



RIGHTSIZING COLLEGE

A case study on how Troy University leaders molded an adaptive and affordable institution to meet the evolving needs of their students and community.

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Governing Board Best Practices
on College Affordability

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DECEMBER 2021



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INTRODUCTION

The project focuses on the affordability strategies of the governing boards of five U.S. higher education institutions or systems. The project seeks to explain the role governing board members play in bringing about affordability measures and their relationship with college executives and their agendas. What strategies do they employ? And how has the COVID-19 pandemic changed their approach?

This study examines the leadership of Troy University's Board of Trustees and Chancellor Jack Hawkins and the decisions that molded the university into an adaptive and affordable institution to meet the evolving needs of its students and community. By making informed decisions based on quantifiable evidence – beginning with a university audit at the outset of Hawkins's chancellorship – Hawkins and the Board have "rightsized" the university through the consolidation of its campuses into a single accredited university and by reviewing and optimizing space utilization, program productivity, and faculty utilization. Ongoing efforts to rightsize the university have resulted in significant cost savings, enabling university leadership to provide students with an affordable, flexible, and quality education.

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The consolidation of Troy University's campuses into 'one great university' reaped significant cost savings – \$10 million in just the first ten years.

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ABOUT THE TROY UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The Troy University System is a large public university system based in Troy, Alabama – the county seat of Pike County in southeast Alabama’s “Wiregrass region.” Troy University is the second largest university in Alabama, with three satellite campuses in Dothan, Montgomery, and Phenix City.

Founded as the Troy State Normal School in 1887, the university has undergone five name changes throughout its history. In the 1960s, the university – then called Troy State College – began offering extension courses in Dothan, Montgomery, and Phenix City to serve Alabama’s population of military personnel posted at Maxwell Air Force Base, Fort Benning, and Fort Rucker. In 1982, the Montgomery and Dothan campuses received independent accreditation and the university became the Troy State University System. In 2004, the Troy University Board of Trustees voted to drop “state” from the name. The following year, the university was consolidated under one accreditation.

Troy University serves an ethnically diverse, low-income, and largely in-state student population – 40 percent minority, 74 percent Alabama residents, and 47 percent receiving Pell Grants.¹

The university’s flagship campus played a “tremendous part” in the city’s distinction as one of Alabama’s fastest growing cities, according to Mayor Jason Reeves.² Pike County boasts diverse industries and is home to several large corporations, including Lockheed Martin, Sikorsky Aircraft Manufacturing, Sanders Lead Company, Wiley Sanders Truck Lines, Southern Classic Food Group, and a Walmart Distribution Center.³

The university also boasts a large national and international presence with 60 additional teaching sites scattered throughout the United States and the world.⁴ An early pioneer in online education, Troy University now offers 97 online degree programs through TROY Online. Since its inception, it has awarded 22,831 online degrees, and currently 6,548 students are enrolled exclusively in its online courses. Several of its online programs have been ranked among the best in the country by U.S. News and World Report.⁵

Troy University is top 10 in their category in the researchers’ own ranking of Public Value Universities, including #2 for lowest increase in net price over time, #8 for value added, and #19 for social mobility.

Total Enrollment: 16,497⁶

Net Price: \$13,257⁷



John Robert Lewis Hall and the Academic Quad, Troy University, (Photograph by Troy University, <https://www.troy.edu/assets/about-us/images/quad-pic.jpg>).

GOVERNANCE CHARACTERISTICS

This study is focused on the Board of Trustees of Troy University, which has statutory authority to govern the university's four campuses, teaching sites, and TROY Online. The Board consists of 12 voting members that are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate for 12-year terms. There are no term limits for board members. In accordance with Alabama state code, the Board consists of the governor of Alabama (ex-officio), two at-large members, and nine members representing seven geographical constituencies – with five of the constituencies represented by one member each and two of the constituencies represented by two members each.⁸

The Board's statutory authority includes hiring the university chancellor, prescribing instructional programs, and tuition and fee rate setting.⁹ The university chancellor serves as the chief executive officer of the university and secretary to the board.¹⁰ Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr., who was named chancellor of Troy University in 1989, is the longest serving public university chancellor in the country.

Alabama's system of higher education is largely decentralized, with most governing power delegated to individual system or campus governing boards. A statewide board, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, has a largely advisory and coordinating role in state postsecondary education. Though its regulatory power is limited, Alabama Code delegates authority to review, evaluate, and approve new instructional programs to the Commission.



Troy University Board of Trustees, 2019 (Photograph by Troy University, <https://www.troy.edu/about-us/leadership/board-trustees/index.html>).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1.

The university commissioned an institutional audit that laid the foundation for the roadmap that followed.



2.

The university reduced costs by consolidating its campuses into “one great university.”



3.

The university is in a constant state of rightsizing itself, including reviewing and optimizing space utilization, program productivity, and faculty utilization.



4.

The Board of Trustees’ default position on tuition increases is opposition.



5.

The university employs financial aid counseling to reduce student loan reliance and discourages borrowing for convenience.



1. The university commissioned a third-party institutional audit that laid the foundation for the roadmap that followed.

At the start of his tenure at Troy University over thirty years ago, Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr.'s first act as chancellor was to call for an institutional audit.

The decision, Hawkins acknowledged, was atypical. But before offering any grand vision that might typically accompany the inaugural speech of a new chancellor, Hawkins first wanted to spend a year to "frame the problem," as he put it.

"You can't solve a problem until you frame a problem," he said. This mindset was instilled in Hawkins by his father as they hauled logs in the woods when he was young. "Here's what he told me, more than once: 'Son, frame the problem and then measure two or three times before you cut.'"

Explained Hawkins, "And that's what we don't do often enough in higher education. We don't frame the problem clearly, and then we don't measure two or three times before we cut."

To Hawkins, conducting an audit to get to the bottom of the institution's biggest challenges was necessary to effectively cast an institutional vision.

To lead this audit, Hawkins put together a three-member, third-party team to review the institution from "bottom up and from top down."

The panel included Dr. Kenneth Shaw, president of the University of Wisconsin System, Dr. David W. Ellis, president of Lafayette College, and Dr. James K. Fisher, an author and expert on higher education governance. The panel's review was thorough, interviewing almost 100 individuals, including the student body president, community members, business leaders, state legislators, and alumni.

By the end of the audit, the panel had framed several problems, including duplication related to the independent accreditation of its satellite campuses in Montgomery and Dothan.

Said Hawkins, "We had three faculty handbooks. We had three financial systems. We had three brands. And one of the charges in that issue study was to address duplication and a lack of cohesion in this system."

The duplication of curricula across the university system, in particular, was a hinderance to students transferring between the university's branch campuses. The issue was also brought to Hawkins's attention by a concerned parent who shared that university administrators had been unable to clarify which of their daughter's credits would transfer if she switched campuses.¹¹



"I would advise every new university president or chancellor to do an audit immediately. A vision can be a great thing, but it also can be a nightmare for those who have to implement it. And that's why I believe that for a vision to have meaning, to be relevant, it needs to be a collective vision. But how do you have a vision unless you can frame the problem?"

Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr.
University Chancellor



"We had three separate curricula within this university system," Hawkins explained. "We had a situation where students couldn't transfer courses beyond nine hours from one institution to another. So it eliminated mobility."

Hawkins believes Troy's approach and practice should be emulated by universities across the U.S.

"I would advise every new university president or chancellor to do an audit immediately," he said. "A vision can be a great thing, but it also can be a nightmare for those who have to implement it. And that's why I believe that for a vision to have meaning, to be relevant, it needs to be a collective vision. But how do you have a vision unless you can frame the problem?"

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The Twenty-first Century has brought drastic changes that have forced many education institutions to rethink visions and redesign strategies. Changing societal demands, intense competition advances in technology, and declining trends in the economy and state funding challenge universities the same as business and industry. Those who refuse to change will be left behind. That will not be the case for The Troy State University System.

*– A Case for Alabama's 21st Century University,
The Troy State University System*

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2. The Board of Trustees reduced costs by consolidating its campuses into “one great university.”

It was a decade after the initial audit that Troy leaders finally “bit the bullet,” as Hawkins put it, to address the problem of multiple independently accredited campuses.

In February 2000, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously to unify the university and “declare war on duplication.”

The Board then tasked Dr. Hawkins with the development of a strategic plan to unify the university system into “a much more focused, integrated, cost-effective, and innovative institution” – what they referred to as “one great university.”¹² The resulting five-year strategic plan established three objectives: (1) to improve service to students by removing barriers created by independent accreditation of campuses, (2) to improve academics by devising uniform policies, and (3) to create “brand identity.”¹³

According to records, the “heart of the [Board’s] mandate” was eliminating the unnecessary duplication of programs and curricula that had presented credit transfer issues for students.¹⁴

As detailed in the merger prospectus, the consolidated university would offer one set of academic programs across all of Troy’s campuses, which “contain the same curricula, measure the same outcomes, have the same expectations for faculty qualifications, and be wholly transferable throughout Troy University locations.”¹⁵ Each of the university’s colleges would be led by one dean, all reporting to a single provost.

In 2005, the merger was approved by the accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

The consolidation of Troy University’s campuses into “one great university” reaped significant cost saving – \$10 million in just the first ten years – by eliminating what board member Earl V. Johnson referred to as the “duplication of costs.”

“It was the thing that really has contributed to affordability at this institution,” said Hawkins. “And making three out of one – or one out of three [separate institutions] – really was a key element.... It was a difficult process.... But today, we’re so grateful that we bit that bullet 20 years ago and are where we are today.”



The consolidation of Troy University’s campuses into ‘one great university’ reaped significant cost savings – \$10 million in just the first ten years.



3. The university is in a constant state of rightsizing itself, including reviewing and optimizing space utilization, program productivity, and faculty utilization.

The merger of Troy's campuses was only the beginning of the "One Great University" initiative. With the campuses consolidated into a single accredited institution, university leadership went to work on "rightsizing" the university, as they call it, by closely reviewing the use of its resources to adapt to the changing times.

Rightsizing at Troy entails a close review and optimization of university operations including faculty and staff utilization, program productivity, and space utilization. It's here university leaders have found opportunities to cut costs and reduce the pressure to increase tuition. As a single accredited university, Troy was able to eliminate overhead costs by moving to shared services.

Said Board President Pro Tempore C. Gibson Vance, "[Now] we have one admissions department, we have one financial aid department, we have one athletic director. And so it was a big savings the day it happened but it's a continuing savings going forward."

The consolidation of certain departments led to an assessment of space utilization, particularly at the branch campuses. The university recently sold one of its buildings in Phenix City to Chattahoochee Valley Community College for \$1 million and is currently negotiating with them on the sale of two additional buildings. Part of another university building is being leased to the local HeadStart Program. The Phenix City campus' large population of adult learners, many of whom opt for online instruction, was a deciding factor in these decisions.

When it comes to university-owned buildings, university leadership has little tolerance for un- or underutilized space.



On optimizing faculty utilization:

"We have a mindset that we don't want to pass cost onto the students. We don't have to. So we manage our personnel, which represents around 55 percent of our total budget very closely."

Dr. James M. Bookout

Senior Vice Chancellor for Financial Affairs and Online Education



space. "If we don't need a building, we're going to get rid of the building," Vance explained. For Troy leaders, this rightsizing mentality is not only applied when considering space utilization of the university's existing facilities, but when considering the construction of new facilities.

For example, the university redirected a major gift from a donor to build a new facility for the College of Business at their Dothan campus. Said Hawkins, "We began really looking at the numbers and realize that if we do that, we may have an empty building there in short order – a beautiful building but an empty building. And so, we redirected that effort."

The Board sees its role as keeping tuition as low as reasonably possible which guards against the temptation to chase shiny new objects, said board member Johnson. "I think some board members get on the Board because they want to see a new stadium built or they want this or that or the other. We don't see it that way. We try to have nice facilities, but the bottom line is we're here to educate, not to entertain," he said.

University leaders also apply their rightsizing mentality to the academic side of the house. Using a two-part process, they analyze the productivity and viability of each academic program and then determine their staffing needs by program. According to administrator Bookout, faculty vacancies remain unfilled unless there is a quantifiable need to fill. In these decisions, cost-revenue analysis is performed with an eye toward reducing financial impact on students.

He continued, “We have a mindset that we don’t want to pass cost onto the students. We don’t have to. So we manage our personnel, which represents around 55 percent of our total budget very closely.”

In addition to student costs, student employability is a critical factor in the program review process. According to Hawkins, the university considers student job outcomes in determining whether program offerings should be modified, or university resources redirected.

“We’ve been focused on employability of graduates from the outset,” said Hawkins. “When you talk about program review, you have to look at what is happening to your graduates. The best index of what you can do is what you have done.”

Though workforce alignment is not the only consideration in the program review process, the Board of Trustees is conscious of how the university is meeting the economic needs of the communities it serves.

“We want to continue to teach traditional courses of study as long as they make sense, but [not] when they don’t make sense anymore or we don’t have the demand for it in our economy,” said Johnson. “We’re not in the business of just training folks for jobs, we’re in the business of education. But at the same time, we’ve got to be conscious of what our community needs in the way of education and make sure that we’re providing that. And if we’re working on something that there’s no need for, then we look real hard as to whether we want to continue along those lines.”

Program and course offerings that are not meeting the needs of students or the economy get the axe, according to Vance. “I’ve asked [the administration] to look at what course curriculums we need,” he said. “And if we’re only servicing a few people, we need to get rid of those [course curriculums] because you truly can’t be great at all things for all people.”

Rightsizing the university is an ongoing process involving the Board and administration.

In 2013, the Board established a rightsizing committee to review staffing levels and recommend actions to align staffing levels with the university’s mission and needs. At the committee’s recommendation, 85 funded positions that had recently become vacant were eliminated – saving the university over \$2 million a year.¹⁶ The committee identified another \$4 million in annual savings through reductions in the use of adjunct faculty, reflecting decreased enrollment levels.¹⁷

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Earl V. Johnson
Member, Board of Trustees



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The chancellor now holds an annual briefing with university administrators, deans, and department heads where they discuss postgraduate outcomes, the cost of producing those graduates, cost compared to other peer institutions, and overall return on investment.

Johnson explained, "This board is working with the administration [asking], 'are we doing the right thing? Are we offering the right courses? Do we have faculty on salary that's really not producing any graduates that the economy needs or that the community needs?'"

The university also employs a hiring strategy that enables them to adapt to changing needs. "How can we retain the flexibility to be a bit more nimble because American higher education is not?" Hawkins asked rhetorically.

The answer, explained Hawkins, is to enable the university to modify programs and redirect faculty members more easily by reducing the ranks of tenured faculty, especially as retirements happen. In the past five years, the share of non-tenure track full time faculty has increased from 27.6 percent to 31.3 percent.

"In today's environment, I think you have to be careful where you invest your money, said Hawkins. "And what our philosophy includes is trying to feed our strengths and starve our weaknesses. And if our graduates are not getting jobs, then what can we do to modify the program or redirect those resources? [...] Let's look at the productivity of these programs to make sure that we're producing graduates who are employable and can make a difference out in the world."

COVID-19 INSIGHT:

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, the abrupt transition to remote learning was a significant challenge for many colleges and universities across the country.

But this transition was less drastic at Troy University, where online education has been embraced for decades. First utilizing dial-up internet in distance learning in the 1990s, Troy expanded its online learning platform in 2005 with the creation of e-Campus, later renamed eTroy. Now recognized as a national pioneer in online education, TROY Online offers 108 fully online degree programs and has awarded 23,113 online degrees.¹⁸

Troy's existing online infrastructure through TROY Online made for an easier transition to remote learning than many U.S. colleges and universities experienced, said Chancellor Hawkins.

"Out of hundreds of faculty, a year ago, less than 50 were not certified in terms of teaching online. What was very natural for us became a problem in a lot of other institutions that had very little experience in online education," he said.

Their new goal, explained board member Johnson, is to ensure that every course offered at Troy University is also offered online. This ambitious goal, which is discussed at every board meeting, is also cost effective for the university.

"There's no question," said Johnson, "it's less costly to provide online."



4. The Board of Trustees' default position on tuition increases is opposition.

When asked, point-blank, who the Board's primary stakeholders are, Vance, who chairs the Board, didn't hesitate.

"The students," he said.

The impact the Board's tuition decisions have on their students is something the Board is acutely aware of.

"We understand where the students are coming from," said Vance. "We understand that they're coming from maybe difficult situations. And they can't afford a lot more than what we're charging. So it's not an option that we could just charge whatever we want and they would come – they wouldn't be able to afford to come."

Board member Johnson echoed his sentiments. "Our responsibility, our fiduciary relationship is with the students at this university, the past, present and future," he explained. "The students are who we are here to serve. And that starts with the Board."

While they espouse tremendous respect for Chancellor Hawkins and his administration, both Vance and Johnson view students, not university administrators, as their primary constituents. This mindset is most evident in their decisions to hold down tuition rates in recent years.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Board of Trustees approved back-to-back tuition freezes.

"When it comes to affordability, we're proud of the fact that we have not raised tuition in three years," said Vance. "As a board, we're always adamant, let's not raise tuition unless you absolutely have to."

In their decision making, the Board crunches the numbers and weighs costs against what students and families can afford, Vance explained.

But opposing tuition increases is the Board's default position, according to Vance. When considering tuition increase proposals, they approach the decision as if it were a court case and make the administration prove their case.

"The burden is on [the administration] to prove to us by a preponderance of the evidence – beyond all reasonable doubt – that that's the only thing we can do," said Vance.

Fortunately for students, the administration shares the Board's focus on students and commitment to affordability. As someone who once worked his own way through school, Chancellor Hawkins says he understands the financial



On raising tuition:

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C. Gibson Vance

President Pro Tempore,
Board of Trustees



stress that any increase places on students and their families.

"The students we serve, we know that so many students were just like I was 60 years ago, having to work their way through school and every dollar is important to them," said Hawkins. "And if every dollar is important to them and to their parents, every dollar is important to us."

According to vice chancellor Bookout, the university focuses on what it can control in the affordability equation.

"When we consider why we need to increase tuition, certainly appropriations are taken into consideration.... One thing we can do, we can control costs," said Bookout. "We can't control revenue, which is enrollments. We can influence it heavily with our recruiting strategies, but we can't control revenue. We can control costs."

The end game, according to Vance, is to provide the best education possible at the lowest cost possible and have students leave Troy not only with a degree but also with a job.

Vance credits Hawkins and Bookout for a can-do mindset: "They just believe, fundamentally, there's ways to cut cost without lowering quality," he said.



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5. The university employs financial aid counseling to reduce student loan reliance and discourages borrowing for convenience.

Troy University leaders hate unnecessary student loan debt. Addressing what Vance refers to as an “impediment” to the American dream and Hawkins calls the “nemesis” and “scourge of American higher education” is a top priority for both the Board of Trustees and the administration.¹⁹

According to Vance, student debt is a top concern of board members who are cognizant of its long lasting implications for borrowers.

Impressively, Troy University’s average undergraduate student debt is 33.5 percent below the national average.²⁰

Said Vance, “We see [student debt] as a path to a career, but we [also] see it as an impediment to being able to live their American dream as adults. So, it’s a fine line. And we want to keep tuition and costs and room and board as low as possible where [students] don’t run out their credit card or that student loan debt that is just weighing them down for years and years. I always look at it as a house payment without a house.”

As the face of the institution, Hawkins uses his position to caution students and get his message across.

“Every time I have an opportunity to speak and welcome new students and families to this university, I talk about the burden of student debt and how we don’t want them to drag that into their future,” Hawkins explained. “You and I both know people who can’t even purchase a home because they’re trying to satisfy student debt. And we don’t want that for our graduates.”

The university takes a proactive approach to reducing student reliance on loans by discouraging borrowing for convenience.

In Hawkins’ view, student loan debt should always be a last resort. “If it’s a matter of convenience, do not borrow the money,” he said. “If it’s not, then you have to consider it an investment.”

This stance is incorporated into guidance from Troy’s financial aid counselors when advising students and parents on their financing options.

The message is sinking in.

“I am proud that Troy graduates owe on average \$10,000 less than their counterparts across the nation,” said Hawkins. “The ‘secret’ to our success is diligence and common sense on the part of our financial aid staff.”²¹

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“The ‘secret’ to our success is diligence and common sense on the part of our financial aid staff. Our counselors emphasize to students that they should not incur debt unless it’s the last resort to complete their degree programs.”

Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr.
University Chancellor



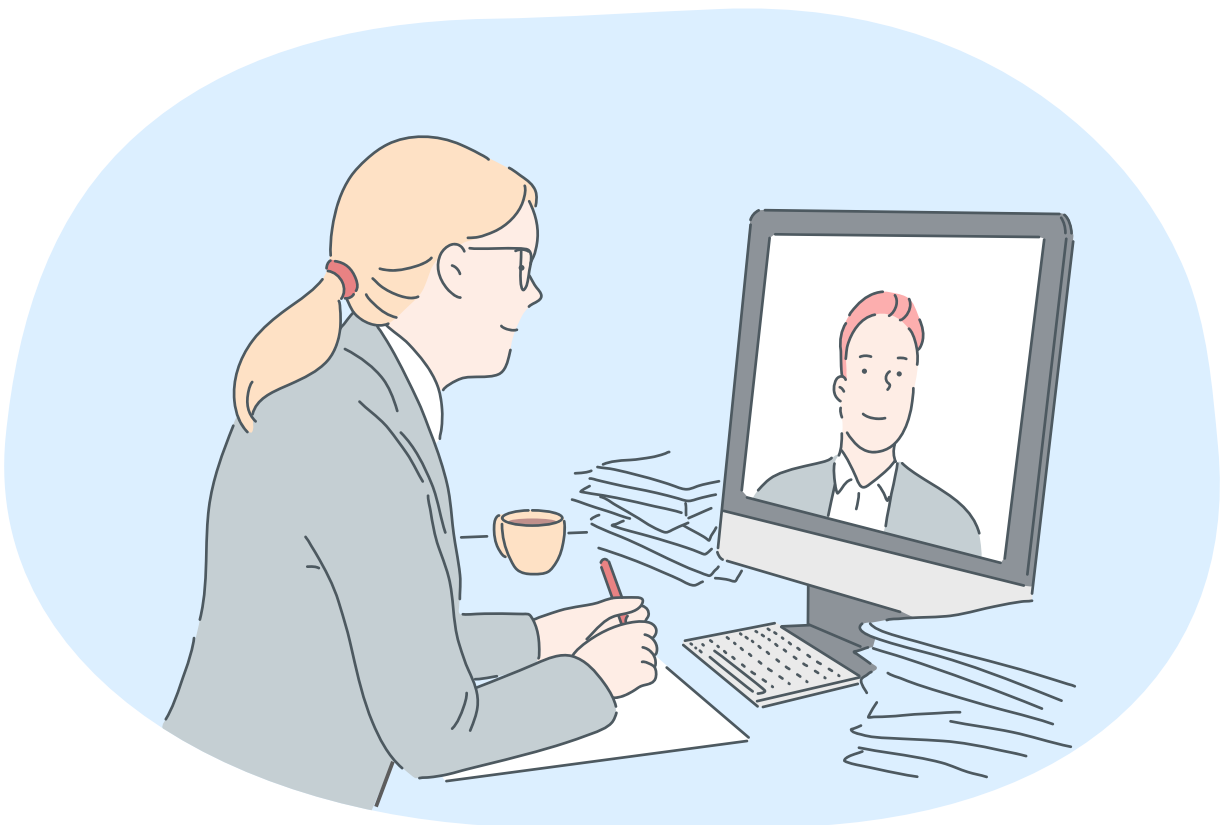
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METHODS

Cases were selected from a list of Public Value Universities who are doing the heavy lifting in state higher education. This set of schools was in the top 10 nationally in one of three categories – flagship, metro leader, and regional – out of 196 public universities total. The universities were ranked according to the average of eight factors: net price; net price increase over time; ratio of instruction to institutional support; percent in-state; percent Pell-eligible; six-year graduation rate; Brookings value added; and Harvard mobility index. Two factors, net price and percent Pell-eligible students, were double weighted to account for the fact this study focused on affordability, especially for underrepresented students. When issuing case study final invitations, consideration was given to geographic diversity among the top 10 as well as different governance structures.

The project director conducted interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide, with Troy University Board of Trustees members and university administrators, including C. Gibson Vance, president pro tempore of the Troy University Board of Trustees; Earl V. Johnson, member of the Troy University Board of Trustees; Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr., chancellor of Troy University; and Dr. James M. Bookout, vice chancellor for financial affairs and online education.

The researchers did not preselect the affordability strategies described in this study. The interviewees were asked to describe the factors they believed contributed to their system or institution's affordability, and the strategies described are contained therein. In addition to the interviews, the researcher and publication author conducted a document review of current and past board policies, historical board documents and media releases, and other relevant sources and documentation.



END NOTES

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