

Chapter 21

Working Inside the Box: How Small Steps Cumulatively Expand Access to Large Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

Societal and financial changes impacting higher education present great opportunities alongside great risks to traditional, large public institutions. While many such colleges and universities have defined goals to enroll more nontraditional students, it can be challenging to undertake large-scale initiatives that require updates to policy, accreditation, and structures. Alternatively, continuous, steady, and incremental improvements undertaken in partnership with willing faculty can accomplish the same goals. Though initially enacted on a smaller scale, demonstrated success can spread across flagship campuses. The authors present seven strategies demonstrating how incremental change at a unit level can create stronger connections and pathways between traditional research institutions and nontraditional students without disrupting the overall university culture. At the aggregate level, the impact of these individual initiatives has spurred thousands of new graduates and numerous opportunities for learners to achieve their goals through higher education.

Societal and financial changes impacting higher education present great opportunities alongside great risks to traditional, large public institutions. To reap these opportunities, institutions must embrace changes that can be challenging and even formidable – no easy task for large public institutions, particularly when they are highly successful. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, home to the authors, has a global reputation of excellence in research, educational outcomes and athletics, but for most of its history has maintained a culture of serving traditional, residential students. UW-Madison is not unlike its peers; however, many state flagship universities find it daunting to pursue policy changes or programs to

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target admissions of adult, online, and returning students. Concerns can range from tuition affordability to adequate student preparation and ability to provide support programming, to the potential impact on national rankings with a changing student body. Faculty, already split between service, research and teaching, must also be willing to connect with students using approaches appropriate to their experience outside of the classroom.

Fortunately, emerging with the lessons learned from remote instruction in 2020-21, coupled with a desire to increase and diversify both the student body and incoming revenue streams, many institutions have made strides to enroll more nontraditional students on these typically traditional campuses. Recognizing that change to long-standing campus culture is necessary to enroll new student populations doesn't make that change easy, however. Although certainly there are large, public institutions—such as Purdue University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Arizona State University—boldly innovating through the purchase of for-profit institutions, innovative corporate partnership agreements, and/or low-cost online degrees at scale, many systems and universities remain more risk averse or more resource constrained. It is within these institutions—the ones that have yet to fully embrace hybrid and online learning or that lack the resources to pursue at-scale programming—where small changes can open ever-widening windows of opportunity for new learners. This responsibility was captured by the former Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Rebecca Blank in her 2018 Paul Offner Lecture at The Urban Institute (Blank, 2018):

We [flagships] have three missions: education, research, and outreach to the state. What we do with those three missions is not just important to our students. It's not just important to the state of Wisconsin. But, I deeply believe that we and other flagships—the work that we do—is important to our country, its long-term success, and its possibilities for economic growth and for addressing inequalities.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is known globally for its excellence in research, enviable undergraduate time-to-degree, six-year graduation rates, high production of doctoral students, and nationally recognized athletic programs. It is precisely because of this long-respected reputation that institutions like UW-Madison have had a culture focused on traditional students for over 170 years. Investments remain focused on growing the undergraduate residential population since it appears immune to pandemic decline or the future demographic cliff that will impact smaller regional public universities and community colleges. The state legislature continues to provide financial support, but not yet at a rate that supports investments in large-scale online learning or other accessible pathways. And although departments experimenting with online and hybrid programs now enroll thousands of learners, nontraditional students represent just a fraction of the overall student population. Without a potential significant impact on the finances of the institution at-large, there is little incentive to update the structure.

What follows are seven independent ideas and action plans enacted over time at UW-Madison to demonstrate how incremental change starting at a unit level can create stronger connections and pathways between educational programming and nontraditional students without disrupting the overall university culture. Each action was deliberately enacted to impact only those departments and academic units that “bought-in” to the change, thus preserving faculty and departmental priorities and decreasing risk to the overall institution by measuring impact on a linear, versus exponential scale. Despite the slower pace of implementation however, these changes were undertaken in the hope that success would breed success and further adoption across the university. By working within the faculty governance model to build

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