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The Making of an Activist Governing Board

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Activist governing boards are a new, controversial, and empirically unexamined phenomenon in public higher education. Although a great deal of concern has been expressed by faculty and administrators about this change in philosophy among some governing boards, we actually know very little about the nature of this ideological shift or associated changes in organizational structure, process, or mission. This article addresses that gap by developing a case study of one of the most prominent examples of an activist board, which emerged in Massachusetts from 1995 to 2000. The key questions are: How does an activist board develop? What are the reciprocal roles of board leadership and staff in that development?

The essays on activist governing boards to date have offered two main propositions to explain the emergence of board activism. The first theory is that the revolution in corporate governance, led by large institutional investors who increasingly demand that managers increase shareholder value, has migrated to the governance of public higher education (Chait, 1995; Lazerson, 1997). The second theory, more widely accepted, is that conser-

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vative political appointees are engaging in a partisan battle over the mission of public higher education (Healy, 1996; Lazerson, 1997; Stimpson, 1998). It is indeed true that in states with activist governing boards—primarily New York, Virginia, and Massachusetts—the majority of the board members were appointed by Republican administrations. And some of the players who have gained the most press, such as SUNY trustee Candace de Russy, have made waves by criticizing the "political correctness" of contemporary university campuses and an associated decline in moral standards (de Russy, 1996). Yet the influence of the increasingly partisan nature of board member selection has yet to be studied.

This paper analyzes the dynamics of policy reform in an activist governing board. A conceptual framework derived from recent theoretical work in sociology provides a definition of board activism and the concept of institutional entrepreneurship, which is the study's theoretical anchor. I then analyze the board's leadership and staff as institutional entrepreneurs by examining the policy-reform process. Finally, I discuss the implications of activist boards for public higher education governance.

Conceptual Framework

Although there has been a great deal of discussion of activist governing boards, no specific definition of board activism currently exists. To some, it is the appointment of business-oriented leaders who hold positions on corporate boards, while to others it is the appointment of conservative or Republican board majorities. In this paper, I understand board activism as process rather than as personnel. How do activist governing boards differ in their behavior from more traditional regulatory boards? How do they build an organizational structure to support this new role? Thus, for this paper, activist boards are those who take an independent and aggressive role in the policy-making process, resulting in organizational characteristics that are appreciably distinct from traditional boards.

To understand this new phenomenon within a complex organizational structure, I develop the concept of "institutional entrepreneurship" to examine the role of board leadership and staff in the emergence of an activist governing board within highly institutionalized environments. To do this, we need to understand recent developments in institutional theory, which have incorporated concepts of power, leadership, and strategic action into a theory that has been largely used to understand organizational stability rather than change.

Within an institutional theory framework, institutions are not simply organizations—but organizations that are imbued with our most deeply held values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are embedded in the organizational structure, thus constraining the actions that can be legitimately

taken by the institution. Although institutional theory has been seen as somewhat deterministic, a fundamental premise of the old institutionalism was its examination of power relationships among individuals and interest groups (Selznick, 1949). Indeed, two of the main purposes of institutional analysis were to investigate the role of institutionalization in the creation and protection of elites, the displacement of original goals and intent, the emergence of competing interest groups. The organization adapts to powerful interests in the institutional environment, sometimes in subconscious ways.

Nevertheless, Charles Perrow (1986) has criticized the old institutionalism for its disproportionate interest in goal displacement. Since goals are set by elites, Perrow argued, a focus on goal displacement reinforces the status quo in organizations and, hence, existing sets of power relations and stratification mechanisms both among and within organizations. A focus on unanticipated consequences has similar problems, since the anticipated consequences are controlled by organizational elites. In Perrow's model, "power is the ability of persons or groups to extract for themselves valued outputs from a system in which other persons or groups either seek the same outputs for themselves or would prefer to expend their effort towards other outputs" (p. 259). Power is thus the ability to establish or alter the distribution of outputs or even the outputs themselves, limited by the bounded rationality of the actors. Internal groups seek to use the organization to serve their own needs and preferences over the needs and preferences of other groups, and external groups seek to use the organization to change public policy or the value premises on which policy is created. Control over the organization is not only limited by the bounded rationality of the actors, but also by the degree of organization and power in opposition groups.

Although institutional theory has addressed issues of interest and agency, it rarely deals explicitly with a power perspective, which is treated more as subtext in the discussion of interests. As Paul DiMaggio (1988) argues, interests have been defocalized in institutional theory because they are so prominent in other theories of organization and in political science and sociology more broadly. Interest group mobilization is so central to these perspectives that they approach disciplinary dominance, and institutional theory was explicitly designed to counter the highly rational assumptions underlying that perspective. As a result, institutional perspectives may have been somewhat marginalized, since the theory restricted its applicability to organizations that are highly institutionalized but that have a weak scientific base, such as banks, community organizations, and higher education (DiMaggio, 1988; Perrow, 1986).

Leadership can play an important role in institutional processes. Radical organizational change requires leadership in the early stages of the institu-

tionalization process, through the building of organizational sagas, the development of resources and legitimacy, and the migration of new organizational models (Clark, 1970; DiMaggio, 1991; Kraatz & Moore, 2002; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Rao, 1998). Leaders must also successfully negotiate the institutionalization process by recognizing that institutions constrain the choices that are possible or legitimate (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Selznick, 1957). During these times of radical change, staff often play an important and disproportionate role in the institutionalization process, as discontinuous change upsets existing hierarchies and forces leaders to rely upon staff for expertise (Barley, 1986).

The concept of institutional entrepreneurship can provide leverage in understanding the role of leaders in creating new institutions (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Selznick, 1957). In the case of higher education governance, multiple institutions hold sway, each with its own set of embedded values, interests, and shared norms. Legislators, campus and system administrators, and faculty all have institutionalized sets of values and norms that must be negotiated by policy makers in higher education. Statewide governing and coordinating boards also have a set of institutionalized values and practices that have become legitimate over time in the field (Berdahl, 1971; Richardson et al., 1999).

Successful institutional entrepreneurs are able to use their social capital, political power, and leadership skills to negotiate these multiple and often conflicting institutional demands. Institutional entrepreneurs "spearhead collective attempts to infuse new beliefs, norms, and values into social structures" (Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000, p. 240). They are disproportionately influential in setting policy agendas, framing events, and managing political conflict—thus reinforcing the legitimacy and credibility of their actions. As we will see in this case, the dynamic relationship between a governing board and its staff led to a dramatic reconstitution of the substance and process of higher education policy making in the state.

METHOD

This case study investigates the degree to which activist governing boards have engaged in institutional entrepreneurship, using as a strategic site the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education from 1991 to 2000. I selected this strategic site because of the emergent nature of the phenomena to be studied and the complex and interrelated nature of the research question (Yin, 1994). The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education constitutes an "extreme case" of theoretical interest because it moved radically and discontinuously from an identity as a regulatory board to that of an activist board in 1995. This abrupt shift fit well with the theoretical needs of the study, focusing my effort on a case that is theoretically meaningful. Com-

parative case studies would perhaps be ideal, but Massachusetts is the most prominent case of the contemporary movement toward activist governing boards and is therefore the best example of where this process may lead in the future.

I conducted interviews with a wide range of participants, both within the Board of Higher Education and with important actors in the system: system officers, lobbyists, college presidents, faculty union representatives, and senior administrative staff. All of the participants agreed specifically to be named in the case study, although each had the opportunity to request anonymity prior to the interview. In a few cases, I have made quotations from staff members anonymous to eliminate any possibility that the revelation could damage either their employment or reputation. It should be noted that staff titles reflect their employment during 1995-2000 and are not necessarily true today. In all, 21 interviews were completed, taped, and transcribed verbatim. I developed interview protocols that operationalized the elements of the conceptual framework.

In addition, a rich array of archival documents, internal memoranda, letters, system reports, and budget data were made available to me. I also utilize secondary literature, media reports, and independent analyses to further develop the cases. The unit of analysis is the system board, but I pay particular attention to the board's relationships both with campus actors and with powerful actors in the external environment, particularly those connected with the legislature and governor's office.

Public Higher Education in Massachusetts

Increasingly, states are using academic restructuring policies to increase system efficiency (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Gumport & Bastedo, 2001). New York and Massachusetts, in particular, have used their academic policies to increase the stratification of campuses within the system. Massachusetts has made a marked transition from a regulatory logic, which emphasized routine control and oversight of campuses, to an activist logic that emphasized top-down control of the policy system and business-oriented solutions to administrative problems such as cost and efficiency. To understand this transition more fully, it is important to understand the political and structural characteristics of public higher education in Massachusetts.

Public higher education in Massachusetts consists of 29 campuses serving over 175,000 students. Like California, the system consists of three major segments: 15 community colleges, nine four-year comprehensive universities, and five campuses of the University of Massachusetts. Unlike California, however, there is no state formula to determine the qualifications of students admitted to each segment. Each state and community col-

lege campus has a board of trustees with 11 voting members, all of whom are appointed by the governor. These trustees have oversight for the institution's educational and financial well being and all other functions not specifically delegated to the Board of Higher Education (BHE). The BHE was the successor board to the Board of Regents of Higher Education (BOR) and the Higher Education Coordinating Council (HECC).

The BHE has the statutory authority to approve and eliminate academic programs, establish institutional missions and goals, approve admissions standards, set tuition and approve fees, require and conduct data analysis, set presidential salaries, and negotiate with employee unions for contracts. The University of Massachusetts is more independent from BHE control than the state and community colleges, negotiating, for instance, with its own faculty and staff unions. As a result, it is said that the BHE has "governing level authority" over the state and community colleges and "coordinating level authority" over the University of Massachusetts. The BHE has 11 members, all of whom are appointed by the governor and who serve for renewable five-year terms. The governor selects the board chair and can remove him or her at any time. The BHE selects the chancellor—the state's chief executive for public higher education—who serves at its will. Campus boards of trustees select campus presidents with BHE approval.

Legislators have been dissatisfied with the board since its inception in 1965. In the face of a series of financial crises, the board proved to be too political and timid for legislators' taste (Crosson, 1996). In November 1995, Governor William Weld appointed James F. Carlin, who had served in the cabinet of two former Democratic administrations, as chair of the BHE with the mandate to "eliminate waste" in the higher education system. The BHE, known for its political backbiting and rapidly changing leadership, was a difficult place to make any meaningful change. Although a few new members were also appointed, Carlin largely worked with the existing board members.

Carlin was determined to make bold policy shifts from the start. Beginning in fall 1996, admissions standards, once largely set by the campuses, would now be set by the BHE and monitored strictly for implementation (Bastedo, 2003). Remedial education, largely ignored under the Board of Regents, was reduced dramatically at the four-year colleges (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). Student tuition and fees were lowered for six consecutive years. Academic programs were forced to undergo program productivity reviews, which led to the termination of 52 programs in 1996 alone. An incredible range of policies in academic affairs, student financial aid, and mission differentiation were developed and implemented during this five-year period (1995–2000). (See Table 1.)

These new BHE policies were passed with remarkably little conflict among state board members, campus presidents, institutional boards, and faculty

Table 1

Selected Policies of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, 1995-2000

Academic	
Admissions standards	Minimum high school GPA for incoming students at four-year colleges raised to 3.0. Percentage of students exempted from the admissions standards cut to 10%. Data monitoring to ensure compliance.
Remedial education	Remedial education limited to 5% of the incoming freshman class at all four-year colleges.
Access	
Tuition reductions	Tuition reduced six consecutive years (1995-2001), for a total reduction of 32%. Fees increased, but overall reduction in student costs of 9.5% systemwide.
Joint admissions	Program that allows students to be jointly admitted to the community college and four-year campus of their choice simultaneously, providing for "seamless transfer" if they maintain a 2.5 GPA at the community college.
Tuition advantage	Provides a one-third tuition discount in the junior and senior years to students who transfer from a community college and earn a 3.0 GPA.
Community colleges	"Free" community college tuition and fees for low-income students with family incomes below $36,000.
Mission	
Mission review	Review of each institutional mission statement to align with state interests. Development of measurable campus priority statements. Use of incentive funds to push campuses to comply with board policies and priorities.
Academic program review	Statewide review of academic programs with low enrollments, leading to the BHE's termination of 52 programs. Statewide reviews of program in key areas such as computer science.
Special colleges	Development of Commonwealth College, an honors college at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, to attract the state's highest achieving students. Promotion of the idea of "charter colleges" that are released from state regulations but are more closely monitored for performance.

(Bastedo, 2005; Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). Support from both the Republican governors and the Democratic legislature was extremely strong on the major issues faced by the BHE during this period, and they routinely made their feelings known to campuses and the public through the media. Campus presidents (with a few key exceptions) often seemed fearful to take on a state board with such broad support and were heavily managed with financial incentives controlled by the BHE.

Carlin found ways to manage often-important constituents. Institutional board members—appointed by the same governors who appointed the BHE—were courted through statewide trustee retreats to the consternation of campus presidents. The faculty were organized primarily around issues of interest to them as union members, such as faculty tenure, pay, and benefits. Separate unions represented the faculty in each of the three segments and coordination among them was extremely weak. Distracted by issues surrounding tenure, which they viewed as a basic threat to their livelihood, the faculty were unable to organize successfully around broader policy issues. As a result, the BHE, its staff, and the state government were the major players in policy reform during this period and, hence, are the focus of this case study.

THE INTRAORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS OF POLICY REFORM

This section addresses the intraorganizational dynamics that helped to support activist policy making for public higher education in Massachusetts. I first analyze the leadership and political resources provided by board chairman James Carlin. As I discussed earlier, institutional theory has become increasingly interested in the sources of organizational change and, in particular, in the role of leaders or "institutional entrepreneurs." I argue that Carlin used his social skills as a leader and his vast political resources within the state to successfully develop a coherent and legitimate set of policies and drew upon those resources to ensure that his policies were implemented.

At the same time, other salient actors within the policy making sphere must be considered. I next address the underestimated role of board staff in policy making. As institutional theorists have tried to understand the possibilities for transformative change in institutionalized environments, they have identified specific processes that facilitate change, including the role of staff in the institutionalization process (Barley, 1986).

Board Chair: Leadership and Political Resources

Stakeholders almost universally believed that Carlin's rise to the BHE chairmanship was the key event that transformed public higher education in Massachusetts. A charismatic leader with substantial experience in gov-

erning higher education, he had served for nearly a decade as a trustee of the University of Massachusetts and, as a result, had a clear vision for how higher education should be reformed. At the same time, he had extensive political experience as the head of three state agencies and a long track record of working effectively with both political parties. Within the two institutions that dominated policy making for public higher education, state government and college governance, Carlin had extensive experience to rely upon when making decisions. And as a self-made millionaire, he also had many of the personal qualities of leadership needed for transformative change.

Carlin was nevertheless a divisive figure, with strong advocates and equally forceful detractors. His advocates tended to be political leaders, board members, and the media. Board members appreciated how well Carlin managed the board, ensuring that he included their opinions in the process. The impression from an outside perspective was that Carlin completely dominated the board, whose members simply fell into line. To a certain extent, this was true. "He circumvents process quite a bit," according to board member Tamara Davis. "He makes decisions as a leader, rather than talking and talking" (qtd. Healy, 1997, p. A41).

Yet it was also true that Carlin was in constant communication with each and every board member, gauging their responses to policy initiatives and trying to adapt his ideas accordingly, or to persuade them to see things his way. "If there was a controversial vote, Carlin was very, very good at quietly calling you and soliciting where you stood and, if he didn't think he had the votes, it wasn't going to be on that agenda," according to board member Peter Nessen. "I give him credit. It was well done. The board never looked fragmented yet there were lots of issues. . . . I think there was a lot of controversy, good controversy, but it was muted at the board meetings because it had been resolved in the committee meetings." Fellow board member Jane Edmonds, who often opposed Carlin's policies, nonetheless respected Carlin's ability to get things done:

> I respected [Carlin] as a businessman, I really respected how he could get things done. He stacked the board with his friends and did so shamelessly. This is the way you get things done. He was results-oriented, somewhat like the bull in the china shop at times, but, doggone it, that guy got stuff done. . . . He wouldn't take me for granted even though he knew he could probably get around me or others, but he would always pick up the phone and he would say, "This is important to me. I want a unanimous vote on this." And I would entertain what he had to say. . . . That's the genius of Carlin. Carlin knew what all of us were thinking.

Even staff members were impressed. "He was a master at getting his board motivated and on the same page," one high-level staffer said. "He was very

good at that, with his little dinners and all. He had everybody rowing in the same direction, even [board members] who were typically wanting to be contrary." Vice Chancellor Judith I. Gill often saw the process first-hand. "The board members had really felt that they were part of a club with Jim because he was calling them all the time," she said. "I never in my entire career have known a chairman who spent as much time on board business as Jim Carlin did. . . . He talked to each board member at least once a week, and he called [BHE Chancellor Stanley Z. Koplik] and/or me three times a day. He was in constant communication with people."

Carlin not only communicated with board members and staff, but also with powerful people in the legislature and the governor's office. As the former head of three state agencies, Carlin had built extensive relationships with everyone who mattered in Boston. That would have meant nothing if Carlin had not been so respected personally for his ability to solve difficult problems and his willingness to cross party lines to find solutions. In many quarters, Carlin was seen as the ideal public servant who was willing to pitch in when necessary but who never needed the job so badly that his personal interests trumped the public interest. "I think people worked for Carlin across the street [in the legislature and the governor's office]; and if he walked in, they listened," Lynette Robinson-Weening, the BHE director of academic affairs, commented. "They opened their door, they listened, and they did what he wanted."

In contrast to the way Carlin managed his staff and board members, there is a common belief that he never tried to engage the campuses in a similar way. Carlin's style was to use the board to pass policy and then hold board staff and campus presidents accountable for implementing them. "[Carlin], in many ways, accomplished a lot of things by himself and through the board and not necessarily by having everybody on the same message," Dale Hamel, the director of fiscal affairs, noted. "It was amazing how much he was able to accomplish by force rather than bringing people along." Vice Chancellor Jack Warner agreed. "People don't like change. It's a fundamental human principle. . . . So in general I liked the idea that the state coordinating board was aggressive with its change agenda, and that it was speedier than most campuses would have liked in framing and enacting policy."

Now the board's chancellor, Judith Gill has taken Carlin's lesson to heart. Carlin and Gill once had a heated argument over some exceptions that campuses wanted to make to new policies for academic programs. Gill later recalled the conversation:

> He said, "You know, we need to do this the way business does it, and that is just assume that any policy as written can be amended. But you don't develop a policy or regulation that provides for all these exceptions, because then you don't have anything." And that is something that I have used even to this day.

Carlin addressed the issue of his policy-making style in a 1997 interview. "I tend to attack a problem immediately. My theory is, you move along to a solution of a problem. If you're on the wrong track a little, you make an adjustment in course rather than wait until you've figured out the solution and then move."

While the board staff tended to be impressed with Carlin's ability to make policy happen, campus actors tended to believe that his lack of engagement with them impeded their buy-in and, thus, the policy's implementation. "It was a common phenomenon," according to UMass Associate Vice President Daphne Layton, "with many of Jim Carlin's shoot-first, ask-questions-later policies, which was that policy got enacted with very little advance discussion and proved quite quickly to be unworkable in its current form, and therefore required the staff to go through contortions to re-write it or re-phrase it or revise it in ways that could make sense." William O'Neil, executive director of the State College Council of Presidents, expressed similar feelings: "What this top-down approach caused was a two- or three-year upset, which was totally unnecessary, with the campuses trying to get around the regulations. So what happens is that as soon as the regulation is passed, you're going to find institutions trying to get around it. You become very adept at that over time." Nor were board staff universally on board with Carlin's policy-making style: "It was the opposite of how I'd always thought policy would be made," one staffer said, "which was that it starts at the bottom and works its way up. This is imposed."

Complaints about Carlin's approach to governance were frequent. Carlin saw himself as an agent of the public whose job was to maximize public benefits and public dollars. The campuses wanted someone to promote the strengths of the system. Nancy Harrington, the president of Salem State College, was one of many who held this view:

> In my opinion, there is no advocacy group for public higher education in Massachusetts. When I would raise that with Chairman Carlin, he would say, "We need quality before we can advocate." I believe there's a lot of quality in the system and I believe one way of expanding the quality is to advocate at the same time. I think you build morale, you build a ground swell of interest. . . . It's almost a halo effect. You get that halo started and then it begins to build and people think, "Oh yeah, the University of Massachusetts is a good university." And then resources start to come to it, donors start to give to it, people start to think of it as a jewel and not as a tarnished stone.

UMass staff believed that Carlin used the newspapers to denigrate the quality of the system to build support for his own policy prescriptions. "I fundamentally disagree with the implementation and the use of the media as punishment," Kelli Armstrong, the UMass director of enrollment management, said. "I saw the role of the Board of Higher Ed as more of a coordi-

nating agency and a support agency and a public relations agency. So I think it was like, 'Good for you, for raising standards. We need to do that. But do we really need to punish people?'"

State college faculty simply despised Carlin. After a divisive three-year series of collective bargaining negotiations—during which he demanded reforms to faculty tenure practices—Carlin became anathema. "He came in with a style that was very confrontational, very deliberately insulting to the faculty and to the students and to the administrators at the colleges," according to the state college union president, Patricia Markunas. "He was a very difficult individual to deal with as the board chairman and at the bargaining table." Jay Laporte, the BHE head of human resources who dealt with union leaders daily, said that their virulent hatred of Carlin came through even more in private discussions. "They hate him. Carlin is a curse word," he said. "And I still have to listen to it: 'What are you, Carlin?' Or, 'That's Carlin-esque.' It's not Kafka-esque anymore, it's Carlin-esque."

The media tended to fawn over Carlin, even in a liberal state like Massachusetts. Beyond the substance of the policies that he proposed, the media nearly always noted Carlin's charismatic personality. "He is bombastic to some, brilliant to others," wrote one *Boston Globe* columnist. "Truth is, he's probably somewhere in between. He speaks with the sensibilities of Mark Twain and acts with the force of Hulk Hogan. He is alternately infuriating and charming, and he has a knack for finding simple answers where others see an impenetrable morass" (McGrory, 1999, p. B1). Similar evaluations appeared in newspapers throughout the state. "Carlin's track record of integrity and unswerving commitment to improving education quality gives [sic] his words authority," said the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette.* "If administrators and faculty fail to heed Carlin's heartfelt warnings, the system will certainly lose ground—and painfully, inevitably fade away." Even the *Daily Hampshire Gazette,* the hometown newspaper of UMass Amherst, had positive words to say when Carlin retired. "There are too many at all levels [of government] who have lost any enthusiasm for excellence, and too few who are still growing in their jobs. Carlin has made a contribution as a catalyst for change and an antidote to mediocrity."

Board Staff: Expertise and Interdependence

Due to Carlin's larger-than-life personality, observers consistently underestimated the role of the staff in policy development. Carlin himself routinely credited the staff—and Chancellor Koplik in particular—but their behind-the-scenes role remained largely private and unnoticed. Although Carlin had a good deal of experience in higher education governance, he nonetheless needed to rely on the board staff for direction and expertise. Board staff were not just the implementers of policy, but active and salient participants in the policy-development process.

Largely unrecognized, even by staff hired during the Carlin period, was the degree to which Chancellor Koplik had shaped the Carlin agenda. After Koplik's appointment in September 1993—two years before Carlin's—he toured each of the state's 29 campuses with the goal of assessing the current situation and developing appropriate policy responses. After a year, he announced three major goals: to address admissions standards, reduce remedial education, and improve system coordination. Until Carlin's appointment, however, these plans remained on the drawing board. A Task Force on Admission Standards was appointed in 1994, but the result was a completely divided group who could not agree on any of the proposed solutions. After Carlin's appointment, he resolved the year-long debate in a matter of weeks. But it is nonetheless true that admissions standards were in fact Koplik's major agenda item, which Carlin then appropriated.

Other policies represent substantial staff work in policy development as well. Vice Chancellor Gill often took the lead on policy development. While the idea for Commonwealth College came from board member Aaron Spencer, its vision statement was written under Gill's supervision. Gill was also responsible for the "add a program, drop a program" policy. Fiscal director Dale Hamel developed two of the major financial aid incentives, the Tuition Advantage Program and the Community College Access Grants. And while Koplik had first proposed reducing remedial education (and Carlin aggressively promoted the reduction), it was Vice Chancellor Jack Warner who produced the major policy revisions.

Although the staff by definition works for board members, that does not explain why they often embraced Carlin's agenda so enthusiastically, especially since Carlin saw the staff as a threat to his agenda. As a result, he viewed staying in contact with the staff as even more important than contact with board members so that he could maintain control over policy development. "I think [the staff has] been pretty good," he said in a 1997 interview, "but we are all products of our environment, and they all came from the academy" (Healy, 1997, p. A41). If anything, Carlin underestimated staff commitment to his agenda. Prior experiences with earlier boards of higher education and state agencies, as well as with public campuses, had led to dissatisfaction with the pace of change in academic organizations. Although Carlin's initial proposals struck many as extreme, he was able to tap into this dissatisfaction in a way that built their commitment and helped to shape their values.

Gill vividly recalls her own conversion. As the director of policy analysis for the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), Gill was a dedicated incrementalist, committed to slow, planned change. After being asked by the Ford Foundation to study how higher education would manage change in the next century, her perspective changed radically:

> I may not always have agreed with Jim at the beginning but it had become clear to me years before that, if higher education was ever to be responsible and to meet the needs of a technologically oriented and global economy, that it was going to have to change dramatically. And it was clear from the first meeting that Jim Carlin held that higher education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was going to change dramatically and it did.

In Gill's view, Massachusetts was completely unprepared for the coming challenges that higher education would inevitably face. A Massachusetts native, Gill had worked as a lobbyist for UMass President Robert Wood in the 1970s; after returning from WICHE in 1995, she was dismayed at the state of public higher education. "When I came home it was clear there was no system here," she said. "In fact there was less of a system in 1994 than there was in 1976 when I left."

Gill was not the only person dissatisfied with public higher education. Nearly every member of the board's senior staff had a certain level of unhappiness with the pre-Carlin situation. Many of them had been hired prior to Carlin's appointment, and all of them stayed until his departure in late 1999. Vice Chancellor Jack Warner is a case in point. Recruited from the senior student affairs position at New Bedford's Bristol Community College, Warner might have been expected to promote a campus perspective within the board staff. Yet Warner was as dissatisfied with the pace of change as Koplik and Gill:

> I'm skeptical from the perspective of what everyone would agree is the glacial pace of change on college campuses, especially university campuses. It's a little bit of a cultural shock coming back to a campus from the Board because the pace of change is so slow. . . . People play out agendas to block change. People don't like change. It's a fundamental human principle, and they'll dig in whenever changes are made. Even if they can see the value in them, they'll often buck it on the details level and that often prevents change from happening at all, or it ends up happening so slowly that it's barely noticeable. So in general I liked the idea that the state coordinating board was aggressive with its change agenda and that it was speedier than most campuses would have liked in framing and enacting policy.

Even Lynette Robinson-Weening, who thought Carlin's style and approach were too punitive, generally supported Carlin's substantive agenda. "It's an interesting question, but in most of his other areas, if you took the approach, how he did it, out of the picture, I think they were good values for someone who was running a higher ed system."

What became clear over time is that Carlin and the staff needed each other to make reform work. Carlin provided energy, direction, and political resources. Without Carlin, attempts at policy reform were stillborn. Yet Carlin needed the staff just as much as they needed him. The staff provided exper-

tise on higher education, both at the campus level and from the experiences of other state agencies. They were often responsible for providing the ideas that Carlin would selectively choose and promote. The staff also served to dampen down Carlin's more extreme ideas—such as completely eliminating community college tuition and billing high schools for the remedial education that their graduates needed at public colleges. In short, both were indispensable for public policy reform.

The Legacy of Board Activism in Massachusetts

Overall, the policies that Carlin and his staff developed left a rather contested legacy for public higher education. This is particularly true for access, which served as the centerpiece of the systemic reform. On the one hand, the BHE developed incredibly progressive policies that made real gains for access, especially for low-income students attending community colleges. On the other hand, those same students—particularly those from minority groups—were progressively denied initial access to upper levels of the system due to admissions standards and, to a lesser extent, remedial education policy. What one hand gave, the other hand took away.

The same can be said for campus autonomy. Carlin's modus operandi was often to give campus presidents more discretion in how they would implement board policies, allowing policies to be translated appropriately for each campus context. Yet he also demanded more of them in the way of proof of movement, through data monitoring and performance measurement. This requirement is not unreasonable, but overall it has meant tying each campus ever more closely to the state government. Paradoxically, a board appointed exclusively by Republican governors has, in fact, increased government control over education rather than reducing it. This phenomenon is curious in an era when releasing the discipline of markets is often seen as a panacea for public education. Indeed, in most states, policy has more influence over campuses than it ever has.

Board autonomy is being threatened as well. One of Carlin's greatest strengths was his web of relationships with those who mattered in the corridors of power, from key legislators to government staffers to governors themselves. Under Gill's supervision, board staff were increasingly solicitous of legislative power brokers, who provided great benefits during budget negotiations over state appropriations. The result, however, has been such a close connection between the board and state government that it is increasingly seen as a state agency. Gill, now the chancellor, is considered to be a member of the governor's cabinet; and the board's new chairman, Stephen Tocco, is a close confidante of two prior governors. In a state where the legislature plays the dominant role in state appropriations, however, the close ties between the BHE and the executive branch may reduce their in-

fluence over the government's most important branch. In addition, to many observers, the closer ties reflect a lack of independence by the board, potentially reducing its credibility overall as an independent voice for public higher education in the state. Although the demands of the state above and the campuses below have squeezed the coordinating board in the past, the fact that it is part of neither raised its credibility with all parties as an advocate for the public interest. This credibility may be seriously threatened by such a close connection to the executive branch.

From a political perspective, it remains vitally important to retain the independence of the state board of higher education. The centralization of power over higher education in the executive branch can only reduce the autonomy of public campuses. From the perspective of system design, one of the major strengths of U.S. public higher education—almost universally recognized as the best in the world—is that higher education is decentralized, allowing campuses to compete against each other, resulting in continuous improvement over time. Although campus competition leads to increased prestige, it does not always enhance the public interest. State coordinating boards are therefore designed to protect the public interest while simultaneously representing the needs of the campuses. It is a conflicting role, but one that is absolutely vital to an effective system of higher education.

Building the reputation of the system through positive public relations is also critical. Carlin's concept of public relations was to use the chairmanship as a bully pulpit, increasing the credibility of the Board of Higher Education by criticizing widely acknowledged problems in the public system. Such critiques had the paradoxical result of improving the stature of higher education by exposing its flaws. As a strategy, it was remarkably successful. Nonetheless, the system has reached a point where its strengths need to be showcased and its weaknesses addressed but not trumpeted. Such an approach will only increase the morale of those working in the system and attract the best students and faculty possible. Resources, both political and economic, will inevitably follow.

Sadly, the weaknesses that were exacerbated during the Carlin era have significantly impacted the Massachusetts system in later years. Reorganization efforts instigated by Governor Mitt Romney in 2002 have played out to the detriment of the public higher education system. Campuses, which viewed the BHE as complicit in a series of recommendations that would have led to the elimination of campuses and the consolidation of others, refused to cooperate with any effort toward reform, however necessary. In response, Romney slashed state appropriations for the colleges in the midst of the budget crisis, leading to substantial cuts in academic programs at the University of Massachusetts and other campuses. The legitimacy gains made during the Carlin chairmanship have not proved adequate to resist these political and budgetary pressures.

The Legacy of Activist Boards in National Context

As discussed in the introduction, two theories have dominated previous discussions of activist governing boards. The first is that corporate governance has changed, giving institutional investors and corporate boards a greater role in decision making; this governance style has migrated to the public sector (Chait, 1995; Lazerson, 1997). The second is that political appointees to state boards have become more ideological, particularly those who have been appointed by Republican administrations (de Russy, 1996; Lazerson, 1997; Stimpson, 1998).

Neither explanation is particularly compelling in explaining the policy-development processes examined in Massachusetts's case. Although Carlin did occasionally inveigh against political correctness (Carlin, 1999), he made no attempt to incorporate these values in policy development. Carlin himself is a lifelong Democrat who has written about the importance of using education to bridge the racial divide (Carlin, 1997). And although state governors have been Republican since 1990, the legislature is the most Democratic in the entire country. At certain times, Republicans in the legislature could not muster enough votes even to oppose an override of a gubernatorial veto, thus giving Democrats a high degree of control over lawmaking. Political and cultural explanations for activist governing boards simply do not explain why the Massachusetts board was successful in passing such a wide range of policies that individual campuses and faculty considered unduly intrusive (Bastedo, 2005).

The concept of institutional entrepreneurship, on the other hand, proved to be a fruitful avenue for understanding the case study. I have argued here that the Massachusetts board was successful in policy development because it engaged institutions that influence the policy-making environment for public higher education, institutions that are widely accepted by powerful actors spanning the political spectrum. From a substantive perspective, the policy making that the board engaged in was activist, yet traditional. By drawing on the dominant institution for system design in higher education—the California Master Plan—the board engaged in mimetic isomorphism, copying the politics and practices of the state that is considered a national leader. Thus, even staff members who opposed Carlin's policy-making style had to concede that he had "good values for someone running a higher ed system."

As a result, this case predicts that activist boards will fail in their policy development if they pursue blatantly partisan political agendas that run counter to higher education institutions. Indeed, when Carlin tried to pursue his personal agenda to eliminate faculty tenure, the effort was a highly publicized failure, despite the strong support of Governor Paul Cellucci and his fellow (mostly Republican-appointed) board members. Once it became

clear that eliminating tenure would isolate the Massachusetts system from other states and make it difficult to retain and recruit talented faculty, political support evaporated, despite strong support in public opinion polls. Similarly, de Russy's inveighing against political correctness at SUNY has largely become a sideshow.

Activist boards will also fail if they lack specific organizational resources to engage higher education institutions, even if their policies are consistent with those institutions. Predecessor boards to the Board of Higher Education repeatedly sought to raise the stature of the system and to develop a consistent base of political and financial support. These predecessor boards tackled policies addressing many of the issues that the BHE pursued—such as admissions standards, remedial education, and academic programs. But because the development of these policies was largely bureaucratic and regulatory, these policies never produced the political support needed to lift the system. Compounding the problem was a lack of consistent leadership, producing the persistent impression that Massachusetts was a system adrift.

Thus, although institutional environments can be very influential in the policy-making process, they are hardly deterministic. The use of leadership skills and social capital by Carlin and the BHE staff led to a rapid accumulation of political power. Such power turned out to be a key variable in the improved success of BHE policy development. Indeed, we cannot ignore the reciprocal relationship that power and institutions have over time. Consistently engaging higher education institutions over time provided credibility for board actions among powerful policy makers in the legislative and executive branches, leading to increased power. Increased power allowed the board to pursue increasingly ambitious policy agendas, helped shape policy statewide and nationally, and led to change in higher education institutions themselves.

In short, through a process routinely characterized as board or trustee activism, policy makers in Massachusetts sought to create a new institution that would guide both the process and substance of public higher education governance. Since prior theories regarding trustee activism have proven to be somewhat inadequate in the context of public system boards, the precise nature of this new institution is not yet understood. Further research is needed to understand the metapolicy that has driven policy development and implementation within the state system, and its implications for the broader field of statewide coordination (Bastedo, 2005). Interpreting this metapolicy, with its bricolage of elements both new and old, can lead to new understandings of the institutional changes that will guide statewide policy making in the future.

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