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Setting the Governmental Agenda for State Decentralization of Higher Education

Background and Problem

Stephen K. Bailey once characterized the American campus-state relationship as embodying a "persistent human paradox—the simultaneous need for structure and for anti-structure, for dependence and for autonomy, for involvement and for privacy" (1975, p. 1). Because neither complete accountability of the campus *to* the state, nor absolute autonomy of the campus *from* the state is feasible, the crucial question confronting policymakers is where the line between campus and state should be drawn. The inevitable tension between these dual demands for freedom and control has vexed state policymakers for higher education throughout U.S. history, especially in the last half of the twentieth century.

Prior to the Second World War, most states exercised relatively little formal regulatory control of higher education. However, during the dynamic postwar growth era of the 1950s and 1960s, the balance of authority dramatically shifted from campuses to state governments. The rapid expansion of state control was the result of a convergence of social and political forces both internal and external to higher education, including a historic surge in college enrollments, increasing sprawl in state

systems of higher education, trenchant interinstitutional rivalries, and the growing regulatory capability of state governments. Although the centralization movement met with intense criticism from numerous national study commissions (Carnegie Commission, 1973; Carnegie Foundation, 1976, 1982), by the mid-1970s the pendulum had decidedly swung toward greater governmental control. The authors of one such national commission lamented: "Guerilla warfare now goes on all across the nation over what belongs to the institution and what belongs to the state. Independence erodes yearly in the face of the greater forces in the hands of the state, and frustration on both sides grows daily" (Carnegie Foundation, 1976, p. 18).

Glenny and Bowen (1977) astutely observed that state intervention into higher education has taken place in "almost infinite ways." Yet, the institutionalized control of public campuses was achieved mainly through the creation and subsequent strengthening of statewide coordinating boards[1] and consolidated governing boards. Through the mechanism of coordination, states superimposed upon campus governance structures a new entity whose responsibility was to make central academic and fiscal recommendations or decisions for an entire state. In consolidated governing boards, states achieved a highly centralized form of campus governance, whereby a single board was empowered to make all day-to-day management decisions for institutions within a particular system or state (McGuinness, 1998). The proliferation of these agents of centralized control was rapid; in 1950, state coordinating and governing boards existed in just 17 of 48 states, but by 1974 only three of 50 states were without them (Berdahl, 1971, 1975).

In contrast with the universal trend toward centralized control of higher education in earlier decades, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a diverse array of higher education "reorganization" and "restructuring" initiatives in the states (McGuinness, 1998; MacTaggart, 1996). One important development that arose during this turbulent period in state coordination and governance of higher education was a countertrend toward *decentralization*[2] of decision authority from the state to more local levels of campus control (MacTaggart, 1998; Marcus, 1997; McLendon, forthcoming). Marcus (1997) documented as many governance decentralization proposals (eleven) in the states between 1989 and 1994 as there were proposals to centralize higher education governance at the state level. In fact, from 1981–2000, at least 16 states enacted legislation decentralizing authority from the state to the campus level (McLendon, forthcoming).

Although the precise dimensions of the decentralization countertrend prove challenging to limn, four primary forms may be delineated.[3] The

first form, especially popular in the early 1980s, involves the enactment of "flexibility legislation." Such legislation transfers authority over se-lect management functions from the state to the campus level while largely leaving intact existing coordinating and governing arrangements. For example, Colorado (legislation enacted in 1981), Kentucky (1982), and Maryland (1984) decentralized, to varying degree, authority over campus enrollments, tuition, and personnel without altering their coor-dinating or governing arrangements. A second form of decentralization involves disaggregating university governance systems. One example is Illinois' (1995) decision to abolish two multicampus systems and to cre-ate local boards of trust for those campuses formerly governed by the two systems. A third form of decentralization has moved beyond the ear-lier "flexibility" approach through creation of hybrid "public-private" institutions. This approach differs from the flexibility mode in that the hybrid entities are recognized as having some new form of corporate sta-tus under law. Examples include Maryland's (1992) exemption of St. Mary's College (a public campus) from the University of Maryland sys-tem and, therefore, from stringent state financial controls, and Hawaii's (1998) restructuring of the University of Hawaii, a statewide multicam-pus system, into a "quasi-public corporation" with authority over nu-merous management functions formerly exercised by state agencies. Fi-nally, decentralization has involved the substantial weakening or dismantling of statewide coordinating systems, such as in the cases of New Jersey (1994) and Arkansas (1998), where regulatory coordinating boards were replaced with far less powerful entities.

To be sure, decentralization has not been the case everywhere. Many higher education restructuring efforts of the past two decades have strengthened, not weakened, state control over campuses (McGuinness, 1998). Moreover, the recent wave of "performance funding" mandates, which link state dollars to demonstrated institutional outcomes, is one more manifestation of continued governmental efforts to ensure the "ac-countability" of public campuses (Zumeta, 2001), efforts that may clearly be seen to constrain, if not diminish, the operating autonomy of public campuses and systems.

Nevertheless, the move toward greater autonomy for higher education in many states represents a significant development within the broader historical sweep of campus-state relations in the United States, espe-cially when it is viewed against the backdrop of universal expansion of state governmental authority in the mid-twentieth century. Among its implications, the decentralization phenomenon raises important ques-tions about the nature of public policymaking to reform the campus-state regulatory relationship, questions to which scholars have paid sur-

prisingly little attention. For example, although an appreciable literature has accumulated in description of various decentralization initiatives (Berdahl, 1998; Berdahl & MacTaggart, 2000 Greer, 1998; Hyatt & Santiago, 1984; Marcus, 1997; Marcus, Pratt, & Stevens, 1997; MacTaggart, 1998; McGuinness, 1995; Mingle, 1983; Novak, 1996), very little is known about how or why decentralization first becomes an issue to which state governments pay serious attention. Alternately stated, no systematic research has examined the earliest stage of policymaking, a stage known as *agenda setting*, in states that have restructured their higher education systems in the direction of greater campus autonomy.

Agenda setting is a term used in the public policymaking literature to refer to the processes by which an issue moves from relative obscurity to become one of a small number of priority issues that has gained the serious attention of policymakers and is being positioned for decisive action by government. Agenda research, therefore, focuses on the dynamics by which issues become *issues* in the first place. The question of how issues first gain prominence among policymakers has long intrigued scholars. Indeed, some prominent political scientists regard agenda setting as the most critical stage of policymaking, for an issue must first command attention before the choice process can begin (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Schattschneider, 1960). Over the past 20 years, research on agenda setting has accumulated in a variety of policy domains. Alas, systematic inquiry into the formation of the state governmental agenda for higher education, particularly into the dynamics by which campus-state regulatory reform becomes a prominent issue on the governmental agenda, is scant.

Purpose of the Study

Despite recent governmental activity in redistributing authority between campus and state, little conceptual or empirical work exists on the phenomenon of decentralization or on the nature of state policymaking to restructure higher education authority patterns, generally. The present study sought to address this void in the literature. Specifically, the investigation employed rival theories of public policy formation and comparative-case study methods to examine how higher education decentralization emerges as a prominent issue before state governments.

The purpose of the study was twofold. First, it sought to generate, through comparative analysis of multiple decentralization episodes in the states, new insights into the processes and politics of higher education governance reform. Although the study focuses on just one end of the reform continuum—that of decentralization—contemporary social

and political trends suggest that decentralization likely will remain an attractive policy option well into the foreseeable future (DiIulio, 1994; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Moreover, examination of decentralization policymaking may produce valuable insights into an array of campus-state reform phenomena.

A complementary purpose of the study was that of theory development. While scholars of K–12 education have developed various conceptualizations of public policymaking to help explain policy activity within their domain (Clune, 1987; Fowler, 1994; Mawhinney, 1993; Mazzoni, 1991), higher education scholars have made little effort to systematically identify, simplify, and arrange the significant interactions and relationships attending higher education policymaking at the state level. Such effort, however, is crucial in developing a social scientific literature on higher education policymaking in the states. This study addresses the limitation in several ways. By examining the extent to which existing theories help explain higher education agenda setting, the study directly links the larger literature on American policymaking with the study of state higher education policy formation. Second, through use of a comparative-analytic research design, the study explores the possibility of an underlying pattern in higher education policy processes that transcends state boundaries. Finally, through efforts to specify a grounded conceptual model of agenda setting, the study seeks to provide an initial framework that may guide future inquiry.

The research questions that guided this study reflect a twin concern for understanding the dynamics that attend policy processes and the interactions of principal policy actors involved: How does the issue of higher education decentralization achieve a place of prominence on the governmental agenda? What is the relative influence of different policy actors in the agenda-setting process? To what extent do various theories of public policy formation adequately explain how higher education decentralization achieves the decision agenda of state government?

Conceptual Framework

Research on agenda setting has accelerated in recent years, providing scholars with an array of theoretical perspectives that may be used to investigate policy initiation in the higher education domain (McLendon, 2000). Following in the tradition popularized by Graham Allison (1971), this study employed three rival theories to guide investigation of higher education agenda setting in the states. Applying competing theories to the same phenomenon has numerous advantages. It can provide a check against the bias of any one single interpretation of data (and reality). Ad-

ditionally, comparing rival explanations of a single phenomenon may lead to the development of "strong inference" (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994) or the accumulation of evidence in favor of one explanation sufficient to rule out alternative explanations. Such systematic consideration of alternative explanations is an important component in assessing the explanatory power of different theoretical perspectives and, thus, in theory development.

The following discussion provides synopses of the three theoretical "models" that guided this study of agenda setting: the Rational-Comprehensive, the Incremental, and the Revised Garbage Can models. The three models advance different propositions about the nature of policy formation in American political systems, propositions that were used in developing an analytic framework for the study. These particular frameworks were selected chiefly for two reasons.

First, when seeking to assess how well different lenses of policy formation explain a focal phenomenon, it is important that the lenses in fact provide competing explanations of the same phenomenon. As Zahariadis (1998, p. 434) put it, such explanatory lenses should offer "different answers to the same question," rather than "different answers to different questions." Indeed, the three frameworks used in this study draw from a common approach to the study of governmental behavior (an organizational-decision approach) and address the same "question" (how and why governments process decisions the way they do), but each framework posits different assumptions and assertions about the nature of such governmental functioning.

A second rationale for the selection of these particular theoretical frameworks involves the need to more rigorously assess Kingdon's (1984, 1994) assertion that his Revised Garbage Can perspective on policy agenda formation possesses greater explanatory power than either the Rational-Comprehensive or Incremental perspectives. Despite the Revised Garbage Can framework's popularity, one indication of which being its frequent citation in the social science literature (King, 1994), Kingdon's formulation has attracted relatively little testing and elaboration (Sabatier, 1999). This study seeks to systematically examine whether in fact the Revised Garbage Can framework provides a more adequate and accurate explanation of policy agenda setting than do the other alternatives.

Rational-Comprehensive Model

The Rational-Comprehensive model is the penultimate problem-solving model of public organizations. The model, sometimes known as *normative* decision making, emphasizes the systematic collection and analysis of information as part of a linear set of processes designed to

"maximize" the solution of public problems. At the heart of the model reside a series of rigorous analytical procedures that decision makers employ to calculate the costs and benefits of considering certain problems and pursuing alternative solutions, allowing them ultimately to select the one alternative that produces the greatest benefit for the problem they have chosen to consider (MacRae & Wilde, 1979; Simon, 1957).

The Rational-Comprehensive perspective on governmental agenda setting holds that issues achieve prominence through a series of sequential problem-identification and solution-generation processes. Policymakers identify problems by articulating goals and setting levels of achievement for those goals that will satisfy them, and then by conducting analyses of the costs and benefits of alternative problems in order to determine which problem among many possible ones they should consider. After the selection of a problem, policymakers shift their attention toward the generation of solutions, systematically collecting and analyzing data about policy options and ultimately advancing the optimal alternative solution.

Although few observers likely would characterize public policymaking as a logical, problem-solving process, principal features of the rational-comprehensive perspective are reflected in twentieth-century reforms of state government and in recurring debate about the power of reason to help solve social problems. The legislative modernization movement of the 1950s–70s produced numerous changes designed to make legislative decision making more rational, efficient, and data centered, including creation of central bureaus of legislative research and reform of committee procedure (Rosenthal, 1981). Indeed, the emergence of the higher education coordinating board, which was conceived as an agent of independent analysis in service to enlightened policymaking, may be traced to this era of state governmental reform (Hearn & Griswold, 1994). A palpable rational-comprehensive flavor also attends the enduring debate over the power of social science research to improve public policy outcomes. Such debate recently has emerged in higher education circles, with practitioners and scholars engaged in a spirited dispute about the public policy relevance of contemporary higher education research (Birnbaum, 2000; Layzell, 1990; Terenzini, 1997).

Incremental Model

As a response to criticism that the rational-comprehensive perspective inaccurately portrays the kind of decision making that actually occurs in government, Lindblom (1959, 1968) advanced the notion of "disjointed incrementalism." Drawing inspiration from Simon's (1957) work on "bounded rationality", and grounding his conclusions in an analysis of

decision making at multiple levels of American government, Lindblom asserted that because policymakers are under pressures of time, incomplete information, and competing demands of organized interests, they grow content to "satisfice," aiming at acceptable rather than optimal outcomes. Because policymakers accommodate institutional and group demands by considering only those policy options that deviate *incrementally* from the status quo, governments tend to move in small steps.

Incrementalism characterizes governmental agenda setting as a long series of political, and only semi-analytical, steps with no clear beginning or ending (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Lane, 1983). An issue's emergence on the agenda is said to result from policymakers' gradual interest in a perennial problem, only the immediate dimensions of which are considered, because policy makers never seek to "solve" problems, only to ameliorate them by making modest changes over time. Policymakers should never be surprised by an issue's emergence because they witness its gradual development. The historical record should reveal a pattern of marginal steps that seem predictable to policymakers. Since small steps are taken annually in response to many existing problems, the agenda remains "clogged", diminishing the pace and trajectory of new issues.

Incrementalism, with its attendant emphasis on group conflict, enjoys paradigmatic status in the higher education policy literature. Whether the focus of investigation is at the state or the national level, most studies assert that the existence of fragmented decision structures and overlapping sources of power produce a form of higher education policy-making characterized by gradualism and predictability. For example, Olivas's (1984) study of the dynamics leading to the creation of the Ohio Board of Regents, one of the few published studies to have explicitly examined governmental agenda setting for higher education, borrows heavily from the tradition of policy incrementalism.

Revised Garbage Can Model

Kingdon's (1994) importation of the "garbage can model of organizational choice" from organization theory provides political science with a provocative and popular explanation of agenda formation in American government (Sabatier, 1999). Borrowing from Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) work on decision making in universities, Kingdon conceptualized the federal government as an "organized anarchy" characterized by problematic preferences, unclear means, and fluid participation. Kingdon then adapted to his study of national agenda setting the essential logic of such an organization, massaging the ideas of Cohen-March-Olsen to fit the contextual conditions of the federal government. Kingdon advanced his *Revised Garbage Can* model, which he based on panel interviews

with over 240 policymakers, to explain how issues in the areas of health and transportation rise to the top of the national decision agenda.

The Revised Garbage Can model proffers a dynamic set of processes whereby problems, ideas, and politics combine with choice opportunities to elevate issues to prominence. It holds that three separate "streams"—a stream each of problems, policies (ideas or solutions), and politics—flow through the national government largely independent of one another. An issue attracts the attention of policymakers only when the separate streams conjoin with a choice opportunity. Separate streams may become coupled when a "window of opportunity" opens, briefly allowing "policy entrepreneurs" to push attention to their pet problems or to push pet solutions. Thus, what gets onto the agenda is a function of the contents floating in the metaphorical garbage can at the moment in time a policy entrepreneur successfully couples the separate streams of activity.

The Revised Garbage Can model is quite unlike either of the other perspectives previously discussed. It differs from the Rational-Comprehensive view in that policymaking does not proceed through a pre-scribed, logical sequence. Instead, streams of problems, alternative solutions, and politics develop independently of one another and none necessarily antedates the others. Policymakers do not set about to first identify problems and then seek solutions to the problems; solutions may actually precede the problems to which they eventually become attached. According to Kingdon, Incrementalism does not explain the process of agenda setting very well, either. The Revised Garbage Can perspective rejects the idea that agenda formation is marginal or gradual. Indeed, an issue may suddenly "hit" or "take off", rising very quickly to become the hot-button topic of the day.

While the Revised Garbage Can perspective has yet to be employed in the study of higher education policymaking, Kingdon's model remains the subject of considerable discussion in the political science literature (Durant & Diehl, 1989; Mucciaroni, 1992; Mumper, 1987; Sabatier, 1999; Zahariadis, 1999). Very little research, however, has examined the extent to which Kingdon's framework explains agenda formation at the state level of American government or in the education policy arena.

Research Methods

Research Strategy

Three features of this study, the purpose of which was to examine how well rival theories explain higher education agenda setting in the states, guided the selection of a research strategy. First, the study addresses complex issues about a poorly understood phenomenon. Second, the

study's focus was that of attempting to understand a set of nebulous governmental processes, rather than to predict their occurrence. Third, the nature of the research questions made *context* (e.g., a state's economic or political context) a crucial consideration. For such reasons, the *case method* was chosen as the chief research strategy of the investigation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). A *comparative*-case strategy was used because the existence of multiple cases allows one to establish the range of a given explanation; in this study, cross-site comparisons permitted generalizations made about agenda setting to be stated more assertively. The comparative-case tradition is a prominent one in the study of policymaking. Nelson Polsby, a well regarded scholar of agenda setting, has argued: "So long as our understanding of policy initiation is primitive, . . . the strategy of laying out case studies and searching for ideas about the experiences they embody seems not only defensible but desirable" (1984, p. 6).

Sample and Data Collection

The nature of the study's research questions necessitated that the sample include cases sufficiently diverse so as to permit an assessment of the explanatory power of the three agenda-setting models under different contextual conditions. Three criteria were used to identify such a sample. First, states selected for inclusion in the study had to have enacted their decentralization policy since 1995,[4] but in different years. Second, the states selected had to have pursued substantively different approaches to decentralization. Third, the states selected had to vary in demographic, political, and higher education-system composition. Consideration of the several criteria resulted in a sample of three cases: the case of higher education "reorganization" in Arkansas (culminating in legislation in 1997); the case of "university restructuring" in Hawaii (1998); and, the case of higher education "decentralization" in Illinois (1995). Each decentralization episode held potentially significant consequences for the balance of campus-state authority in the respective state.

An eclectic mix of data, including interviews, documents, and archival records, was collected in each state. A critical data source was semistructured interviews with 61 policy actors in the three states. Three-quarters of the interviews were conducted in person during site visits to the states in 1999; the remainder was conducted by telephone. Informants were selected through a generative process in which an initial group of target-informants in each state was asked to identify other individuals with special insight into their state's decentralization episode. Informants represented five categories of policy actors, indicated in Table 1. Interviews lasted, on average, 50 minutes in length. In-

terviews were tape-recorded and transcribed and extensive field notes were taken.

The study's semistructured interview protocol contained 12 questions corresponding to the various dimensions of the study's analytic framework (discussed below). The protocol focused on four main areas: (1) the political, economic, and social conditions in each state at the time the decentralization issue arose; (2) the nature of the problems that were thought to exist at the time of the episode; (3) the ways in which decentralization proposals were generated; and, (4) the dynamics attending the decentralization issue's advancement onto the governmental agenda. The protocol was pilot-tested with policymakers in a fourth state prior to its use in the field.

Data Analysis

Data collected from each state were transcribed, coded, classified into patterns, and written in the form of a narrative case study. The chief analytic strategy employed in the study was a form of *pattern-matching* in which data patterns were matched with propositions operationally derived from the rival theories for the purpose of determining how well the theories explained each state's agenda episode (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). The "within-site" pattern-matching process involved several steps. The three theories previously discussed advance competing propositions about how issues emerge on the governmental agenda. Three competing sets of propositions were identified for each of seven important dimensions[5] of agenda setting examined in

TABLE 1

Distribution of Study Informants by Category and State (n = 61)

Informant Category		States	
	Arkansas	Hawaii	Illinois
Campus/system officials	11	6	7
Legislators and staff	6	5	4
Governors and staff	2	2	3
State agency officials	4	*	2
Academics, press, and other Observers	2	3	4
Total number of informants Per state	25	16	20

NOTE: This table charts the total number of individual informants interviewed; multiple interviews with the same informants are not counted toward the totals.

*Under Hawaii's state governance structure, senior campus administrators also "double" as agency officers. Such informants are found under the single heading of "Campus and System Officials".

the focal cases. These differentiated categories comprised an analytic framework expressed in the form of a table. Proceeding *deductively*, the author developed a system of codes representing the different categories of the framework and manually assigned the codes to the textual evidence of each case; multiple rounds of coding were performed. Upon completion of the coding, the data were arranged for the purpose of determining the extent to which data patterns in each case matched the patterns hypothesized by the different theories of agenda formation, as operationalized in the analytic framework. In other words, the process was one of determining how well the data "fit" the rival scenarios suggested by the different theories. A separate inductive analysis also was performed for the purpose of identifying emergent themes in the data. After coding and analysis of the individual cases, a *cross-case* analysis was conducted to identify points of commonality and divergence in agenda setting across states. Here, the focus was on assessing the extent to which data patterns in each case matched the patterns in other cases.

A summative point should be made regarding efforts taken by the author to "triangulate" data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to ensure the accuracy of the cases developed. Painstaking care was taken to balance insights gained from interviews with information gathered from archival sources. Legislative reports, campus and state documents, blue-ribbon studies, and press accounts were scrutinized in order to corroborate interview data. Yet, while archival data helped establish the chronological structure for each case episode, such data were less useful in identifying the behavior and motivations of policy actors and the underlying patterns of policy activity. Here, the extensive interview data were of penultimate value. When informants' accounts diverged, follow-up interviews or interviews with additional informants were conducted (another form of triangulation), resulting typically in the accumulation of evidence favoring a particular interpretation; rarely did the accumulated data reflect persistently divergent accounts. In order to ensure clear connections between the data analyzed and the theoretical propositions explored, a matrix was created before fieldwork began that linked data sources to the various dimensions of the analytical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994); for each analytical dimension, the researcher identified corresponding data sources (specific protocol questions and archival sources) that would serve as the evidentiary basis for conclusions drawn. Finally, each case write-up was reviewed by principal policy actors involved in the focal episode as a key strategy for establishing the credibility of case reports (Creswell, 1998).

Case Summaries

The case summaries that follow provide narrative accounts of the decentralization agenda-setting episodes in Arkansas, Hawaii, and Illinois. These case summaries are distilled from more complex case studies (McLendon, 2000). Each case "begins" at a point in time prior to the emergence of the decentralization issue and then chronologically charts the issue's rise on the governmental agenda.[6] All quotations cited are those of informants interviewed for the study.

Higher Education "Reorganization" in Arkansas

Throughout the 1990s, a complex interplay of issues, interests, and personalities produced various episodes of conflict between the Arkansas Board of Higher Education (BHE), a regulatory coordinating board with approval authority over campus programs and budgets, and many of the state's 30 public colleges and universities. By January 1996, relations between the Board and some of the institutions had markedly deteriorated. This was especially the case with two-year colleges, which perceived poor treatment at the hands of the Board and its administrative arm, the Department of Higher Education (DHE), over a range of issues, including a controversial performance-funding plan. Although no one in state government at that time was considering the idea of radically altering the campus-state relationship, one year later the issue of "reorganizing" Arkansas higher education, and the locus of decision authority within the higher education policy domain, stood atop the state governmental agenda following the emergence of a dramatic proposal to abolish the BHE and to downsize the DHE.

Importing solutions: Introduction of the "New Jersey" Plan. In January 1996, a small number of campus officials who had grown contemptuous of the Board and the Department began privately discussing what they called the "New Jersey Plan" as a possible solution to the agencies' alleged "intrusions" into the affairs of campuses. The term referred to landmark New Jersey legislation two years earlier that had decentralized higher education in that state by replacing a strong coordinating board with a much weaker entity and creating a "Presidents Council" to facilitate campus self-regulation. The president of one Arkansas university cautiously recounted that the New Jersey Plan first found its way into circulation in Arkansas after he and several campus representatives had discreetly contacted New Jersey officials to inquire into the decentralization initiative. The Arkansas delegation provided copies of the legislation to state Senator Nick Wilson, perhaps the single most powerful member of the General Assembly, who the officials believed might share

their interest in diminishing Board authority, because the senator previously had quarreled with DHE staff over leadership of the community college sector. By all accounts, however, Wilson received the New Jersey Plan with complete disinterest. Of paramount concern to Wilson, according both to the senator's allies and adversaries, was his protracted fight with a rival faction of Senate Democrats. The presence of Governor Jim Guy Tucker—a strong chief executive and protégé of former Governor Bill Clinton who had provided key political support for the Board and the Department—provided additional disincentive to any attempt at undermining the agencies. Wilson acknowledged he had no use for the ideas presented him early in 1996, commenting:

> What people call the 'New Jersey' model—hell, that sat around a long time after I first got it. I don't even remember who first handed it to me—someone at an institution, I think. But, yeah, I'd seen something about [the New Jersey legislation], but I didn't pay much attention. It just wasn't relevant *at that time*.

The officials who secreted copies of the legislation to Wilson accepted his indifference, for none of them had considered the decentralization idea a feasible prospect. Indeed, the secrecy surrounding the dissemination of the New Jersey Plan concept reflected an awkward reality: while many campus leaders viewed recent decisions by the BHE and the DHE with disdain, most leaders did not favor a fundamental reordering of the campus-state relationship.

Gubernatorial resignation and a resulting "power vacuum." On Tuesday, May 28, 1996, the nation's media turned its attention to Little Rock, Arkansas, where a federal grand jury returned guilty verdicts against Governor Jim Guy Tucker on charges of conspiracy and mail fraud stemming from the ongoing "Whitewater" investigation into the real estate transactions of U.S. President Bill Clinton. The verdicts carried a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. Tucker's sentencing date was set for August. Following the conviction, Governor Tucker announced he would resign effective July 15, 1996. On the day of Tucker's expected resignation, hundreds of spectators gathered in the chamber of the Arkansas House of Representatives to witness the swearing-in of Republican Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister without any governmental experience prior to his election as lieutenant governor two years earlier. Instead of an inaugural celebration, a four-hour constitutional crisis arose when Governor Tucker "rescinded" his resignation minutes before the ceremony was to have begun. After several hours of backroom intrigue, Huckabee appeared on statewide television apprising Tucker of his near-complete loss of legislative support and warning him of an im-

pending impeachment vote. Tucker immediately resigned, and Huckabee was sworn into office as only the third Republican governor of the century (Haddigan, 1996).

The circumstances and timing of Huckabee's unusual ascension to office placed him in an exceedingly weak position—just months before the start of legislative session, the inexperienced, and unelected, Republican was flanked by overwhelming Democratic majorities in the General Assembly. So great was the political instability that lawmakers perceived the existence of a "power vacuum" in state government. One implication of the fragile political landscape was the opportunity afforded Senator Wilson to reassert his influence. Constrained in recent years by Governor Tucker and a rival Senate faction, Wilson's power had waned. Wilson, however, was renowned for his ability to exploit such power vacuums.

Emergence of higher education reorganization in the 1997 legislative session. The 81st Session of the Arkansas General Assembly convened on January 13, 1997, amid much political turbulence. With a new governor, who was ill prepared for a rancorous legislative session, governmental insiders contemplated scenarios by which politicians would likely jockey to consolidate their positions. Few such scenarios failed to calculate the significance of Senator Wilson, whose recent conflict with fellow senators made it essential he exploit the imbalance. Because Wilson's protracted battle with senate colleagues had eroded his power in the upper chamber, the senator had begun cultivating alliances with members of the House of Representatives. These alliances resulted from a complex set of forces, but especially important was Wilson's senate patronage of two-year colleges, which held substantial sway in the House because of their grassroots nature and strategic dispersal around the state. Senator Wilson's advocacy of the two-year colleges had made him the institutions' undisputed legislative champion. Wilson leveraged this status to influence members of the House, whose political fortunes rested, in part, on the support of their local two-year colleges. Campus and state agency officials who served as study informants recounted, with a mixture of admiration and revulsion, how the senator used the two-year colleges as political currency. One university's long-serving government-relations officer commented:

> Wilson is a consummate political animal. He recognized that in order to maintain power in the Senate, he needed leverage in the House, and he had a vehicle [to accomplish this] in the 2-year schools. He organized the House around what he was doing for these schools. For someone who does what I do for a living, [this] was beautiful to observe. . . . The Senate belonged to

[Wilson's opposition], but Wilson had the House tied up, and with no governor [as a] counterweight, the Senate couldn't do anything. That's [how he asserted] control in 1997.

On February 10, 1997, three weeks into the session, the presidents of the public campuses gathered at the state capitol for their weekly strategy meeting. Anticipation pervaded the meeting, for Senator Wilson had asked to address the group. Requiring but a few minutes to complete his remarks, the senator unveiled a proposal bearing remarkable likeness to the New Jersey Plan presented him a year earlier. Specifically, the senator proposed that the BHE be eliminated and that a new "Presidents' Council" be created to give campuses more control over their affairs. The Presidents Council would serve as the centerpiece of a new system of "self-regulation"of higher education in Arkansas, assuming many of the responsibilities of the current Board. Officials who attended the meeting described their colleagues as "surprised" and "stunned" by the proposal. Campus leaders were familiar with the New Jersey legislation through the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and from peers at professional meetings, but few had given serious consideration to such an initiative in their own state. Agency staff and legislators were surprised, too. A senior DHE official commented, "To say [we were] shocked and surprised at the idea of abolishing the Board and Department is a gross understatement; . . . no one was prepared for what Wilson unveiled."

The public rationale Wilson offered for the reorganization initiative was "excessive state bureaucracy" and "arrogant" bureaucrats in the Board and the Department. He also cited recent developments in New Jersey, and elsewhere, as evidence that "decentralization" was a national trend that Arkansas, too, should emulate. While few observers accepted as sincere Wilson's stated concerns for government efficiency, the rationale Wilson used helped lend public legitimacy to his proposal. Said one informant:

> I don't think Nick really understood or cared about the 'New Jersey plan', not at all. And he didn't care about the size of state bureaucracy. The [New Jersey] proposal was just something lying around at the right moment. Nick's justification made sense to some people—there was interest at that time to downsize government. But [reorganization] was really all about Nick's power base and [about] other historic developments. . . . It was an effort [of Wilson's] to endear himself to the two-year schools by getting rid of the Board, which the schools resented. The New Jersey Plan was a convenient tool at the right time and place.

Within days of Wilson's announcement, the issue of higher education "reorganization" was the chief topic of conversation in the higher education community. Issues that had been at the top of presidents' legislative

agendas plummeted in importance as reorganization emerged as the one issue attracting everyone's attention. A senior DHE official, echoing the sentiment of all study informants, noted: "Very suddenly, [reorganization] was the only topic of discussion in the higher education community." The issue also garnered front-page coverage in the state's largest-circulation newspaper. Less than a month after Wilson's comments to the campus presidents, HB 2076, the higher education reorganization bill, was passed by the House Higher Education Committee and sent to the floor of the chamber for a vote. In April, following Senate passage of a scaled down bill, Governor Huckabee signed into law the higher education reorganization measure.[7]

When asked to reflect on the decentralization episode, interview informants with intimate knowledge of the course of events attributed the issue's emergence to a complex intersection of political forces that few, if anyone, had predicted. One such informant, a senior legislator, summed-up the impressions of many of those interviewed when he observed:

> This is complex, . . . but the substantive merits of decentralization had nothing to do with [the reorganization] issue. A few institution officials had wanted to be free of the Board, so somebody heard about this thing in New Jersey and thought it might be a solution. But it went nowhere at first because nobody cared about [it]. It was just dead. Then there was Tucker's sudden resignation—that undid everything. Wilson saw an opportunity . . . to link lots of things that didn't have much to do with one another [in order] to promote his own agenda. It was pure accident that everything came together when it did—accident, plus Wilson's opportunism.

University "Restructuring" in Hawaii

In the spring of 1997, the University of Hawaii (U-H), a statewide multicampus system consisting of ten campuses on four islands, held the dubious distinction of being one of the nation's most highly regulated public university systems. State executive agencies exerted extensive control over key aspects of campus management, which was a function of the highly centralized nature of Hawaii state government. At that time, the issue of campus-state regulatory reform attracted very little interest from government officials, although numerous proposals to grant the U-H greater autonomy had arisen throughout the twentieth century. Such proposals had been discussed at the state's three constitutional conventions of 1950, 1968, and 1978, but each convention merely amplified ambiguities about the campus-state relationship. Academics and legislative staff also had produced, over the past several decades, numerous reports outlining specific ideas for autonomy, yet such reports

simply accumulated (Potter, 1984). By 1997, U-H President Kenneth Mortimer, in his fourth year in office, repeatedly had called for a "new" relationship between campus and state, but elected officials showed little interest. Then, during a six-months period in 1997, the issue of "university restructuring" suddenly emerged as a hot-button topic when political and business elite endorsed the idea of granting the university "quasi-public corporate" status, thereby granting the institution greater control of its financial and administrative affairs.

Economic crisis and political urgency. By the end of the first fiscal quarter of 1997, elected officials and the general public believed that Hawaii's lingering economic malaise had become a crisis. Hawaii had entered a seventh year of feeble economic growth, leading the state budget department to declare, in April of 1997, that the economy was in the throes of a "structural transition" (DBEDT, 1997). Moreover, the state economy had begun to absorb the first aftershocks of the 1996 plunge in the Asian markets. Compounding the sense of crisis that surrounded Hawaii's economy were looming statewide elections. Although 18 months away, the elections already had become the focus of intense media scrutiny because of the economic stagnation and the scope of the election cycle—all 51 House members, one-half of the Senate, and Governor Benjamin Cayetano faced reelection. The political stakes were highest for Democrats, who held all of the important statewide offices but recently had faced increasingly stiff Republican opposition. A Democratic legislator of senior standing recalled his colleagues' dismal outlook:

> Foremost, everyone was terrified and frustrated by economic conditions at the time. We had an election coming up; . . . it was just real bad timing. We knew the economy would be the number one issue and if something wasn't done, a few of us might not be around [in the next legislature]. That's when the *task force* arose.

The Economic Revitalization Task Force. On July 25, 1997, Governor Cayetano, flanked by the senate president and house speaker, announced the formation of the blue-ribbon Economic Revitalization Task Force (ERTF). The product of high-level backroom discussions following the release of the April economic report, the ERTF's mandate was to devise "a package of proposals for invigorating the state's economy that could be translated into a series of bills" when the legislature convened in January 1998 (Yuen, 1997). The panel's 27 members included the "captains of industry" from every major economic sector—finance, tourism, organized labor, education, and the military. Included in the group was President Mortimer.

The ERTF, whose business was conducted behind closed doors, organized into five "workgroups" to develop recommendations for economic stimulus. Each workgroup was to independently develop proposals for economic stimulus that would be debated by the larger Task Force when the group reconvened in the fall. The education workgroup subdivided into two bodies, one focusing on K–12 education and a second on higher education. From the outset, the focus of the higher education subgroup was single-minded articulation of a proposal granting the U-H more management authority. According to members of the ERTF interviewed for this study, the idea originated with President Mortimer, who raised it at the first meeting. The president's colleagues, being familiar with the frustrated history of governance reform in Hawaii higher education, understood that Mortimer's term, 'university flexibility,' referred to devolution of decision authority from the State to the University. One participant recalled, "We talked the same language. We thought of 'flexibility' in the traditional way—to take the [state] bureaucrats out of things, to allow the U-H to become like the better [universities] on the mainland."

The subgroup began to consider the operational details of alternative flexibility proposals. One idea, advanced in previous legislative reports, was that of patterning the University of Hawaii after the constitutionally autonomous University of California system. This idea, however, was rejected in favor of transforming the U-H into a "quasi-public corporation." The notion of converting public agencies into *quasi-public* entities had already found its way into the lexicon of state elected officials, as well as into state statute. One study informant recalled, "Some of us remembered that there was precedent for granting state run agencies extra powers by making them quasi-public agencies. So, we borrowed the idea." The precedent to which the informant referred was the legislature's recent decision to privatize a state-run hospital by granting it "quasi-public" status, thus permitting the hospital to manage its affairs absent stringent state oversight. Another subgroup member recounted his colleagues' familiarity with the hospital legislation and with the recent privatization trend in Hawaii:

> We modeled [the university flexibility proposal] after the state hospital system being turned into an independent entity. 'Quasi-public' was the [term] used at that time. The idea of turning [public agencies] into semi-private agencies had come into more common usage. Even the governor had jumped onto the privatization bandwagon. This is where the idea [for university flexibility] came from.

The subgroup decided to "borrow" the term "quasi-public" to refer to their as-yet unspecified university flexibility initiative.

Linking university autonomy with state economic development. In the three weeks between the final meeting of the university workgroup and the reconvening of the ERTF in late-October of 1997, the idea of reforming the campus-state regulatory relationship in Hawaii became linked with the goal of state economic development in the minds of influential business leaders who served on the task force. This linking of the university flexibility and economic development issues, two issues that historically had little association with one another, redefined the 'campus-state question' into a very different kind of question than that which had periodically arisen in Hawaii. Informants close to the sequence of events attributed the linkage to the advocacy efforts of President Mortimer.

Historically, efforts to secure greater operational autonomy for the University of Hawaii were couched in terms of academic freedom—greater freedom for the university was necessary to protect the core academic function of the institution and to raise the reputation of the university vis-a-vis its mainland counterparts. However, in the weeks prior to the reconvening of the ERTF, Mortimer asserted in private conversations with task force members that, if freed from excessive oversight, the university could become more "entrepreneurial," thus spurring economic development in the state. The freedoms that Mortimer sought included the authority of the university to manage its budget and lands, to negotiate faculty contracts, to procure its own goods and services, to manage auxiliary enterprises, and to retain its own legal counsel. A legislator related his understanding of the distinction between the older and the newer conceptions of autonomy:

> The [traditional] way of defining [university] 'autonomy' . . . centered on the benefits [which accrue] to the University. But when the issue arose in the ERTF, [autonomy] was defined in terms of benefits to the state. . . . 'If we free the University from state bureaucracy, then it can partner more [with industry], helping the economy.'

When the ERTF reconvened to adopt its legislative recommendations, substantial differences of opinion emerged about many of the proposals presented. Among the most controversial were the proposals to change Hawaii's tax structure and to consolidate various state regulatory agencies. However, little dissension surrounded the proposal to make the UH a *quasi-public corporation*. Among the 32 recommendations the ERTF publicly announced on October 22 was one to "restructure the University of Hawaii into a quasi-public corporation with independent accountability" (Perez, 1997). Hence, the proposal to decentralize the UH was adopted as a key strategy for economic renewal, despite little evidence or sustained discussion within the ERTF about the alleged economic impact of the university measure.

As the 1998 legislative session got underway, the issue of restructuring the campus-state relationship gained irresistible momentum. Despite immense expectations by the media and the general public that the bulk of the ERTF's recommendations be enacted as some form of economic stimulus package, differences between state business and labor interests doomed many of the proposals in legislative committee or on the chamber floors (Omandam, 1998). In sharp contrast, support for the university restructuring proposal, a relatively innocuous and politically feasible idea, strengthened. One month into session, higher education committees in both chambers passed similar restructuring bills crafted along the lines originally set out by Mortimer and his workgroup colleagues. In June 1998, Governor Cayetano signed the decentralization measure into law, claiming it as a momentous victory both for higher education and for economic development in Hawaii. Press accounts and editorials labeled Public Act 115 as a "Magna Charta" for the University of Hawaii. Senior university officials labeled the legislation "the most significant victory for higher education in 40 years." In November, Cayetano and Democratic legislative leaders won their reelection bids, having made the university legislation a prominent campaign theme. Democrats retained control of the General Assembly. One senior university official offered this assessment of the electoral significance of the legislation:

> Everyone was looking to the general election. When [the autonomy legislation] passed, it became everyone's 'going-home' stuff. The governor referred to it in campaign speeches. Legislators . . . told constituents they had freed the university from excessive state regulation. Everyone claimed it was good for the university and good for the economy; . . . they didn't let voters forget it.

Interview informants retrospectively cited "timing" as the critical factor in the emergence of the university restructuring issue. They noted that the issue of campus-state regulatory reform had circulated "beneath the surface" of the governmental agenda for years, emerging as a hot-button issue in the summer of 1996 only when it converged with several unexpected developments: a deteriorating economy, a volatile election season, and the creation of a task force to identify solutions for the state's troubled economy. A senior campus official reflected on the unusual convergence of forces that elevated the issue onto the governmental agenda:

> The stars just aligned. . . . The politicians were looking for an election issue, the business community had been looking for years for some kind of economic development initiative, and the UH [had] . . . been looking to expand its powers. The task force, and then Mortimer's pitch about autonomy, pro-

vided the opportunity. So, it was about the ERTF, the economy, the political crisis, the composition of the panel, timing; . . . it all tied together perfectly.

Decentralizing System Governance in Illinois

One of the most heated debates of the 1993 Illinois General Assembly centered on a proposal to disband the state's renowned "system of systems" for higher education, a complex structure consisting of four multicampus boards for public universities, a community college system, a private college sector, and a state coordinating board. Specifically, the proposal sought to abolish two multicampus governing boards, the Board of Governors (governing five campuses) and the Board of Regents (governing three campuses), establishing in their place local boards of trust for seven of the eight campuses in the two systems. While the idea of eliminating the boards had periodically surfaced over the course of several decades, few elected officials paid the idea serious attention, as legislators and campus officials were generally content with Illinois' well-regarded higher education system. In the span of a few months in 1992, however, the "decentralization" issue became the most prominent higher education issue facing lawmakers.

The Edgar administration: Challenges confronting Illinois' "education governor". In early 1991, newly elected Illinois governor James (Jim) Edgar's prospective education agenda, which he had pledged to make the top priority of his administration, was imperiled by three major challenges. First, Illinois was experiencing the economic downturn that had spread throughout the nation, and newspapers were beginning to focus attention on "the coming recession" (Gruber, 1991). A second obstacle involved Edgar's campaign pledge to reduce taxes and the size of state government, a pledge which, together with the economic downturn, now made the prospect of increased funding for education at all levels quite unlikely. A third challenge was that Democrats had already, in the words of one interview informant, "cornered the market" on prominent education issues such as Chicago school reform, thus denying the new administration an education reform issue of its own. This three-fold dilemma became manifest in the governor's first budget proposal, which he presented to the General Assembly two months after taking office. The budget provided only $30 million in new money for the state's $2.1 billion school aid allocation and no increase for higher education, a move the administration acknowledged would translate into large tuition increases at Illinois campuses. The budget proposal drew sharp criticism from Assembly Democrats.

Largely unnoticed amidst the budget wrangling was the introduction,

in January 1991, of a bill calling for the elimination of the Board of Regents and Board of Governors. The sponsor of the bill was a Republican whose district included a Board of Governors campus. As with similar bills the member previously had introduced, the 1991 version stood little chance of passage because legislators were disinclined to alter the current higher education design. Of foremost concern to campus and elected officials was the acute state budget crisis.

Lt. Governor Kustra's "gaffe." In October 1991, nine months into Edgar's term, and a few months into economic recession, Lieutenant Governor Robert Kustra appeared before the Macomb, Illinois Chamber of Commerce as part of a whistle-stop tour intended to remind the business community that the new administration was sensitive to its concerns. Instead, Kustra's speech in Macomb, home to Western Illinois University, a Board of Governors institution, helped catapult the university decentralization issue onto the governmental agenda. One senior administration aide who attended the speech recalled:

> As a habit, [Kustra] didn't use notes when he [spoke]. So, [he] started delivering this stepwinder of a speech, without knowing exactly [what he'd] say. But, [Kustra] knew Macomb is a university town and that they wanted their local university to have its own board of trustees because no one liked being part of the Board of Governors. So, [Kustra] began talking about this and that and before you know it, [he proposed] doing away with the Board. . . . "Let's give Western Illinois the board it deserves" [he said]. But the press was there—taking notes.

The headline in the next day's local paper read, "Lt. Gov. Proposes Shake-Up for WIU Board."

The lieutenant governor's remarks would surely attract attention. Kustra, the administration's point-man on education issues, was a higher education insider who had served on the faculty of several Illinois colleges. Additionally, he had chaired the Senate Education Committee during his ten-year legislative career. Kustra's perspective on Illinois higher education had been shaped by several episodes in which the alleged spending excesses of the regional governing boards attracted negative attention to higher education. The collective weight of Kustra's experience and position within the administration gave the lieutenant governor's remarks in Macomb a potency that exceeded his intentions, according to interview sources close to events. Concern over the potential ramifications of the published remarks led Kustra to seek Governor Edgar's counsel upon returning to the Capitol. A senior administration official who was present during the conversation recounted the exchange:

> [Kustra] popped [his] head into [the governor's office] and said, "Hey, I need to talk a few minutes here. You know how strongly I feel about these governance [issues]. Well, I kind of went out on a limb and said we should get rid of the Board of Governors and [Board of] Trustees. I was really talking off the top of my head. I don't want to embarrass you." Edgar replied, "Embarrass me? Shoot, I think it's a good idea. When will we do it?"

Governor Edgar's ready acceptance of Kustra's gaffe owed in large part to the governor's own past experiences with the Board of Governors and Board of Regents. Such experiences, including one in which the Board of Governors dismissed from the presidency of one of its campuses a personal friend of Edgar's, had by all accounts soured him on the boards.

Formation of the "Governor's Task Force on Higher Education." The Illinois General Assembly convened in January 1992 amidst intense partisan bickering between Governor Edgar and Assembly Democrats over the best way to address Illinois' deeply troubled economy. Against the backdrop of budget stalemate, the governor delivered his State-of-the-State speech on January 27, three months after Kustra's comments in Macomb. In the speech, Edgar urged the legislature to make across-the-board budget cuts. He also publicly aired for the first time the idea of abolishing the Board of Governors and Board of Trustees. There was little public reaction—Illinois' budget woes and the upcoming November elections dominated the attention of policymakers.

In April, Governor Edgar presented his proposed FY1993 budget to the General Assembly, his second budget without a university funding increase. Instead, Edgar voiced strong support for the idea of abolishing the two governing boards, and he called for the creation of a task force to study how the state could save money by "trimming the higher education bureaucracy." A week later, he announced the formation of a blue-ribbon commission, the Governor's Task Force on Higher Education (GTFHE), and appointed Kustra co-chair (Vitale, 1992). Observers assumed that the panel would move quickly to adopt a specific board-elimination proposal, since the governor already had advocated abolishing the boards. The panel's creation attracted instant press coverage, with both *The Chicago Tribune* ("Realign") and *Chicago Sun-Times* ("Streamline") running editorials in support of the idea.

The ten-member GTFHE held its first meeting in Springfield, Illinois in May 1992, in closed-door session. According to one participant, the group was "already of one mind to 'go after' the two [boards]." The panel agreed to reconvene in June so that final recommendations could be sent to the governor. At the second meeting, opened to the public after a newspaper brought suit against the commission, leaders of Illinois'

four university systems unanimously appealed for the Board of Regents and Board of Governors to be retained. The leaders vigorously contested the arguments that had been made for "decentralization," arguing that the current system-of-systems design was effective and that the board-elimination measure would not reduce costs, as the governor and the task force alleged. This testimony did little to change the minds of task force members. Despite clear or compelling "evidence" indicating that higher education decentralization would have the beneficial effects its proponents claimed, the GTFHE released its report on June 19 recommending that the two governing boards be abolished and that local boards be created for seven of the campuses in the two university systems (GTFHE, 1992).

The report's release galvanized Republican support for the decentralization initiative. When the General Assembly convened in 1993, the higher education decentralization bill, shepherded by the lieutenant governor, moved rapidly through the Republican-held upper chamber. In the House, however, the bill ran into insurmountable opposition from the Democratic majority. Although higher education decentralization remained a high-profile topic for the duration of the 1993 legislature, Democratic House control prevented enactment. Legislative passage was not assured until November 1994 at which time Illinois Republicans, mirroring the Gingrich-led sweep of the U.S. Congress, captured the governor's office and the Assembly in a dramatic sea-change election. On the night of the election, Governor Edgar and Lieutenant Governor Kustra, who still considered the higher education decentralization issue a personal priority, agreed by telephone to include their original decentralization proposal as part of the governor's so-called "Fast Track" legislation. Three weeks into the 1995 legislative session, Governor Edgar signed the university decentralization bill into law.

In reflecting on the course of events in Illinois, virtually all interview informants attributed the emergence of the university decentralization issue to a serendipitous convergence of political and economic forces that transcended higher education. They cited the intersection of several parallel developments—economic recession, the indeterminate future of Edgar's education agenda, withering criticism from Assembly Democrats about the administration's apparent lack of a coherent education agenda, Kustra's Macomb gaffe, and a general concern for reelection—as having played a determinative role in the unanticipated appearance of the decentralization issue. One campus president succinctly captured the sentiment of many informants, remarking:

> Timing, plus unforeseen events, made it possible. The economy helped provide a rationale to proceed, but the idea of [eliminating] the boards went

back years—the idea to decentralize was simply sitting around. It was about timing, [Edgar and Kustra] in office, the bad economy, and the need of political leadership to find an education agenda. [A] lot of unrelated things coming together made the issue come to life.

Study Findings

This study examined the public policy formation dynamics by which an important campus-state regulatory issue, decentralization of higher education, first emerges on the decision agenda of state governments. While the three decentralization cases studied vary in sociopolitical make-up and in the nature of initiatives pursued, several findings converge across cases.

First, the issue of decentralization achieved the state governmental agenda neither through a rational, problem-solving process nor as one more step in a series of incremental policy initiatives. Instead, the process of governmental agenda setting for higher education decentralization strongly resembled the "garbage-can"-like dynamics described by Kingdon in his study of agenda formation at the national level of American government. Against the backdrop of intermittent conflict between campus and state, three loosely related streams of activity drifted through each state governmental system: a stream of state political forces, a stream of problems bearing little direct relation to higher education, and a stream of decentralization solutions. Although the different streams of activity were not entirely unrelated to one another, they exhibited a surprising degree of independence—to paraphrase Kingdon, the campus-state interface produced its varied conflicts, campuses pushed their pet decentralization solutions, state governments generated their own problems, and politicians sought reelection. Out of the disconnectedness, higher education decentralization emerged as a "hot-button" issue when one or two individuals in each state recognized politically propitious moments in time to couple existing decentralization "solutions" with previously unrelated problems.

Additional findings provide support for a "Revised Garbage Can" interpretation of decentralization agenda setting. A second, and ironic, finding is that higher education decentralization became established on the state governmental agenda for reasons that were weakly related, even unrelated, to conflict over autonomy and control within the higher education policy domain. While episodes of campus-state conflict were sometimes important in the development and dissemination over time of specific decentralization ideas, such conflict did not serve as the primary stimulus to the emergence of each state's focal decentralization issue. Rather, the issue of higher education decentralization achieved promi-

nence on the governmental agenda when existing decentralization solutions (solutions borrowed from other states, borrowed from other policy domains in the same state, or developed earlier in time within the state's higher education community) became linked to problems of broader concern to policymakers (problems involving the economy, state budgets, or debates over the size of government) during periods of political volatility or electoral crisis.

Third, higher education agenda setting was characterized by a seemingly "irrational" sequence of problem identification and solution generation. Decentralization "solutions" did not originate in direct response to the problems with which they became publicly associated. Rather, solutions were developed independently and in advance of the problem for which proponents of the solution later claimed they were the answer. Once introduced into circulation, decentralization solutions floated around the higher education community, or in some other policy domain, awaiting the right problem (a problem "larger" than higher education) and the right political conditions (regime change and electoral crisis or conflict) to which they might become attached.

Fourth, in sharp contrast with conventional (Incrementalist) assertions about the nature and pace of policy change, higher education decentralization moved rapidly to a place of prominence atop the state governmental agenda. Each state's respective decentralization issue developed quite suddenly, traveling from the outmost periphery of policymakers' attention to become a topic of serious discussion and debate in a relatively short period of time.

A fifth finding involves the relative influence of various policy actors in the decentralization episodes. Namely, one or two individuals in each state played a determinative role in the course of decentralization agenda setting. In Arkansas, a lone legislator almost single-handedly elevated the decentralization issue to a place of prominence on the policy agenda. In Hawaii, a single campus president figured most prominently in his state's agenda episode. In Illinois, the governor and lieutenant governor were chiefly responsible for the advancement of the decentralization issue in their state. Of note, both through their action (resignation or creation of blue ribbon panels) and their inaction (inexperience or insufficient influence), governors in all three states affected the climate and structure of agenda change, sometimes without intending to do so.

A Policy Streams Model of Decentralization Agenda Setting

The convergence in findings across states permits the formulation of a grounded conceptual model (Appendix A) depicting how higher educa-

tion decentralization emerges as a hot-button issue on the state governmental agenda. This section of the article outlines the *Policy Streams* model's key elements and relationships. The subsequent section addresses several theoretical implications of the model and explores the model's prospects for explaining a range of higher education policy phenomena beyond that of the present study.

The conceptual model portrayed in Appendix A builds on Kingdon's Revised Garbage Can framework, but modifies it to account for contextual conditions arising in state government, in the domain of higher education, for the particular issue of campus-state regulatory reform. The model conceives of state governmental systems as "garbage can"-like in nature, embodying paradoxical elements of clarity and ambiguity, order and anarchy. Problems, participants, and solutions drift through the governmental system in relatively independent fashion. Yet, embedded in the seeming disconnectedness is a discernible dynamic linking several sets of processes that result in the emergence of the decentralization issue on the governmental agenda. This dynamic is the coursing of distinct "streams" of activity, against a backdrop of campus-state conflict, which become linked at particular moments in time by *Issue Opportunists* seeking to couple decentralization solutions with problems of broader statewide scope and with propitious political developments. This opportunistic coupling of different streams of activity bearing only nominal relation to one another is the chief mechanism by which the decentralization issue emerges as a hot-button topic attracting the serious interest of state policymakers.

The model conceptualizes state government as enveloped by regional, national, and global macrosystems, which bear upon higher education policymaking by providing flows of stimuli (informational, ideological, material, and political) into the major streams that course through state government. As the case summaries in this study amply show, the national political landscape and global or regional economic developments can exert profound, if sometimes indirect, influence on policymaking to reform the campus-state regulatory relationship.

Multitudinous sources of strain between public campuses and the state entities that interface with them are an enduring reality of the campus-state relationship and an embedded feature of the conceptual model. Such conflict, whether latent or manifest, results from various stressors: constitutional ambiguities, resource constraints, turf battles, and clashes in ego, personality and style of campus or state leaders. A critical point to be made with respect to this backdrop of campus-state conflict is that, prior to the convergence of political, problem, and solution streams, conflicts that appear to campus officials as "problems" are likely to be

regarded by state elected officials merely as "conditions" of little concern. In other words, while campus officials interpret campus-state conflicts as "problems" deserving of decentralization remedies, state elected officials view such episodes (to the extent that they notice) as conditions of insufficient importance to warrant serious consideration on the crowded policy agenda. It is not until the idea of decentralizing higher education becomes viewed as a solution to other kinds of problems that the underlying currents of conflict garner the attention of politicians.

The *State Political Stream*, the first of three separate streams of activity conceptualized to flow through the governmental system, consists of the routine cycle of political events in a state, as well as the singular political occurrence that creates disequilibrium within the system. Drifting along within the Political Stream are regularized decision opportunities, such as elections, that result in legislative, gubernatorial, and administrative turnover. This stream also includes the ebb and flow in influence of individual legislators, the balance of organized interests, and partisan rivalry. Occasionally, catalytic events can create crisis throughout the system. Sea-change elections, gubernatorial resignation, and fallings-out among legislators are some of the conditions that provoke conflict of unusual intensity, resulting in the opening of an *Issue Window* (technically, a "Political Window," about which more is said below) within which existing decentralization solutions may become linked with other kinds of problems.

Constituting a second stream of activity, the *State Problem Stream*, are the various "conditions" political elite have defined as "problems." At any given time, state officials have chosen to interpret certain conditions as problems meriting their attention. Higher education decentralization solutions tend to become "attached" to several particular kinds of problems: state economic stagnation or decline, budget crisis, and debate over the size and function of public bureaucracy. A problem defined in very severe terms may create an *Issue Window* (technically, a "Problem Window") within which an existing decentralization solution emerges.

There are three ways solutions become part of the *Stream of Decentralization Solutions*. Solutions may be imported into one state's higher education arena from another state's higher education arena. Here, campus officials borrow ideas from other states that already have experimented with campus-state reform. Such dissemination requires specialized knowledge of developments occurring in higher education, which campus officials obtain through interpersonal exchanges, professional meetings, or trade publications. Decentralization solutions also may be

borrowed from other policy arenas within the same state; devolution precedents in K–12 education or health care provide advocates with ready-made solutions to use when the right alignment of problems and politics occurs. Lastly, solutions may be developed within the higher education community. Although the solutions that gain currency among campus officials are directly related to the conflict campuses experience with state government, over time specific solutions do not remain tightly coupled with the conflicts that first produced them. Finding no problem that will propel them before state policymakers, solutions may lie dormant for years, later becoming attached to an entirely different problem than the one that first brought them either into existence or circulation.

Finally, *Issue Windows* are opportunities in time where, under the kinds of political conditions noted earlier, existing decentralization solutions may become linked with problems of statewide scope. Issue windows are brief in duration and may be one of two types: *political windows*, which open in response to political crisis, or *problem windows*, which open when policymakers interpret some "condition" as sufficiently serious to warrant remedy as a "problem." Ironically, the issue of decentralizing higher education arises during the opening of political or policy windows, *not* in direct response to episodes of campus-state conflict. When windows open, *Issue Opportunists* may attach decentralization solutions to problems of broad appeal, and thus propel higher education decentralization onto the agenda.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study pose provocative implications for the development of a conceptual literature on higher education policymaking in the states. The study's findings challenge the prevailing view of higher education policymaking as necessarily gradual, serial, and predictable—in a word, "Incremental." Building on contemporary developments in political science, this study argues for an alternative conceptualization of state higher education policy formation that diverges from incrementalism. The "garbage can" view of policymaking advanced here portrays the policy process as embodying paradoxical elements of clarity and ambiguity, order and anarchy, pattern and unpredictability. On one hand, elements of clarity, order, and pattern are seen in the structure of the individual streams of activity and in the rhythm of routine events occurring within the streams. Yet elements of ambiguity, anarchy, and unpredictability are found in the specific coupling of problems, solutions, and politics; indeed, many different couplings are possible, depending on the precise mix of metaphorical "trash" floating in the governmental

garbage can at the time an *Issue Opportunist* conjoins the streams. While Incrementalism may be the best explanation of state budgetary behavior, insofar as the substantive policy agenda for higher education, change can occur abruptly, rapidly, and unpredictably. The study, therefore, invites further specification and elaboration of the conditions under which higher education policymaking proceeds non-incrementally.
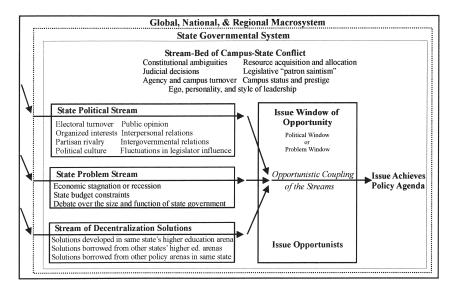
Like all conceptual models, the *Policy Streams* framework attempts to lend clarity to complex phenomena by ordering and simplifying reality and by identifying significant interlocking relationships (Dye, 1995). The extent to which this particular representation accurately reflects higher education policy processes across the states is unclear. Yet this new conceptualization provides higher education researchers with an alternative set of hypotheses to guide future investigation, and it aligns the higher education literature more closely with recent trends in political science—trends emphasizing dynamism and fluidity in American political systems (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Dodd & Jillson, 1994). Of course, as the first *comparative* analysis of state-level agenda setting for higher education, the study begs replication in other contexts. Theoretical elaboration and empirical testing go hand in hand. Although this investigation documented a conspicuous similarity in findings across a diverse sample of cases permitting the articulation of a conceptual model, replicating the study in other states may provide a stronger argument (or a weaker one) both for the findings and the model advanced. Of particular significance is the question of the "analytic generalizability" (Yin, 1994) of the *Policy Streams* model to explain different, but conceptually related, campus-state regulatory phenomena. To what extent, for example, does the grounded conceptual model help explain policy formation at the other end of the campus-state reform continuum—i.e, *centralization* of authority at the state level? Assessing the explanatory power of the *Policy Streams* model as it relates to a range of governance reform phenomena seems a worthwhile conceptual endeavor.

The several components of the *Policy Streams Model* also beg elucidation. For instance, a very interesting set of questions arises as to the "diffusion of innovation" (Berry & Berry, 1999; Gray, 1973; Walker, 1969) in higher education governance reform across the American states. This study documented some interesting ways decentralization ideas migrate across states and across policy arenas within the same state, but more systematic inquiry is needed to specify the nature of the migration. What is the speed and pattern of adoption of campus-state regulatory change among the states? How and to what extent do states borrow ideas from one another when reorganizing their systems of higher education? Is there, as Jack Walker (1969) found in his landmark

study of policy diffusion, a regionally based (or national) system of "competition and emulation" (p. 898) in the higher education policy adoption behavior of the states? Of course, similar questions could be asked about a range of policies other than that of campus-state regulatory policy. As political scientists have learned, such questions are complex ones, both theoretically and empirically (Berry & Berry, 1999). Perhaps it is due to such complexity that only a single published, empirical study (Hearn & Griswold, 1994) exists on the determinants of state policy innovation for higher education and no extant research addresses questions of governance innovation, in particular.

One additional implication that deserves attention pertains to the politically instrumental nature of higher education. In all three cases studied, the decentralization issue emerged when long-standing conflicts over the locus of autonomy and control in higher education converged with the more immediate electoral interests of political incumbents. More precisely, the decentralization issue became positioned for decisive action when state politicians recognized it as a partial answer to electoral distress. Although little is known about higher education's involvement or influence in state electoral processes and outcomes (McLendon & Hearn, 2003), this finding suggests the need for further exploration of the contours of a potential higher education-electoral "connection."

A final implication involves the way issues advocates advance their causes before state government. Because the rules of "garbage can" policymaking are quite different from those of incremental policymaking, issue advocates must think unconventionally about the advancement of their pet causes. Advocates would do well to recognize that success in the metaphorical garbage can of state government may not necessarily accrue to those with the best argument, or to those who persist longest, or even to those with the most impressive resources—although compelling logic, extraordinary endurance, and political capital indeed may prove critical at certain junctures. What seems more important is an appreciation of *contingency*. A lesson to be learned from the Issue Opportunists profiled in the cases is that successful advocacy requires ready solutions and an ability to move quickly when windows of opportunity open. Having solutions in hand is crucial; issue windows are too short-lived for "solutions" to be developed anew. Also, because problems and solutions are subject to "loose coupling" in the governmental garbage can, a given solution (like decentralization) can serve as an "answer" to many different kinds of problems, even those for which it was never intended as an answer. As in the garbage can of university decision making first articulated by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), issues arising in government tend to become entangled with many unrelated problems and solutions simply

because those other problems and solutions already exist at the time a focal issue comes before government officials. In this decision environment, effective advocacy depends upon neither the strictness of means-end hierarchies nor the accumulated momentum of policy history. Rather, effective advocacy derives from the diligence of attaching pet solutions to the varied problems floating through government, no matter how "irrelevant" the problems may appear to the desired solution.

Global, National, & Regional Macrosystem

State Governmental System

Stream-Bed of Campus-State Conflict

Constitutional ambiguities	Resource acquisition and allocation
Judicial decisions	Legislative "patron saintism"
Agency and campus turnover	Campus status and prestige

Ego, personality, and style of leadership

State Political Stream

Electoral turnover	Public opinion
Organized interests	Interpersonal relations
Partisan rivalry	Intergovernmental relations
Political culture	Fluctuations in legislator influence

State Problem Stream

Economic stagnation or recession
State budget constraints
Debate over the size and function of state government

Stream of Decentralization Solutions

Solutions developed in same state's higher education arena
Solutions borrowed from other states' higher ed. arenas
Solutions borrowed from other policy arenas in same state

Issue Window of Opportunity

Political Window
or
Problem Window

Opportunistic Coupling of the Streams

Issue Achieves Policy Agenda

Issue Opportunists

APPENDIX A: A Policy Streams Model of Decentralization Agenda Setting

Notes

[1]Coordinating boards were created with a "dual obligation" to campus and to state, but debate has long ensued over the precise nature of their orientation. The earliest coordinating boards were planning bodies with limited authority (Glenny, 1959), but the scope of their authority expanded as states replaced weaker boards with stronger ones. The dramatic growth in the number of states with *regulatory coordinating boards* during the 1960s and 1970s later led many observers to characterize coordinating boards as an "agency of state government" (Millett, 1982, p. 62), whose role "is one of advocating the state's interest in higher education, not that of institutions" (p. 113). In 1976, the Carnegie Foundation similarly concluded: "In practice . . . such agencies have been red-hot pokers pointed at higher education" (p. 15).

[2]In this study, the term *decentralization* refers to legislative transfer of decision authority from "higher", or more central, levels of state or system control to more local levels of campus control.

[3]There are various ways to conceptualize the policies states have pursued in devolving authority closer to the campus level. For example, Berdahl and MacTaggart (2000)

recently have written about the notion of the 'charter college.' In exchange for being granted their own board of trust and greater discretion in managing their administrative affairs, charter colleges would agree to meet certain predetermined performance goals and would limit their annual appropriation request from the state. The authors characterize St. Mary's College of Maryland as one successful example of the charter college idea.

[4]Agenda-research typically involves the study of opaque policy processes. Because such conditions can affect the reliability of interview data obtained, the first criterion of sample selection helped ensure the contemporaneousness of data collected.

[5]The seven differentiated dimensions of agenda formation included the following: the nature and extent of rationality exhibited by policymakers; stimulus to the issue's rise on the agenda; clarity of policymakers' goals and preferences; the relationship of problem-identification and proposal-generation processes; pace and predictability of the issue's rise on the agenda; recency of the issue's last appearance on the agenda; and relative influence of policy actors.

[6]In order to ensure consistent analytical parameters, the policy "agenda" of a state was defined as consisting of those select issues for which committee bills had been passed in either chamber of the legislature. It is important to note that the case summaries focus on agenda setting, rather than on the dynamics attending legislative enactment of the bills.

[7]Although the reorganization bill that was eventually enacted, HB 2076, contained more modest provisions than those Wilson originally had proposed, the legislation did in fact increase the power of the individual campuses vis-a-vis that of state officials. The legislation reconstituted the coordinating board, specifying its role to be that of statewide coordination, rather than statewide governance, of higher education and altering the composition and selection processes of board membership so as to ensure strong institutional representation. The bill also established a Presidents Council with (1) advisory responsibility for the selection of the executive director of DHE and (2) control of the coordinating board's policy agenda.

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