



Education Commission  
of the States

# Policy Brief

## Governance

Attachment I

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### Guidelines for States Considering Reorganization

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In most states, leaders have made governance changes without first making a thorough evaluation of how well their existing policies and structures align with the state's agenda and the public interest. Consequently, one can find numerous examples of governance changes that failed to meet the expectations of the people who proposed them. Continuing changes in public expectations and new policy environments require changes in many existing structures. States that fail to assess these contextual factors risk seriously hampering the capacity of the state and its postsecondary education system to compete in the new environment.

States considering reorganization need to do the following:

- **Focus first on ends, not means.** Clear goals and objectives need to precede reorganization. Reorganization is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Reorganization without a sense of purpose or direction may be more damaging than maintaining the status quo. If reorganization debates are framed by good information about the state's demographic, economic and education trends, the debate is more likely to focus on the ends to be achieved than on arguments about means, turf and power.
- **Be explicit about the specific problems that are the catalysts for the reorganization proposals.** In governance debates, rationales for change can be expressed in lofty terms disconnected from the problems that led to the proposals. In some cases, the real issue is a specific concern, such as perceived inequities, other problems in financing policy or failure of an existing structure to curb institutional turf battles and unnecessary duplication of high-cost graduate and professional programs. In other cases, the issue may be state leaders' sense that the existing structure is inadequate to help the state confront major policy priorities, such as workforce development or P-16 reform. Whatever the issue, the problem may lie elsewhere (e.g., in the politics of the legislative process), and not in the postsecondary education structure itself.
- **Ask if reorganization is the only or the most effective means for addressing the identified problems.** Reorganization is necessary at times and can be an effective way to signal new directions, assert new leadership and provide a framework for new policy initiatives. But other alternatives, such as strengthened leadership by boards and executive officers or new financing and accountability measures need to be considered carefully.
- **Weigh the costs of reorganization against the short- and long-term benefits.** What short- and long-term damage will result if reorganization is pursued? It may take five to eight years for a newly organized system to begin to function effectively and to yield anticipated results. Major reorganization often is proposed to achieve efficiencies, but little account is taken of the extraordinary costs and reduced productivity stemming from the uncertainty and low morale of persons affected by the changes. Large-scale organizational change requires extensive consultation and rebuilding of the formal and informal networks essential for effectiveness. All these processes are the basic costs of change.
- **Recognize that a good system balances state and societal needs and the needs of colleges and universities.** The assumption that one viewpoint must rule is dangerous. Some officials argue that institutional autonomy is an absolute good and that state involvement on behalf of the public interest must be kept at a minimum. Others believe state priorities must rule and that they need to constrain institutional autonomy. The challenge for states is to develop structures and policies that foster appropriate institutional autonomy, as well as institutional responsiveness to public priorities.

- ***Distinguish between state coordination and institutional governance.*** Coordination is concerned primarily with the state and system perspective – the framework within which governance takes place. Governance, on the other hand, relates to the direction, by boards of trustees and presidents, of individual colleges and universities or systems of institutions. This distinction is important because states often try to solve coordination problems with governance alternatives or vice versa.
- ***Examine the total policy structure and process, including the roles of the governor, executive branch agencies and the legislature, rather than only the formal postsecondary education structure.*** States often will change the postsecondary education structure (e.g., abolish or restructure a state coordinating board) when, in reality, the source of the problem lies elsewhere (e.g., the state civil service requirements or the enactment of inappropriately detailed mandates by the state legislature).

State coordination of postsecondary education is one of the most complex, difficult balancing acts in state government. There are no simple answers, no absolutes. While lessons can be drawn from other states, there is no perfect model. Conflicts are the reality. The challenge is to resolve those conflicts as close to the operating level (e.g., at the campus or through cooperation among campuses) and as close to the real problems as possible. Once issues rise to the level of the governor and legislature, political, as opposed to education values, tend to dominate the debate. Finally, what worked at one point, with one set of actors, may not work at another point. State leaders need to periodically evaluate the adequacy of their systems and undertake carefully considered changes when necessary.

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