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Higher Education in Maine:

A Conversation with Sally Vamvakias



This conversation between Sally Vamvakias, former chair of the University of Maine System Board of Trustees, and Luisa S. Deprez, director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine, took place on October 5, 1999. At the time, Vamvakias had just completed her ten-year tenure as a trustee, the last four as chair. In this forward-looking conversation, Vamvakias talks about the change that electronic forms of knowledge transmission are bringing to higher education, and lays out the challenges to the University of Maine System as we begin the new millennium. This conversation was conducted for Maine Policy Review by Luisa S. Deprez. 

LUISA S. DEPREZ: *Thank you for taking the time to talk about higher education in Maine. As the former chair of the Board of Trustees you have been in a unique position from which to view the higher education system in Maine. You began your tenure as a Trustee in 1989. In reflecting upon those ten years, the last four as chair, could you talk about the changes you witnessed in the University of Maine System, specifically, and in higher education in general?*

SALLY VAMVAKIAS: I think one of the most important and enlightening changes I witnessed is the electronic delivery of knowledge within the University of Maine System—first with ITV, then with EdNET, and now with UNET. This became an option toward the end of my tenure. It is amazing to think that in the next century, the next millennium, that type of delivery could possibly replace what we now define as a campus.

In a more general sense, it is interesting to think about the shift from an energy-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. Let me explain. When I look back I realize that in the past people have been consumers and exploiters of energy, be it with the exploitation of natural resources, such as forests, or in the development of manufacturing skills needed in such enterprises as the steel industry. However, now the primary product appears to be information—information contained in emerging software. How do you compare the development of this kind of product to an era of logging and steelmaking? If information is our product, how do we build on it, find new ways to disseminate it and utilize it, and jettison it when it is irrelevant? It has challenged me significantly. It has made me think about the value of the academy as it has been historically understood and its new position relative to the role of information in a twenty-first century society.

Reflecting on change within the System, the mid-1990s were challenging in many ways. On many days the only constant was change and the central question was, “What would it be?” There are four main issues that I recall:

1. The importance of balancing the interest of the University of Maine System or, for that matter, any state-supported system with the public interest;

2. The need to educate more Maine people;

3. The creation of a cohesive organizational and governance structure for the University of Maine System; and

4. The adaptation of the System to an economic downturn.

My experience has led me to believe that in challenging times often what should “go away” isn’t what does “go away,” and short-term cost-cutting necessities can affect the long-term quality of educational institutions.

LUISA: *How do you see some of these changes unfolding in the twenty-first century?*

SALLY: Let’s take another look at the electronic delivery of information. The University of Phoenix, a virtual university, enrolled sixty thousand students last year; in 1997 the profit was \$33 million. Virtual universities concentrate on workforce preparation and job skill enhancement rather than on academic advancement. They incorporate highly sophisticated means for dispensing knowledge and are driven, in many cases, by quasi-private sources of delivery. By utilizing all available technologies, virtual universities are changing the time, method, content, and cost of education. They are not bound by time or place. Many of today’s older



Sally Vamvakias is a native of Bath, Maine who now resides in Falmouth. She served as chair of the University of Maine System Board of Trustees from 1995 to 1999, and as a member from 1989 to 1999. Currently she is a member of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges Council of Board Chairs, trustee of Maine Medical Center, chair of the Maine Community Foundation, member of the Board of Overseers of the Bar, Grievance Commission, member of the International Women's Forum, director of the Vincent B. and Barbara Welch Foundation, and past president of the University of Maine Alumni Association. Sally is also a incorporator of the Hurricane Outward Bound School. She received a B.S. degree from the University of Maine in 1963.

consumers of higher education expect opportunities (courses) that can begin any day of the year and any time of the day. They are looking for convenience and find a cadre of for-profit and not-for-profit providers ready to accommodate their needs. Many students, especially older ones, no longer feel the need to experience either the traditional semester approach to education or the traditional campus life of conventional universities. Virtual providers can also focus on a variety of ways of learning that best fit or adapt to an individual student's learning style.

The University of Maine System was one of the early leaders in distance education because it made an early and significant infrastructure investment in distance education. Therefore, its position is probably somewhat better than that of other states. However, the investment in distance-based, on-line education is lengthy, incremental, and expensive. The costs of the hardware, software, and training for all of its various users have significant price tags attached to them. We also have found ourselves trying to anticipate questions, such as how we credential this mode of learning or how the

Aid. In the not-too-distant future there will be a need to adapt Financial Aid rules to accommodate all learners, regardless of age, living situation, or method of receiving instruction.

In addition, if on-line education becomes one of the primary sources for acquiring information and knowledge, how does one accomplish that without forfeiting the soul of the academy? I don't have the answer, but it is an important question. It is something about which we must think seriously.

LUISA: *Can you say more about the soul of the academy? What do you mean?*

SALLY: A university's responsibility is to its people—each individual who strives to achieve and grasp some small wisdom of the ages should be made to feel that his or her quest is understood, supported, and obtainable. Perhaps this is our greatest challenge. I believe almost all critical issues can be adequately addressed if universities remain relevant to their roles, responsibilities, and structures.

Let me be a bit more specific. First, a university's role. If the future of society resides in brain power—everything we read or are led to believe indicates this is probably so—then we are going to have to be able to remain flexible, to shift between traditional expectations of a university and

those that will be looming on the horizon. I have mentioned the electronic delivery of education; I think it holds great peril and great promise. I think it is something that is going to be fascinating to observe as we go forward.

Relevancy also relates to structure, both in terms of our physical capacity and our governance. Are our current structures up to the task? Can we demonstrate efficiency? Productivity? Accountability? Our ability to remain adaptable is tremendously important because, in the future, higher education is going to be challenged in unprecedented ways.

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on-line delivery of education will affect our standards. The question whether Maine will position itself strategically to take advantage of sophisticated electronic delivery opportunities, perhaps through collaborations with others, remains to be seen. In other words, will Maine be nimble enough to respond appropriately?

Another important point is that traditional college-age students, those 18-24 years old, living in dorms or at home and taking courses in a classroom, now represent a minority of students nationally. Yet they reap almost all of the benefits of Federal Student Financial

The third point—responsibility—might be the most significant as it is actually about and grounded in ideological changes. When this century started there were about one billion people on Earth. Today, as we begin a new century and a new millennium, the number is somewhere between six and seven billion and growing by about one billion per decade. Our world becomes more intimate with each passing day. Simultaneously, powerful external forces are emerging to which higher education will be expected to respond. Some of our most basic assumptions will probably need to be re-examined.

For example, the System is right now engaged in an initiative called Life, Work and Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century. The initiative arose out of a concern that higher education was losing its core value by seemingly dispensing knowledge that enabled students to find jobs but not to be citizens of a global society. We cannot lose sight of one of our fundamental purposes—to produce a well-educated, participatory citizenry.

Perhaps I can describe this more clearly with a personal example. The chemistry and biology that I learned as a student in my college major is somewhere in my brain. I might call upon it occasionally if I look at a leaf or think about photosynthesis. However, it's the basics I learned and have built upon in the liberal arts that sustain me. If individuals have to change careers, and they will three or four times in their lifetime, they are going to need an anchor that is supplied by their balanced exposure to the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, the fine and performing arts, and history. These are the things that help to provide continuity and purpose across time. The "simple" information that one learns in a university has to be balanced with the attributes of the academy that have sustained it since the beginning. This is what I mean about challenging assumptions. As universities evolve into a new pace, let's not forget why they are here and what brought them to this point. When we define and redefine things like mission and vision, we have some responsibility relative to character and to value systems. I think that type of knowledge is imparted in ways that one does not become familiar with quickly; it happens over time.

LUISA: *What do you see as the most critical future challenges to the University of Maine System? How will these challenges affect the future of higher education in Maine?*

SALLY: There are, I believe, four major challenges ahead for the University of Maine System: the Community College Initiative; the affordability of higher education; the System's role in the maintenance of a sustainable society; and leadership.

Let me begin with the Community College Initiative, centered within the University of Maine System and the Maine Technical College System. If successful, the Community College Initiative will do much to address the accessibility issue. It will require resources and committed leaders, and could serve as an excellent example of the collaboration between two entities in a state where funding is difficult. It could also be an excellent use of resources for both institutions.

Accessibility also brings aspirations to mind. Several years ago I thought that Maine could address aspiration-related challenges by helping secondary students understand the value of continuing their education beyond high school. I am now convinced that if Maine is serious about its intent to educate more Maine citizens, it has to start earlier in the education process, preferably in the lower grades. Middle school may even be too late. A serious effort will involve the process of mentoring, tutoring, and parental participation. I am reminded of a quote in Antoine de Saint Expery's *The Wisdom of Sands*: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather the wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." In Maine, we must teach youngsters to yearn for the vast and endless sea of education.

This leads me to the issue of affordability. Maine knowingly pays a premium for learning. Maine is a large state in terms of area. We realize that the geographic convenience of some of our institutions—in other words, where campuses are physically located—adds to the expense of education. We also know that the cost of attending a public university in Maine is high relative to personal income. The decisionmaking we do with regard to cost is painstakingly meticulous. However, keeping higher education affordable must remain one of our highest priorities.

In Maine, there has been no unified vision for higher education. That has been left to the three public higher education entities...

Another challenge to the University of Maine System relates to its use of the state's two public policy institutes. Located within the University of Maine System, they have the potential to play a prime role in making sure that our society is a sustainable one, a society in which we not only use what we need but also replenish and replace the resources we take. In a relatively short period of time, we've seen enormous growth in these two institutes with both providing research, technical data and leadership. I believe these contributions are vital to helping legislators and other state leaders frame the public policy decisions of the future. These centers must take the lead in ensuring that Maine's citizens are aware of the public policy issues that affect the state's future.

For example, they can help to ease the tension between coastal development and inland rural Maine. They can advise Maine citizens and lawmakers on the utilization of natural resources, both in terms of practice and management. In the area of fisheries there are concerns whether the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 can fulfill its dual promise of rebuilding fish stocks to a sustainable level and maintaining those levels to perpetuity. At present it doesn't look like Maine's stock of the more commonly caught fish is going to be replenished to such a level that there will be ample number.

Maine has many questions about its future with which to wrestle, and I think the University of Maine System is going to be a major participant in those public policy discussions and in the research and development initiatives necessary to sustain and build Maine's economy. This is an example of a public university's return on investment and I think it is going to be an exciting and rewarding challenge for all involved.

One last point: leadership. All significant and successful endeavors employ appropriate leadership. Continuing to retain or attract appropriate and compat-

ible leadership will be of the utmost importance to the University of Maine System. Universities have a right to be led and not simply left to find their way. Currently, the System is fortunate to possess extraordinary leadership at almost every level.

Again, let me personalize. When I was chair I tried to create an environment, an atmosphere, a spirit and attitude where everyone's participation and contributions were valued and appreciated; only by working and coming together can the common good be truly realized. In the future that common good is one that will enable Maine's citizens to live out the full measure of their lives in a new age and in a vastly different world.

LUISA: *In March of 1999, at your final Board of Trustees meeting, you made some remarks about diversity. In this regard, what do you see as the System's greatest challenges and what are its greatest opportunities?*

SALLY: The point I was trying to make in my comments last spring is that diversity work is not a single event, but a process that requires years of attention and ongoing support. Diversity work requires constant change and continuous improvement. It requires an appreciation of traditions of cultures as different interpretations of life's purposes and values.

When I refer to race and ethnicity, I'm not simply referring to the admissions process or to the work environment. I'm talking about the institutional need to understand what the value of diversity means, how a truly multicultural university looks and behaves, and how it imparts the benefits of diversity to students in the classroom and workers on the job. I believe every classroom, from those in the social sciences to those in math, should have a "benefits of diversity component." Our universities are sending graduates worldwide and I would like to think that those graduates understand the value of building on the social capital of differences. In other words, our greatest challenge will be to keep the importance of diversity a priority.

LUISA: *What role has state government and the Legislature played in supporting higher education in Maine? What more needs to be done?*

SALLY: If you believe that a university's primary responsibility is to promote the common good, you need to ask who defines the common good? In Maine, there has been no unified vision for higher education. That has been left to the three public higher education entities—the University of Maine System, the Maine Technical College System, and the Maine Maritime Academy—to establish their own vision and resultant public policy position within the state.

In the past, the University of Maine System has defined its public agenda by looking at questions focused on what society wants from education, what society needs from education, and whether those expectations are compatible. By concentrating on societal expectations, the System has usually focused on commonly held needs agreed upon between the Legislature, the government, and the System itself. The debate has usually been about the amount of dollars expended to meet those needs. For example, at present many of the universities' aging buildings are in need of attention and various aspects of technology need upgrading. Soon these needs will necessitate a significant, one-time capital investment.

Chancellor MacTaggart has been extraordinarily adept in nurturing within the Legislature and the governor's office a sense of legitimacy relative to the University of Maine System's mission of teaching and learning, research, and public service while at the same time infusing the public with a sense of ownership of their System. In the last few years the System has built enormously on its political capital, but because every two years brings new legislators to Augusta, it must be a continual process. In the past the System has been criticized by public officials and challenged to respond to questions such as: Are you customer oriented? Are you accountable? Are you efficient? Are you productive? These have been fair questions. Indeed, when the System is criticized, it is important to understand the substance of the criticism. University leaders should never feel above the smallest detail of a legislator's or a citizen's question or concern, remembering that each university serves the same public that the governor and legislators represent.

To summarize, there are tremendous needs within the state of Maine, and I don't see any of them abating. Higher education's responsibility is to tell its story passionately and convincingly while displaying, by words and actions, the unique contributions public higher education makes to the intellectual, economic, and the cultural vibrancy of the state of Maine. Maine's public universities are an exceptional resource and an extraordinary gift to society. They are worthy of our constant nourishment and attention. 🐟