundtable (1998), and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (1998). A review of these many documents reveals a constant appeal for changes to the Master Plan, ranging from incremental to radical, to improve its capacity to address more comprehensively the state's educational needs.

Indications that Master Plan structures and assumptions faced an early test of the changing times come from the first review in 1973, which warned already that "new times call for new approaches." That review was most critical of the lack of statewide planning and coordination and the rigid segmental structure that fragments responsibility and "advances the needs and aspirations of institutions" over those of the state. The review observed that under the Master Plan there has been a greater concern with "identifying and protecting functional differences" among the segments than with "coordination of educational services to benefit the people of California." In a strong rebuke of the structure imposed by the Master Plan, the review claimed that "excessive emphasis upon institutional prerogatives and boundaries is a major barrier to maximizing the quality and quantity of education available to the people." Substantive concerns raised in that first report included the quality of undergraduate teaching, the equity of admissions criteria, under-representation of minorities, the need for mission differentiation within each segment, and the need for alternative delivery systems to increase access.

The 1987 review similarly cited the changing times, specifically the new student demographics and the state's need for a better educated citizenry, as reasons for change. It cited problems including a lack of coordination with K-12, a transfer system that was "beginning to atrophy," negative impact of the emphasis on research and graduate studies on undergraduate education, poor educational outcomes for minority students, inadequate statewide coordination, and poor graduation rates. While recommending increased cooperation among segments and stronger governance structures, it reaffirmed mission differentiation as "protection against unhealthy intersegmental competition."

The 1989 review was focused primarily on the educational equity implications of the state's rapidly changing demographics. Claiming that "the older logic is not sufficient...it no longer works," the review raised serious concerns about the ability of the existing structure to deliver on the promise of equal access to quality education via the transfer process. It stated that improving transfer was "among the very highest priorities" and called for greater intersegmental cooperation and a departure from existing notions of hierarchy among segments. It called as well for a coordinated plan for accommodating enrollment growth.

The several reviews and studies in the 1990s were, understandably, shaped by an overriding concern with finances, in view of the state's economic downturn and consequent reduction to higher education budgets. The common themes addressed in these reports included student fees, productivity, governance

reform, linkages with K-12, and improved collaboration across higher education segments. The most pointed challenge to the structure set forth by the Master Plan was in the 1998 report of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, written by David Breneman, which suggested it was time to rethink the Master Plan along regional, rather than segmental, lines. A regional structure would, according to the report, “focus less on the three public segments, and their distinguishing features and roles” and foster more comprehensive thinking about the educational needs of Californians.

The current proposed new Master Plan continues the decades-long pattern of (1) questioning the capacity of current structures to promote educational equity and accommodate enrollment demand and (2) recommending more comprehensive approaches to planning for K-16 education in the state. It even takes these issues to the next level by proposing a master plan for all of education. But the proposed new plan stops short of recommending any changes to the segmental structure or the mission differentiation laid out in the original Master Plan.

Why is the Master Plan so Durable?

My theory of the durability of the Master Plan amid decades of criticism begins with the concept of compelling “frames” by which people come to understand and interpret reality. The Master Plan’s overriding and durable frame is that the segmental structure is absolutely necessary in order to prevent the chaos of institutional competition.

The Master Plan was enacted at a time when huge projected enrollment growth presented a major challenge to policy makers, accompanied as it was by a heated political struggle between the University and the state colleges for students, programs, campuses, status, and authority. The community colleges, still governed by the State Board of Education, were seeking their place within the higher education structures. In the face of this potentially chaotic situation, all parties were seeking an orderly solution to accommodating growth. For higher education leaders, the key requirement for order, according to Clark Kerr, was to keep the Legislature out of the higher education policy arena. As Kerr noted in a 1992 reflection, “we were deeply concerned by any implications that the political process was taking over” – a concern raised by the “dozens of bills before the Legislature to change different aspects of higher education and to create new campuses across the state.”

The strategy for preventing legislative intrusion was for higher education leaders to agree on a structure for accommodating expansion that would be acceptable to policy makers. I believe that the devised solution—differentiation of mission by segment—addressed two needs. First, it provided a structure that could apportion growth without the unchecked competition for students and degree programs that was occurring in other states. Second, and equally important, it

provided a compelling frame, in an almost frightening way, to justify the chosen structure. Language from the original Master Plan illustrates this point.

Looming much larger than the issues of access, quality, and affordability (which are the three terms typically used to describe the Master Plan's goals) in the written document is the specter of destructive competition between the University and the state colleges that would otherwise play out in the political arena. The Master Plan is riddled with phrases such as "avoid unnecessary duplication," "save from destruction by unbridled competition," "promote orderly development." The opening sentence refers to "a growing concern that competition and unnecessary, wasteful duplication between the state colleges and the University of California might cost the taxpayers millions of dollars." It is this powerful idea, or frame, that in my view has insulated the Master Plan from structural change over these many years.

The second part of my theory of the Master Plan's durability is an offshoot of the fear of competition. In order to avoid competition the segmental structure was created, with strict boundaries defined by eligibility and mission. This segmental structure has in turn shaped the very nature of discussions about higher education and, more importantly, restricted the range of options. In California we approach higher education policy first and foremost from an institutional, segmental perspective. While other states more readily take a statewide look, we compartmentalize our analyses because we have compartmentalized our institutions. We ask, for example, how many community college students become prepared for transfer and how many university transfer students complete the baccalaureate. We don't ask how many transfer-prepared students never get to the university because of capacity constraints or restrictions within individual programs, such as Nursing. That's a boundary-spanning issue that falls between the cracks.

When we do raise cross-cutting issues we have no policy handle for dealing with them because institution-specific approaches trump statewide coordination every time. The best example can be seen in the response to the 1998 Breneman recommendations which were intended as advice to the "next Governor of California" (which turned out to be Governor Davis). The report summarized five themes that had been raised by a collection of policy studies (RAND, Citizens Commission, Roundtable) and put forth recommendations. Of the five themes, four raised prominent cross-cutting issues. These themes were (1) linkages to K-12, (2) governance reform, (3) student fees, and (4) productivity, with the latter including recommendations for sharing facilities and faculty, joint academic programs, and collaboration to improve transfer. The only issue that could be implemented without addressing cross-segmental issues was budget stability. And this was the one area that Governor Davis did address—in the implementation of the "partnerships" with each four-year segment that provided precisely the kind of budget stability that the segments individually sought.

Our segmental approach also serves to mask problems that might arise from a state-level approach to accountability. While other states are mobilizing in response to the state-by-state report cards issued in 2000 and 2002 by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, no such activity has occurred in California because these state-level measures of educational performance do not have any natural audience. There is no one responsible for coordinating state-wide educational outcomes for higher education. Accountability mechanisms, such as they are, are segment-specific. We review the outputs or outcomes of each segment and fail to notice the problems that result from having strict boundaries where people may get shut out.

Prospects for Policy Change

What would have to happen for major policy change that would break down the boundaries set by the Master Plan and foster statewide planning and coordination for purposes of meeting the public's higher educational needs instead of sustaining three sets of institutions?

I address this question from the perspective of theories of policy change. We know that "focusing events" are often the impetus for major policy change—like crises or major threats. Issues are constantly competing for "agenda space" and higher education is not yet viewed as a crisis (even if in part because our limited means of understanding the issues prevents any impending crisis from being seen). In addition to actual focusing events, we know that the way issues are framed and communicated can be instrumental in getting people to mobilize around certain agendas. Skilled "policy entrepreneurs" can at times find the right message to increase the public salience of an issue.

From this perspective, it seems that non-incremental policy change will occur only if or when we change the frame by which we understand and communicate state higher education policy and outcomes. The current frame has us stuck on "avoiding destructive institutional competition" while in the "real world" competition is increasingly seen as beneficial. Instead, we need to shift our conversations or our images to "meeting the educational needs of Californians" or preferably something far more catchy that only an effective policy entrepreneur could devise and sell. Which reminds me of the question raised in the conference panel on leadership: where are the Clark Kerrs of today? Perhaps today's circumstances are more complex and less susceptible to the cult of personality.

With or without larger-than-life leaders, there are two developments that may help promote new ways of thinking.

One of these is the increasing emphasis on K-16, a national trend that is reflected in the proposed new master plan. As collaboration between K-12 and higher education is pursued, the rigid boundary impediments of the master plan

structure should become more conspicuous, which could magnify calls for structural change.

The second is the profoundly new approach to higher education accountability being shepherded by the Legislature and recently introduced as legislation (SB 1331). Traditional approaches are focused on institutions. Policy makers review the performance of individual institutions and impose consequences upon them. The new approach takes a statewide perspective. Policy makers and institutions will collectively hold themselves accountable for meeting the educational needs of Californians, as set forth in four broad state goals. Performance indicators will monitor progress toward meeting these state goals, not furthering institutional goals. Based on performance data, changes to state policy and resource investment would be considered.

Both the K-16 master plan *for education* and the accountability project are only in their formative stages. If successful, they could represent some first steps toward replacing negative images of *boundaries to prevent competition* with positive images of *pathways to promote educational success*.