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The Public-Private Forum:

Good Intentions Randomize Behavior

Robert Wood

Public and private institutions of higher learning coexist throughout the United States in a pattern of diversity that is unknown in any other postindustrial society—and Massachusetts is a prime example of U.S. pluralism in education. In an era of scarce resources and mounting costs, the contrary instincts for cooperation and competition are at work. This article is an account of a voluntary attempt among private and public colleges and universities between 1973 and 1976 to forge a fragile partnership—the Massachusetts Public-Private Forum—which first flourished, then foundered. Tracing the course of its early successes and final failure may help shape present education policy, as Massachusetts tries to find a common ground for a partnership between the public and private sectors.

Always pray that your opposition be wicked. In wickedness there is a strong strain toward rationality. Therefore there is always the possibility, in theory, of handling the wicked by outthinking them.

Corollary One: Good intentions randomize behavior.

Corollary Two: Good intentions are far more difficult to cope with than malicious behavior.

—Marion J. Levy, Jr.

Laws of the Disillusionment of the True Liberal

The institutional mosaic by which the United States educates its young is one of the great unnatural wonders of the world. In so-called plain education—kindergarten through twelfth grade—some 16,000 local education authorities in the public sector coexist with 3,600 private schools. In higher education, 1,700 public universities and colleges stand alongside almost 1,400 private colleges and universities, although three out of four students in the nation attend public institutions.

The extraordinary mix of public and private institutions stands in sharp contrast to the national structure of education common in all other so-called advanced nations. Foreign

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visitors looking at our array of schools and colleges, observed the late James Bryant Conant of Harvard, often conclude that “this is not a system, but chaos.” To which Conant replied, “But it works; most of us like it; and it appears to be as permanent . . . as most of our political institutions.”¹

Apparently, permanent coexistence among separate parties implies some sort of continuing interaction among the several parts. Sometimes it takes the form of collaboration, as in the work of the College Board, which serves as gatekeeper in the transition from school to college. More often today, as college costs soar and the college-age cohort in the population dwindles, competition is the principal feature of the relationship. Every year, private colleges unwillingly expire, having blamed their demise on the public sector. Independent universities vie with public ones in the search for research funds. Public and private admission offices engage in “marketing strategies” to attract the best and the brightest.

For a generation, state governments have struggled, with uneven success, to put in place coordinating and governing boards that could rationalize the missions and better allocate resources between the public and private sectors. Professional associations have worked to fashion arrangements that at least provide rules of the road in the contest for students and money. Independent universities and colleges, fearing government “intrusion,” and public ones jealous of the historic prestige of elite private institutions and suspicious of their claim on publicly supported student aid occasionally try their hand at treaty making, bringing to mind the “spheres of influence” strategy of colonial empires.

In no state has the battle between the public and private institutions of higher education raged more fiercely than in Massachusetts. The concentration of first-rate, prestigious private universities and colleges is greatest here. Public institutions are Johnny-come-latelies compared to their Midwest and western counterparts. They play catch-up with all the vigor, brashness, and occasional crudity that mark newcomers to an enterprise. If there is a laboratory to test the prospects for collaboration, to determine the costs of unbridled competition, and to explore the feasibility of comprehensive education oversight and planning, short of state domination and dictation, it is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

This is a report on one such experiment that took place in the Massachusetts laboratory about a decade ago. The article was prepared initially for the Alden Seminars, a group of leaders in education, business, and industry who meet to discuss major issues in higher education and to identify areas for action and possible solutions for problems. The discussion treats the experience of the Massachusetts Public-Private Forum, a voluntary cooperative endeavor among public and private institutions of higher education that flourished, then foundered in the years 1973–76. The Forum’s purpose was to forge a common front for higher education in the state, presenting a united claim in the allocation of scarce resources during a time when those resources were increasingly hard to come by. Its members, in the overwhelming majority, were men and women of good will and high professional capabilities who increasingly came to respect and like one another. In two important instances, the Forum achieved consensus on important policy matters. Then it fell apart, even while similar associations in other states—such as New York, Illinois, and Pennsylvania—held together. The question is, of course, why?

What follows then, drawn from imperfect documentation and more imperfect memory, is a plausible but not definitive reconstruction of the rise and fall of the Massachusetts Public-Private Forum. Successive sections characterize the environment in which higher education operated in the mid-1970s, and the key features of the system of higher education then. They trace the evolution of the Forum with at least chronological accuracy,

describing its climb to the mountaintop of the “spirit of Williamstown” and the descent to the Worcester massacre. The last sections suggest reflectively what went wrong and what lessons there are for today. But the reader must remember that these conclusions are those of a workaday political economist temporarily posing as a historian and painfully aware of how the historian would judge the effort.

The Environment: The Dreary Seventies

All through the sixties, higher education in Massachusetts was on a roll. Enrollments swelled as postwar baby boomers came of age. Federal support for research and development, the student aid programs of the Great Society, liberal state appropriations for public institutions, and the first sizable endowment drives for many private ones provided sufficient and occasionally ample resources. Civil-rights legislation released the pent-up college demands for minorities. Capital outlays for new campuses, classrooms, and laboratories were often authorized even before architects completed plans. The times were golden.

However, foresighted observers such as Joseph Healey, chairman of the University of Massachusetts Board of Trustees, knew that the bloom was coming off the rose. By the end of the decade, continued student protests over Vietnam and inept academic responses to them startled a public once wholeheartedly committed to education, then soured it. The Columbia University riot in 1968, the Harvard Bust in 1969, the march on MIT’s Draper Labs in 1969, Kent State in 1970, and the resulting campus upheavals across the country signaled an abrupt halt in the academic march to a bigger and better promised land. These events distracted academic administrators from ordinary concerns. They diverted all energies to the simple maintenance of law and order and to damage control of a public opinion increasingly confused and outraged at the turn of events.

Unlike Joseph Healey, most college and university leaders were slow to recognize the changing times. Preoccupied with the tasks of restoring campus peace, sorting out student demands, and reuniting fiercely divided faculties, academic leaders missed even more fundamental and ominous signs. The first of these was simply the change in demography: the smaller numbers in the college-age cohort of the population. The baby boomers had passed through the pipeline; the baby-boom “echo” was fifteen years away. The second indication lay in the public consequences of an older population: the new priority to be given the post-65-year-old cohort, the most rapidly growing group of dependents. The third was inflation, resulting inescapably from the way in which the Vietnam War had been financed and from the emergence of genuine foreign competition in major sectors of the U.S. economy. Rarely disposed to plan ahead in any event, academic administrators still had their attention riveted on getting through each week’s crisis, and seldom perceived the new forces at work.

By 1973, on top of the downswing in the economy, the effect of the new forces had been further intensified by the recognition of resource scarcity—or, in Dennis Meadow’s felicitous phrase, “the limits of growth.”¹² International economic problems proved unresponsive to wage or price freezes and a floating dollar; a full-blown recession followed. Even before the onslaught of the OPEC energy crisis, the Keynesian consensus that the national economy could be deftly managed to control business cycles was becoming unglued. “Stagflation” became a phenomenon economists had difficulty explaining.

Not surprisingly, the political mood turned sour. A strange Cromwellian spirit settled in—puritanical, simplistic, niggardly, mean-spirited, essentially anti-intellectual, basi-

cally anti-institutional. In Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis campaigned on the promise of no new taxes, relying somewhat naively on increased productivity from an executive branch never known for its managerial competence or efficiency. Once in office, he would face an apparently intractable deficit, and public education, midway through its long-term capital outlay program, would be instructed to slash 30 percent from its outlays—operating expenses and capital. Healey’s admonition that the bloom was off the rose was painfully confirmed.

In October 1973, Gladys Hardy, former under secretary of education in Massachusetts, submitted her first interim report as director of the Public-Private Forum. Hardy summed up the situation in her classically understated way:

The venerable privately sponsored institutions in Massachusetts felt the economic pinch and were sensitive to the dangerous ways in which competition might increase between the public and private sectors to the detriment of all higher education. The publicly sponsored institutions, begun slowly and late in receiving substantial investments, had not yet reached the goals of those investments and commitments of the 60’s and were sensitive to the potential of restraint on the realization of these objectives.

The System

In *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies*, a provocative treatment of organization theory, Charles Perrow distinguishes between simple and complex systems according to the number of their components and how they are coupled to one another, in “loose” or “tight” ways.³ In 1973, the Massachusetts higher education system clearly qualified as complex—many components, loose couplings. The Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts (AICUM) then had fifty-eight members, ranging in nature from the great research universities, such as Harvard, to two-year junior colleges, such as Bay Path. The public system organized by the Willis-Harrington legislation during the expansive mood of the mid-sixties (“let every college bloom”) consisted of three universities, one with three campuses; twelve state colleges, most of which were in the process of transforming themselves from teacher-training institutes; and twelve newly established community colleges. Each university and the two other segments were run by separate, gubernatorially appointed boards of trustees. A Board of Higher Education (BHE), composed of representatives of the public universities and colleges, one private citizen, and a labor representative, presumably oversaw the public system.

By statute, the BHE was authorized to develop a master plan for higher education, to coordinate the programs of the public institutions, to approve new programs, and to review budgetary requests. But the board itself never obtained from the legislature a budget or staff that was sufficient to carry out these responsibilities. Further, its early leadership was viewed as biased toward the University of Massachusetts, and its program and budget reviews quickly became pro forma. Most public institutions simply ignored its pronouncements.

The BHE’s own role was compromised in 1971 by the awkward presence of a secretary of educational affairs, a position that had been established as part of an extensive reorganization of state government. This reform was designed to streamline the executive branch and to provide the governor with a cabinet that had line authority over previously quasi-independent departments and agencies, tied together by a sophisticated computer-based information system (which was never installed).⁴ The office of the secretary of educa-

tional affairs had been created apparently without considering the existence of the Board of Higher Education, and the result was considerable duplication of statutory authority and responsibilities. Despite a thoughtful memorandum by Paul Cooke, a Harvard Business School consultant who argued that the secretary's role was principally an advisory one, each body viewed the other with suspicion.

Both the private and public higher education systems then were "soft systems," the institutions within each only loosely coupled together. They relied mainly on voluntary collaboration as they faced the hard problems that changing demography and economic recession imposed on them. Between the two sectors, collaboration was visible only at specific geographical locations where common curricula and student needs were obvious: the Five Colleges, Inc., in the Lower Pioneer Valley; the Worcester Consortium for Higher Education; the Southeastern Association for Cooperation in Higher Education in Massachusetts (SACHEM); and the Boston Eight.

The Boston Eight consisted of universities offering doctoral graduate programs in the Boston metropolitan area. It came about on the initiative of three academic presidents: Father Seavey Joyce of Boston College, Asa Knowles of Northeastern, and the author, then of the University of Massachusetts. Meeting periodically in the Captain's Room at the Algonquin Club, the Eight managed to publish a report on the contributions made by higher education to Boston's economy. After that, the exchange of views among strong personalities at close quarters made for poor chemistry, and the tentative confederation fell apart over the issue of federal aid to education.

Beset by conflicting demands from the public institutions and facing an experienced professional, Joseph Cronin, as the first state secretary of educational affairs, BHE chancellor Pat McCarthy called for outside help. The BHE and Secretary Cronin cosponsored three major studies by recognized consultants: the Academy for Educational Development (AED), University Consultants, and the Organization for Social and Technical Innovation (OSTI). Lacking real authority over either budget or planning, McCarthy could only hope that among academic leaders presumably committed to rational thought, reason would prevail as these empirical and logical studies went forward. Actually, such was the fragmentation and disparity among public institutions that neither he nor Secretary Cronin had any option.

The Public-Private Forum: (1) The Beginnings

Don Schon, an MIT behavioral scientist, was president of OSTI and the principal investigator for a BHE project titled "A Master Planning Process for Higher Education in Massachusetts." A veteran evaluator of Great Society programs, Schon was process-oriented. He believed that no single master plan would be able to gain the support of all the institutions affected. After collecting data about higher education in the state, and then projecting trends, Schon advocated a "negotiation-bargaining" planning process, a prototype for efforts known as public-private partnerships that were to become fashionable in 1980 research circles.

It was under Schon's auspices that the first three meetings of the Public-Private Forum took place, in February, March, and May of 1973, and it was his agenda that initially shaped the Forum's work. Considerable preparatory work for both the public and private sectors was completed prior to the February meeting. (Each sector met separately three times to determine its positions on policy issues that might arise. Obviously, sovereign suspicions ran high.) The Forum members present at these meetings were the Executive

Committee of AICUM, for the private sector, and the operating heads of the public universities and state and community colleges.

These early sessions provoked considerable claims throughout the higher education establishment, as well as considerable concern. Members of the BHE worried that the Forum could preempt the board's statutory authority. Public-segment executives at the campus level were suspicious that their leaders would "give the store away" to the private sector. For their part, private institutions believed that the Forum might be a stonewalling device to allow public capital-outlay programs to go forward under the cover of deliberately protracted discussions and debates. An exchange between Father John Brooks, president of Holy Cross, and the author at the November 1973 meeting on the subject of Brooks's proposal to freeze public capital-outlay appropriations was representative of some sharp questioning of motives and good faith that occurred in almost every session. So was an exchange of letters in November and December 1973 between the author and John Adam, then chairman of the BHE, over the same issue.⁵

Given this atmosphere of suspicion, the Forum commissioned the author and President Burton Hallowell of Tufts to elaborate its form and functions. The two presidents were cautious. They provided a set of guidelines and asserted that the collaborative effort was essential, then went on to say it would be "inappropriate . . . to recommend an ultimate organizational location." Further, they stressed that "the aegis of a lay decision-making policy body representing the citizens' interest" was essential. The principal aim of the report was to lay to rest the image of an informal establishment elite bent on back-room domination of higher education.

These early meetings of the Forum produced some workmanlike procedural results. Four working bodies were formed: the Equal Opportunity Pool (EOP) group; the Committee on Graduate and Professional Education; the Student Aid Committee (later to be combined with the Equal Opportunity Pool); and the Information Committee (planning data and cost reporting).

During the summer of 1973, the committees went to work. Then, on November 12, 1973, a full-blown session, with twenty-five participants, took place at Emmanuel College. Its purposes were to hear Schon's final report and the progress reports of the standing committees and to approve another committee on capital outlay. At the meeting on December 11, a seven-person Executive Committee was established, with John Adam as chair (thus removing some of the BHE's concern about a competitive enterprise); the secretary of educational affairs was invited to be on the committee as a nonvoting member (thus damping his concern). Twelve votes were authorized for Forum membership: five for public CEOs, five for AICUM presidents, one for AICUM, and one for the BHE. Bylaws were drawn up, a mission statement was approved, and a three-quarters majority vote was established as a prerequisite for Forum approval of any major policy.

With committees in place, structure and voting requirements established, and doubts assuaged, the Forum appeared to be in business.

The Forum: (2) Hard Work and Tortured Consensus

Throughout the winter of 1973 and the spring of 1974, the Forum met monthly, alternating between private and public campus sites, where hospitality ranged from lavish spreads of spirits and food to send-out sandwiches (on the occasion when the host Forum member forgot to inform his campus of the meeting). The sessions focused primarily on the committee reports, increasingly on the report of the Equal Opportunity Pool Committee,

which was chaired by Peter Edelman, then vice president of the University of Massachusetts. This committee was charged with shaping a substantial financial aid program that would be fair to both sectors. Essentially, the program turned on fixing a differential in awards for financial aid between the two sectors, which would acknowledge the difference between public and private tuitions and therefore allow students to make approximately cost-neutral choices.

The heavy EOP debate was further complicated by technical considerations such as the calculation of federal aid, family support, and loans. It was also handicapped by the introduction of extraneous issues. For example, midway in the deliberations, Lawrence Dennis, CEO for the state College Board, announced a new "open university" program that he was to oversee and that would report directly to the governor. Throughout February and March of 1974 the debate went on, with Edelman providing successive revisions of its contents.

Then, during the meeting of April 8, after eloquent advocacy by President George Hazzard of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, the Forum adopted the EOP program and agreed to seek gubernatorial and legislative support. The program totaled \$35 million and provided up to \$2,000 for private-sector scholarships, capping public scholarships at \$1,000 and guaranteeing that 80 percent of the total scholarship funds would be directed to the private sector. In Hazzard's opinion, the proposal "moved toward equalization" and deserved "a common front." On May 22, 1974, the Forum had the satisfaction of seeing the proposal incorporated in House No. 6094, with a special message recommending it by Governor Francis Sargent.⁶

The Forum: (3) High-Water Mark—The Spirit of Williamstown

By the beginning of the summer of 1974, the Forum was buoyed by the production of a tangible and important piece of legislation, by the presence of a senior staff member in Gladys Hardy, and by a Ford Foundation grant to underwrite a summer conference. (The grant had been secured by Frank Tredinnick, executive director of AICUM, and by Father Michael Walsh, then academic adviser to the University of Massachusetts.) At Williams College at a three-day seminar in July 1974, the Forum went public. In fact, the seminar was a summit meeting, carefully planned and structured by Hardy, Walsh, and Tredinnick. It brought together all the Forum members, along with eleven other presidents of private and public institutions. Presidents John Silber of Boston University, John Chandler of Williams, and Father Don Monan of Boston College were there for the private sector. President Robert Leestamper of Worcester State College, President Don Walker of Southeastern Massachusetts University, and Dennis were major spokesmen for the public sector. All but the most amply endowed private universities were represented, and the most anxious private and least-known public institutions were there in force.

Howard Bowen, the nationally known education economist, chaired the seminar. Fred Glimp, director of the Permanent Charity Fund (now the Boston Fund), and Leroy Greaason, dean of Bowdoin, were rapporteurs. A carefully prepared agenda began with initial position papers by the author and Knowles, moved systematically through the major issues provoked by enrollment and financial trends, then concluded with a plenary session.

In the elegant ambience of the Williams Elm Tree House, and prodded by skillfully persistent staff, the seminar found common ground for public-private trade-offs that were consistent with the priorities of each sector. An Executive Committee meeting midway

through the seminar nailed down the specifics of a common statement, and the plenary session offered a surprisingly eloquent endorsement. The two essential parts of the bargain were Forum support for the constitutional amendment (Article 46), then pending before the voters, which would allow state aid for the private sector; and Forum agreement that low tuition would continue for the public sector.

Other provisions in the package were a commitment to planning that would be both comprehensive and “open” (that is, planning in which the two sectors would share information—a departure from past procedure); support for the EOP pending legislation; and a “no diversion” pledge to ensure that private aid would not reduce support to the public institutions. But these were good-will generalities. The real agreement was an exercise in *distributive* politics—both sectors anticipating increments to their resource positions heretofore denied them.

John Adam expressed the delight and surprise of all participants when he wrote on July 11 that the “tone or spirit,” “attitudes and feelings,” and concrete written agreement all represented a “landmark in the development of public-private cooperation.” The members departed aglow with the spirit of Williamstown.

The Forum: (4) Committees in Trouble and Purple Prose

The glow lasted throughout the 1974 academic summer, and the two autumn meetings went well. Glimp agreed to become Forum chairman. The body reviewed its mission and reaffirmed its independence; and it was gratified by a reaffirmation of support from the BHE. It also began to benefit from frank, informal exchanges, in the discussion of AICUM’s forthcoming legislative program and in the debate over contrary proposals for veterinary medical education. (The Forum ultimately endorsed the contract plan of the New England Land Grant Universities, instead of a free-standing veterinary school.) A senior staff transition from Hardy to Henry Kriebel, president emeritus of Babson College, went well.

But trouble loomed regarding the work of the Committee on Graduate and Professional Education and the Information Committee. In 1974, Dean Robert Alberty of MIT, chair of the Committee on Graduate and Professional Education, had reported the committee’s difficulty in obtaining reliable information, especially in engineering. He had distributed a questionnaire to participating institutions. Returns had been few. Now, on March 25, 1975, his committee made no substantive recommendations and suggested that regional groups be established to review new graduate programs proposed by any institution. The Forum discharged the committee with thanks.

The Information Committee was in deeper difficulty. Under the leadership of Warren Gulko, director of institutional research at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, it had embarked on an ambitious and technically complex analysis involving comparative cross-institutional costs of individual academic departments. The study cost money, and \$16,000 was scrounged from various college budgets. But Forum members—Silber and Father Monan of Boston College especially—had raised questions both as to design and utility. And there was general apprehension on the part of private institutions about disclosing financial information.

Further, the Information Committee found it difficult to apply national statistical formats such as the Higher Educational General Information Survey (HEGIS) to the Massachusetts scene. Problems of definition hampered its work. So did the failure of participating institutions to report promptly.⁷ In March this committee was also dis-

charged with thanks, although in June 1975 the Forum was to try again by authorizing a \$9,000 study by Newhauser, Frantz, and Corsirie, to be completed by October 1975. That work also foundered as a result of difficulty with the data. Without tangible substantive recommendations from these committees, the Forum essentially marked time.

In the meantime, the spirit of Williamstown seemed to be disappearing. Hardy had warned that it was “precious, though fragile and tenuous.” Now, on November 15, 1974, the BHE recommended higher public tuitions, and on December 18, the author wrote a sharp letter of protest to McCarthy, complaining that the board’s action was contrary “to both the spirit and the specific recommendations of the Williamstown meeting.” Kriebel observed diplomatically in his final report of April 18, 1975, as his contract expired, that “the quality of the Forum meetings has not been consistent” and that “the composition of the agenda has a substantial bearing on the quality of the meeting.” Seeking to regain momentum, the Forum ventured another Williamstown-style meeting, this time at Holy Cross, on April 29, 1975.

As in Williamstown, the Holy Cross meeting was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, but this time the meeting did not work. For one thing, it was only a day in duration, and for another, almost one hundred CEOs, trustees, and staff were involved. Father Walsh gave a splendid address, and T. Edward Hollander, deputy commissioner from New York, reported on that state’s experience, emphasizing the institutional aid that the “Bundy money” provided. He deemed it essential that higher education speak with “one voice.”⁸ A question-and-answer period ensued, followed by a press conference at the end. Father Walsh called for a master plan, but no formal statement was issued.

The Forum: (5) Disaster at Worcester

After the Holy Cross meeting, the paper trail of Forum activities largely disappears. Kriebel executed the cost study contract, and in October 1975 the contractors reported their inability to establish reliable comparisons. By December, the AICUM files focused almost exclusively on correspondence with the Ford Foundation, in which an effort was being made to reconcile expense vouchers. There are references to an occasional meeting of the Executive Committee in Adam’s offices in Worcester. But there is no report of any agendas or of full Forum assemblies, if they were held. Ken Ryder, newly appointed president of Northeastern, did host a meeting at Henderson House in the winter of 1975. No minutes of the meeting emerged because, as Ryder recalls, “There was nothing to record.”

The drop-off in recorded activity is not surprising. The real, if somewhat hidden, agenda at Holy Cross was to discover whether a genuine master-plan effort could be launched, with the necessary data made available and competent professional staff assigned. That issue had not been resolved, and neither BHE nor Ford Foundation funding was now available.

Meanwhile, the economic and political environment had worsened. The effects of the OPEC oil crisis were everywhere, as inflation quickened and fuel costs threatened the budget of every campus. The Dukakis administration persevered in trying to impose across-the-board cuts in funding for public higher education. It also proposed a moratorium for the opening of the new medical school facilities at Worcester, and impounded capital-outlay funds for such projects as a new gymnasium at the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts. Scholarship funds were cut, and private and public institutions alike were engaged in struggles for economic survival.

Increasingly, the public sector became preoccupied with fighting off Governor Duka-

kis's austerity proposals and what it perceived to be a frontal attack on fiscal autonomy. The BHE and the new state secretary of educational affairs, Paul Parks, seemed more and more to behave like two scorpions occupying the same bottle. Chancellor McCarthy of the BHE departed for Maine, and other public CEOs slipped away. Finally, the public sector, with the support of Senate president Kevin Harrington, undertook a major reorganization of its structure, aiming to distance itself from gubernatorial direction and to establish a strong central board with genuine budgeting and planning authority. By early spring of 1976, the fight for the reorganization against gubernatorial opposition was consuming most of the public sector's energy and attention.⁹

Nonetheless, through the good offices of Glimp, Adam, and Tredinnick, it was determined that at least one more major effort should be made. On March 26, 1976, forty-six CEOs and their staff assembled at the Worcester Medical Center, appropriately enough, as it turned out, in the surgical amphitheater. The aim was to come to grips with the specifics of a master plan: what the plan would be, who would write it, and how it would be financed. Shortly after the meeting began, however, President Silber of Boston University made an eloquent but intemperate defense of the independence of the private sector, and attacked the wastefulness and redundancy of the public institutions. From the floor, President Bartley of Holyoke Community College and Chancellor Bromery of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst responded in kind. Charges and countercharges resounded through the amphitheater with growing intensity. The meeting bogged down in yet another technical cost discussion, producing more glazed eyes than conclusive articulation. The opportunity to present a specific policy proposal vanished.

Instead, the CEOs in attendance issued a seven-point statement calling for a strengthened BHE, with more private representation, and suggesting that the role of the secretary of educational affairs be "reexamined." The statement encouraged "voluntary" cooperation and coordination but through *regional* and *area* consortia, and sought to distinguish between lay-board governance and the planning function. Its only specific positions were a defense of the fiscal autonomy of state institutions and a declaration that "neither the executive branch nor elected officials should have line authority in the governance of higher education."

Not a single resolution emerged concerning the role of the Public-Private Forum or what it should do next. The attendees simply straggled out, to repair in cliques and caucuses at nearby bars and restaurants. The Forum did not meet again.

Analysis: What Went Wrong?

The Forum achieved consensus on two significant policy matters—the EOP and the Williamstown agreement. Why, then, did the undertaking ultimately fail? As one sifts through the record, two sets of answers suggest themselves: internal and external. Generally speaking, *internally* the relative strengths of the two sectors were uneven, not so much in the aggregate as in the respective positions of universities, liberal arts colleges, and two-year institutions. *Externally*, the Forum faced not only a difficult economic environment (as did the other states), but also an especially adverse political environment—one with little tradition for recognizing the autonomy of any institutions that sought substantial public resources.

In elaborating on the internal properties of the Massachusetts education system, one observes the following. First, the sheer number of institutions and their diverse character made a coherent structure hard to come by. Approximately eighty separate private institu-

tions existed in Massachusetts in the 1970s, each with its own board of trustees and each committed to institutional survival. Twenty-five public universities and colleges were involved. Their character and quality varied wildly, not only in the two-year/four-year/graduate divisions, but in special foci, origin, and sponsorship. To engage them all, or, more important, to have each perceive that its interests were being fairly represented in the Forum would have been an extraordinarily difficult achievement of statesmanship even in prosperous times.

Second, the private sector had special characteristics, as T. Edward Hollander had pointed out at Holy Cross. More than other states, Massachusetts draws a large proportion of its students from out of state. The more prestigious the college or university, the less it depends upon either public or private state resources. So Harvard, MIT, Amherst, Williams had no direct concern with the Forum's condition, save in a public relations way. Indeed, the experience of the Boston Eight made plain that the heavy hitters tolerated the game only as long as it seemed pleasant. When they withdrew, they suffered no consequences. The active private participants in the Forum were the hungry universities. They were frequently of high quality, but state aid meant a great deal to them, and their competition with the public sector was very real. What these institutions lacked in prestige and clout, they made up in contentiousness.

Third, the public sector was in no better shape. Operating at the end of the Great Leap Forward decade, its segments were designed to operate independently, preoccupied with completing major expansions for which the commitment in bricks and mortar had already been made. Most important, public-sector institutions suffered from a historical inferiority complex vis-à-vis their private counterparts. In actuality, the public community colleges were in far better circumstances than the private junior colleges, and the University of Massachusetts was achieving national status. But their administrations found it hard to believe in themselves. This second-best attitude made them street fighters too, as much as their hungry private counterparts.

Fourth, this complicated, weak, and loose array of institutions functioned with an appalling lack of knowledge about themselves or each other. The experience of the Information Committee demonstrated how crude and error-prone the data base for policy-making was, and few institutions had competent planning staffs. Throughout the Forum's existence, the simple absence of facts plagued its deliberations and encouraged judgments based on rumor, false assumptions, and vague generalizations. The presence of two able senior staff directors could not compensate for this fundamental deficiency.

As for characteristics of the external environment, the "outside" political system was ill-disposed to support higher education, especially public higher education, for several reasons. First, the coordinating mechanisms that existed were flawed and redundant. The composition of the BHE was heavily weighted toward the public sector, and the private institutions both resented and were suspicious of the board. Further, the board had no real authority; it could review, comment, and recommend programs and budgets, but it could not mandate them. When the office of the secretary of educational affairs was introduced as an extraneous by-product of the statewide reorganization plan, confusion and uncertainty were compounded. The first secretary, Joseph Cronin, appeared often to heed the injunction of consultant Paul Cooke to function in an advisory and consultative fashion, but his successor, Paul Parks, showed no such disposition. If ever there was a fifth wheel in governmental structure, it was the secretary's office. (This mistake was acknowledged, and the office was abolished in the 1979 reorganization legislation for higher education.)

Second, the higher education system never achieved genuine autonomy with respect to the larger state political system. The private sector was never really dependent on public resources, nor was it critically influential in the political process, for it always resisted financial disclosure, a prerequisite for institutional aid. It sometimes had marginal influence, as with scholarship programs, but on major issues such as the establishment of a state medical school, it lost. The public sector had won considerable statutory autonomy in the sixties, but the continuation of that autonomy turned on legislative sufferance usually evident in nonacademic patronage accommodations. Some governors exercised self-restraint in trustee appointments, but by the mid-seventies, that restraint had vanished; in its place, a conscious strategy of oversight and control had emerged.

Third, the severe economic recession, the energy shortage, and the faltering public faith in the value of higher education encouraged and magnified media cynicism. This was expressed in such headlines as “College: Who Needs It?” and served to create a mood of growing pessimism. Educators were no longer respected public figures. They were advised by their business and political counterparts to “hunker down,” not to make waves, not to try.

Fourth, both the public and the private educational institutions tended to align themselves with broader political ideologies, which led to confrontational postures not relevant to the common cause. Public educators often preached a populist doctrine, portraying themselves as the guarantors of education for the “common people” and offering access to the first-generation college-bound. Private educators often responded by suggesting that their institutions were superior in terms of quality and purity of motives. In the speeches and behavior of both, one could detect the ghosts of the Jefferson-Hamilton debates.

Contemporary political analysis categorizes public policies in four ways: *constitutional* (changing the rules of the game); *regulatory* (imposing restraints on individual or collective behavior); *distributive* (providing benefits to a majority); and *redistributive* (providing benefits to one group at the cost of another). Clearly, as a voluntary, consensus-based, and confederate organization, the Forum could not aspire to constitutional or regulatory policy. It could—and did—advance distributive policy, functioning as a potentially powerful interest group that could influence but not mandate public policy. Given the centrifugal forces at work within the higher educational system (lacking the cohesion and discipline of an industry association or a trade union) and the centripetal forces of the outside political system (the gubernatorial drive for dominance engendered by a deteriorating economy), redistributive policy-making was beyond the Forum’s capability. It was one bridge too far.

Put another way, as long as the public and private sectors in education regarded themselves as more dissimilar than alike, they could negotiate, as Schon urged them to do, but they could negotiate only treaties. They did so in the EPO program and at Williamstown. In these instances, each party expected to gain in an anticipated distribution of additional resources—joint scholarships, a constitutional amendment for the private sector, continued low tuition for the public sector. This was akin to incremental budgeting, a non-zero-sum game. A treaty could be made.

However, when the two sectors were asked to agree to a master plan that assigned discrete missions and a reallocation of resources, the load became too heavy to carry. True enough, the Forum entered a partial no man’s land, created by an ineffective BHE and a loose-cannon secretary’s office, but occupying that territory required a disciplined force

to engage in redistributive policies, in hard times taking from one and giving to another. This is the hardest kind of politics to play, and it is not surprising that the Forum was not up to it.

So at Worcester, the sectors parted company in a curiously inconsistent way. On the one hand, the Forum asked the larger political systems to undertake the redistributive task through a stronger lay board. On the other hand, it argued for grassroots voluntary regionalism, apparently assuming that things would go better at the local level even though resources were more scarce. The Forum was unanimous only in its admonition to politicians to keep their hands off its precious, if fragmented, enterprises. No politician, especially in Massachusetts, would be likely to take that counsel as anything but a confession of failure. Accordingly, two years later, in an off-budget section of the state appropriations act, the Board of Regents was established.

Lessons for Our Times

Ten years after the demise of the Forum, the environment for higher education in Massachusetts is sharply different. The flood tide of reports indicates that higher education is once again on the public agenda, that a window of opportunity has been opened after a decade of being shut. Massachusetts is booming economically, and a powerful education lay board is in place. Ironically, the issue of private-public representation is now reversed. This circumstance is made plain by the aftermath of James Collins's appointment and by the legislative override of Governor Dukakis's veto of the new conflict-in-interest law.¹⁰ What is intriguing in the present situation is that the arena for resolving in-house competition among public and private educational institutions is now the Board of Regents. Absent a public-private forum, there is nowhere else for that issue to go. What the Forum protested against, even as it dissolved, is now reality.

Could a reconstituted Forum recapture that arena on the grounds that academic autonomy and independence are at risk today, to the detriment of both public and private universities and colleges? The contemporary experience of five other states offers at least a partial answer.

In 1985, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) studied patterns of collaboration in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina, and New York—and found the prospects encouraging. The AGB's special report, *Cooperation and Conflict: The Public and Private Sectors in Higher Education*, observes first that historically there have been more shared interests and values than differences.¹¹ It points out that in the eighties, far more than they did in the seventies, both sectors rely on the same three major sources of institutional funding: fees, gifts and endowments, and federal and state aid. Both have the same interest in federal and state tax codes. Sabers continue to rattle, the report states, as in the half-cost battle with federal Pell grants, but the danger of a preemptive strike by one sector or another seems to have diminished in the past ten years.

Specifically, after presenting the five case studies, the AGB suggests that well-structured, well-staffed, joint state associations can successfully advance common funding programs, and have done so. This is the so-called linkage strategy of tying support for private institutions to a percentage of public appropriations, thereby ensuring a rising tide to float all boats. Such state associations can engage and have engaged in contractual agreements among each other, as in the Ben Franklin Partnership in high-tech regional centers and in the Illinois Higher Education Cooperative Act. They can cooperate and

have clearly cooperated on student financial aid. These policies seem transferable to Massachusetts.

Finally, the AGB recommends that lay governing boards recognize the importance of intersector relations and that all parties seek the “high road” of cooperation instead of sending out “hard ball” signals.¹² It suggests that boards should encourage state associations of higher education and enhance support of their activities. It endorses the linkage formula for appropriations, anticipating that private institutions will have to acknowledge general oversight of their programs. Observing candidly that the possibility of civil war exists, the association goes on to opt for the civility of enlightened self-interest.

Given the AGB guidelines, perhaps Massachusetts should try again. While the Board of Regents is still struggling to organize itself and define its role, the presence of a public-private forum as a coherent, consistent voice for higher education could be a powerful factor in the formation of sound education policy. Such a forum would remain, of course, an interest group, however enlightened and deserving. But it could be a knowledgeable initiator of a sound distributive policy, and it could provide a determined buffer against inappropriate intervention from the external political system. In the present circumstances, with the lessons of the past taken to heart and the deficiencies of the current structure acknowledged, a public-private forum might again invoke the spirit of Williamstown, and this time the enterprise might succeed. 🐾

Notes

1. James Bryant Conant, *The Child, the Parent, and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 8.
2. Dennis L. Meadows, *Dynamics of Growth in a Finite World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Wright-Allen, 1974).
3. Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
4. Somewhat ironically, the reorganization plan was funded in 1968 by a federal grant to then Governor John Volpe. The grant was approved by the author, who was then under secretary of HUD. Later the author would find himself president of the University of Massachusetts, his authority circumscribed by the self-same plan he had underwritten.
5. Files of AICUM’s executive director.
6. House No. 6094 incorporated the Forum’s recommendations and was initially blocked in the House by Speaker David Bartley. Subsequently, legislation was enacted that substantially raised scholarship support to the private sector.
7. Files of AICUM’s executive director.
8. Ibid. New York had enacted an institutional aid program proposed by a committee chaired by McGeorge Bundy, then president of the Ford Foundation. The program provided state funds, on the basis of the number of degrees granted by a participating institution.
9. The central issue was a comprehensive reorganization plan drafted by the University of Massachusetts and introduced by Senate president Kevin Harrington. It was opposed by Governor Dukakis and died in committee after Harrington decided the legislature could not overturn a promised veto.
10. James Collins, a state representative from Amherst and long-time supporter of public higher education, was appointed chancellor by the Board of Regents in July 1986. Governor Dukakis opposed the Collins appointment. Subsequently, by making enough new appointments to the

board in favor of his own position, the governor was able to bring the board to a reconsideration of the Collins appointment. As a result, in early September 1986, the board overturned its earlier vote in support of Collins. Almost simultaneously, Regent James Howell was accused of a conflict of interest by the state Ethics Commission. In 1986, legislation was passed which clarified the relationship between the law establishing the Board of Regents and the law establishing the Ethics Commission. This legislation was vetoed by the governor, but the governor's veto was subsequently overridden by the General Court.

11. John W. Gardner, Robert H. Atwell, and Robert O. Berdahl, *Cooperation and Conflict: The Public and Private Sectors in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1985).
12. *Ibid.*, 27–38.