

Carolyn K. Roberts
Board of Governors Meeting
Comments
June 14, 2007

This was a difficult Legislative Session for the State University System, but really, for all of state government. Legislators had to make tough choices in an environment of limited resources. Our universities have needs, but so do the public schools, the community colleges, corrections, the medically needy – there are many competing needs for state resources.

I want to provide some perspective. Our Board of Governors was created by a constitutional amendment with one of the largest popular votes in the history of Florida politics.

Amendment 11 created the Board of Governors – as an explicit rejection of the previous model of decentralized management of the State University System. The voters of the state, Florida citizens, wanted a statewide board to operate and manage the whole State University System. The purpose for this system of governance for the universities was “to achieve excellence through teaching students, advancing research and providing public service for the benefit of Florida’s citizens.”

The Constitution, as amended, states, “The board shall operate, regulate, control, and be fully responsible for the management of the whole university system. These responsibilities shall include, but not be limited to, defining the distinctive mission of each constituent university and its articulation with free public schools and community colleges, ensuring the well-planned coordination and operation of the system, and avoiding wasteful duplication of facilities or programs.”

It took us three years to become fully operational and staffed. This was a very difficult period for our Board, Boards of Trustees, and the universities. While this Board spent the first years trying to figure our place, while we began to work on the issues we thought were directed by the Constitution, with a lawsuit ongoing involving our Board and the State Board, our public universities continued to enroll nearly 40,000 additional students. We have borne the brunt of enrollment growth and in my mind performed heroically for the citizens of the state, despite continuously having the lowest tuition in the country and despite continuous inattention to the real stresses and strains caused by enrollment growth, and the competitive pressures of the changing economy of the 21st Century.

By every indicator of comparison, Florida falls behind in higher education. We do not just fall behind benchmark mega-trend states. We fall behind neighboring states with half the size, half or less the wealth, and little real promise for national leadership. Let me give one example, in ratio of tenured faculty to students, the national average is about 25 students to every faculty member. In Florida, we are one above the dead last state of Louisiana, with almost 30 students to every faculty member. Arkansas is way ahead of us at 25 to 1; Georgia is at 26 to 1; and North Carolina, the 13th best state in this particular comparison is at about 22 to 1.....and, of course, there is a reason for North Carolina's success.....and it is strong state funding and appropriate tuition.

I do not believe that next to dead last is what we aspire to for our students....OUR STATE DESERVES BETTER.

Since I have been associated with higher education and our universities, we have continually short-changed public university funding. Access is on the cheap and we have kept our doors open. Perhaps we are in this situation today – too many expectations, and bare-bones funding for access, in part because we accommodated and did not draw a line. To maintain access, and to ensure that our graduates can compete in the 21st Century marketplace, we must invest in our institutions of higher education. I would note that given the growth of enrollment and the underfunding of access the past several years, there has actually been a disinvestment in our universities.

Since the passage of the constitutional amendment, this Board has been cooperative and patient, calling for collaboration and partnership. We have not shied away from accountability. We are eager to support and reward performance. And we know that we have a promise to keep with citizens of the state for affordable, high quality education. Perhaps we have been too patient, too cautious, for too long.

Now, we genuinely believe that our institutions are at risk. Simply, without the needed faculty and staff, we cannot continue to promise quality. We already have one of the highest ratios of students to faculty in the nation. We have some of the most cramped academic buildings in the country. Yet everyday, more students want to get an affordable college education, and we are ever more hard-pressed to provide it to them. I believe that we should be planning for a new university so we have the needed access available.....instead, we are defending the existing universities.

Today, I am calling on our Board to raise the flag on quality and access. To make a commitment to the people of Florida who want their sons and daughters to get

a four year university education – one that has value, both inside and outside this state, for we do not just compete in Florida. Our sons and daughters, the people of Florida expect nothing less.

This cannot be done without a shared commitment. This cannot be done without a greater understanding that as a Board our purpose – stated right in the Constitution--is to achieve excellence – a standard that is defined globally and in the world of work, not artificially through a standard that is political and momentary.

Our obligation is to the public and to future generations of Floridians who are counting on us – trusting us to do the right thing. We cannot sit idly by, debate and wait for a political breakthrough that will likely never come for us – not after such a strong endorsement to create an independent governing board for the public universities.

Governor Charlie Crist recognizes the value of the university system to our state and has been supportive of our mission to provide quality access and competitive degrees. His budget included enrollment funding to support university growth. He encouraged the Legislature to take the burden of funding the universities from the students. The Legislature, instead, approved a tuition increase which was vetoed. The Governor and Legislature have the responsibility of appropriately funding all the needs of our state..... We believe that funding for the university system should be a top priority.

We have a powerful vote behind us....it instructed us to do the right thing for the public university system. Today is the day that we demonstrate courage to do the right thing. We will continue to be partners with the Legislature and the Executive Branch. There are great leaders in both bodies – men and women who want to do the right thing. Our great idea is to have quality education for our public university students. We know that you cannot have a great state without a great university system. That is our mandate, our calling and our commitment.

All of the members of the Board of Governors have legal, political, and personal advisors. You would not have reached this level of public service if you did not. Today, I encourage you to have a serious discussion.....we need to know what all of you believe is the best course of action. After today's meeting, take advantage of the advice of people you trust as we are about to make serious decisions. I am requesting our staff to respond quickly to your questions. Any decision we make will have serious consequences.....positive or negative. The one choice with the most negative consequence, in my opinion, is no action.

We will have a special meeting in a few weeks. I'm respectful of your busy summer schedules, but hope that you will make an effort to participate.....in person or by telephone.

The Trustee Nominating Committee will be interviewing candidates and we will ask staff to coordinate our meetings.

I am confident that this Board will take the appropriate action to uphold our Constitutional responsibility. I am asking Chancellor Rosenberg to have a recommendation, after consulting with each of you, for a plan of action at our next meeting. I have confidence in you.

Now, I ask you to listen to your colleagues. This is a public Board, and all of us understand that our discussions are subject to the Sunshine law, so we will address this matter openly. The Chancellor and our General Counsel have lined out about five options for our consideration.....and, I'm sure, that you will have more for today's discussion.

1. continuing to discuss and set strategic directions, enrollment growth objectives, identify and recommend budget and tuition, and hope for the best from the Legislative Session;
2. challenge the Governor's tuition veto in the courts;
3. address through the courts the remaining issues related to the Board's authority to govern including the issue of tuition authority;
4. freeze freshman admission enrollment growth at a level consistent with actual funding; and
5. freeze all enrollment growth at a level consistent with actual funding.

Each of these choices has ramifications and we need to consider these seriously and carefully. I want to encourage all of you to consider our fiduciary responsibility for the universities and the quality of the education they are providing the sons and daughters of Florida. I want to suggest that we have a good discussion today, and come back in several weeks, perhaps by conference call, and decide on our course of action. Everyone is watching us..... depending on us to do the right thing. Once again, I believe that we cannot have a great state without a great university system.....this Board will provide the leadership to have the university system our citizens deserve.

Chancellor.