

Regional UNIVERSITY FOCUS

By Walter V. Wendler

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015 slightly less than 20 million students were enrolled in U.S. post-secondary educational institutions. Community colleges enrolled 6.2 million students; national research universities enrolled slightly less than 4.2 million students; and doctoral, masters and baccalaureate universities—regional institutions—enrolled slightly more than 4.2 million students. The balance of enrollment occurred at specialized public, private, nonprofit and for-profit institutions.

Regional colleges and universities are workhorses of opportunity; yet, in many cases, one or two flagships drive educational policy. In some states, such as Illinois, private institutions serve on coordinating boards and shape public higher education policy.

This is not a lament, but a reality. As costs to students at major research institutions increase, even in the face of ever-increasing scholarship opportunity, regional institutions will shoulder a greater burden of providing educational opportunity to cost-conscious students and families. Responsive regional university leaders must step up in six ways.

First, we must recognize the difference between regionalism and parochialism and embrace the positive attributes of regional responsiveness. Addressing regional challenges will attract attention from lawmakers, business and industry. Such action is empowering, not limiting. A rural campus that focuses on the needs of agriculture, small businesses, local healthcare, the energy industry or any other identifying characteristic of the home region will gain influence in the state, nation and the world. Likewise, an urban institution that addresses local joblessness, underachievement in primary and secondary schools, or in-city poverty will lead.

Second, leaders should make the needs of students from local service regions their priority. Such focus will create attractiveness for students from afar—a slight twist on “Think globally, act locally.” Realtors will affirm this: In two houses of equal size, one built for a speculative generic market and one built for a particular family, the second will always command higher value. This bewilderingly simple

observation recognizes foundational connections of human needs and aspirations. Abraham Maslow would agree.

Third, mission and regional responsiveness, welded to the research, scholarly and creative interests of faculty, guided by teaching and focus on students, leads to mission excellence. Seeking regional responsiveness in diverse fields creates distinctiveness, focus and ingenuity.

Fourth, the impact of the institution on the local economy goes beyond the headcount-dependent pizza and beer sales. All benefits to be sure, but pale compared to positive consequences founded on regional actions to meet real needs. Sustained economic impact follows focus.

Fifth, regional institutions are lighter on their feet, and able to produce efficiencies and economies that place student costs for attendance between community colleges and research universities. Debt passing the \$1.5 trillion mark makes the status quo unsustainable. Efficiencies can create intellectual acuity and opportunity for students and faculty by addressing regional challenges.

Sixth, partnerships with community colleges will make regional universities ever more attractive. Additionally, dual enrollment high school students are the fastest growing segment of the college student population. Dallas Independent School District alone will graduate thousands of students with two-year degrees in the next few years. Regional student-focused institutions should welcome these 18-year-old juniors. That is upstream. Downstream, partnerships with national research institutions provide opportunities for regional university graduates to attend research universities for graduate and professional study. The Texas A&M University System capitalizes on this regional reach. We should never apologize or shun the “throughput” opportunity of the regional mission.

At West Texas A&M University, we serve the Texas Panhandle first. Tip O’Neill’s quip, “All politics is local,” applies. Public postsecondary education is properly political. Hold high razor-sharp focus; run towards it, not away from it. **P**

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