



Remarks by Dr. Robert A. Kennedy
Interim President, Board of Regents for Higher Education
Higher Education Consolidation Committee
September 14, 2011

Good afternoon, Senator Bye, Representative Candelaria and members of the Committee. My name is Bob Kennedy, and it is a pleasure to be here today. I'm new in this setting, but I'm very aware and appreciative of your dedication and service to our students and to the state's higher education. As you know, I was recently appointed to serve as interim president of the Board of Regents for Higher Education.

First, I would just like to say that I am very pleased to be here in Connecticut, and very excited about the opportunity to join you in crafting the future of higher education in this state. I don't have to tell you about the tremendous reputation that Connecticut has in education, and I am certain that your many efforts in the legislature are a big part of that.

Now, I've only been on board for about a week, so if you won't mind, in a minute, I'll turn to Mike Meotti, who you know well, to respond to some of the specifics regarding what has been done so far, and what is in the works.

Since arriving in Connecticut, I've spent some time apartment hunting, but considerably more time meeting with presidents, meeting with staff and listening. So far, I've been very impressed with what I've heard.

By coincidence, Mike and I had a terrific meeting earlier this week with all 17 of the college and university presidents, and five of the new Regents, and it was, frankly moving, to hear their excitement, passion and pride in what they are doing and their confidence in the direction that we are headed.

It was also good to hear first-hand about their work and their campuses—and as I'm learning almost every minute—there are some really outstanding programs in our universities and pathways to build on.

I assured them that one of my first goals is to visit each of their campuses, talk to their students, community and business leaders—and I hope, if possible—meet some of you or your colleagues while in your home communities. I'm really looking forward to these visits and we've begun to schedule them this week.

But already, one thing is very clear. We have an opportunity in Connecticut to use the reorganization of higher education to do a better job for our students, whether they are attending a university, a community college, or Charter Oak.

And we have an opportunity to do a better job working with this state's businesses to provide them with students ready to step into the workforce, meet their needs, and grow Connecticut's economy. These are things I've worked on a lot in the past, so, you can see why I am so enthusiastic about being here in Connecticut!

If you will permit me, I'd like to spend a moment or two sharing with you where I see some of those opportunities. And perhaps the best way to do that is to highlight some of the initiatives during my presidency at the University of Maine—building on my experiences at Texas A&M University, the University of Maryland, and working in Minnesota—because I think they relate very specifically to the opportunities that we have here in Connecticut.

One of the things that I am most proud of while I was in Maine is a collaboration I initiated between UMaine and Southern Maine Community College in material science and alternative energy as part of the redeployment of Brunswick Naval Air Station. Two such institutions had never collaborated in that way before.

SMCC is the fastest growing Community College in Maine, and President Jim Ortiz was a wonderful colleague in these efforts. Already, this effort has been instrumental in attracting various businesses to the new campus—which is expected to grow to about 3,000 students—including an airplane manufacturing company from my home state of Minnesota.

(As an aside, I'd say that I've worked quite extensively with people in Minnesota on economic development and the loss of this aircraft manufacturing company to Maine was a blow to their own manufacturing and economic development efforts.)

I believe one of the hallmarks of my presidency in Maine would be inter-institutional collaboration, like those I just cited, with institutions and companies in various sectors, and especially promoting public-private partnerships. In one case, an alternative energy initiative will save the university tens of millions of dollars over the next several years, and another with international collaborations, that has the potential for thousands of jobs and an economic potential in billions. Those are big numbers in Maine!

There is virtually no institution in Maine that we didn't develop extensive collaborations with, significantly raising the university's profile. Or, as reported in a television profile in July, "moving the school closer to the people..."

Hopefully, these examples give you some sense of context for what can be done here. But of course, every state is different, and each has its own particular strengths. So, I am looking forward to meeting with students, faculty, staff, business and industry leaders, local community leaders, and working with all of you, as we move forward.

I've always believed that the first job of a leader is to listen, and that is what I am doing, and plan to continue. And rest assured, I will carefully consider what I hear - working with the new Board of Regents - to advance higher education in Connecticut. In doing so, I will keep you informed, and I welcome your input every step of the way.

I know there are a number of points that you would like to cover today, so let me contribute what I can at this juncture, and Mr. Meotti will certainly be adding to that.

Regarding the Board of Regents, as you know, the Board is to have 15 members and 4 ex-officio members – the commissioners of the departments of education, labor, economic and community development, and public health.

- Of the 15 members, 8 have been appointed thus far. Governor Malloy has made 6 of his 9 appointments, including the Board's Chairman, Lewis Robinson, who I've gotten to know and we have started to lay the groundwork for the Board's many important roles, including an excellent meeting this morning.
- Two of the four legislative appointments have been made, and it is my understanding that students are just beginning the process of selecting their two representatives on the Board.

We are providing you with a list of Board appointments to date.

This is clearly a time of transition for higher education in Connecticut, as the Boards of Trustees conclude their work over the next few months and the new Board of Regents gets underway.

My excitement and enthusiasm for the reorganization is only exceeded by my sincere belief in the process and what it will mean for our students and the state of Connecticut!

Now, I welcome any questions you may have, for me or for Mike Meotti.