

For immediate release
August 25, 2009

Beth Martino, Press Secretary
785.368.8500

A PATH TO EXCELLENCE

Remarks at the Kansas Board of Regents' Retreat:

“I appreciate the opportunity to address you today. Each of you has amassed a wealth of individual accomplishments and each of you has shared your talents generously with Kansas. We are a better state because of your service. It is an honor for me to be here today.

“I’m very excited about talking to you because I’m excited about the Kansas Regents system.

“Education is the foundation of this state; working minds drive the working world. Businesses, farms, the arts, humanities, the safety of our streets and the prosperity of our future – the value of these assets depend on the quality of our education system.

“The Kansas Regents Institutions have successfully produced hundreds of thousands of graduates who have gone on to build this state and our country. The list of its graduates is impressive, and the impact we have made is immense.

“I’m also personally thankful for our Regents system. I’m a product of Wichita State University. I had an outstanding experience at Wichita State where I graduated in Secondary Education and spent four years on the national debate circuit representing our school. I then went on to the KU School of Law, where Stacy and I met; from there we both graduated, and have gone on to live a storybook life. Our experiences at Wichita State and KU were instrumental in our later happiness.

“You will find me among your strongest supporters. As a legislator, I voted for tax increases for the general fund, in hopes that some of it would find its way to the Regents. As a leader, I’ve consistently expressed my genuine view that Kansas cannot succeed if our higher education system does not succeed; and I firmly believe that. The answer to a variety of challenges from workforce training, to job creation, to development of new technologies, lays within our Regents schools.

“You are in a remarkable position to not only improve our educational system, but improve the state. I hope you appreciate the impact you can have statewide. For example, if you make the right decisions and become part of the solution to our workforce training challenge, you will boost the Kansas economy. If you make the right decisions and KU receives National Cancer Institute designation, you will improve the quality of cancer care throughout the Midwest, which will save thousands of lives. If you make the right decisions and improve retention and graduation rates for our students, you will save tens of thousands of students the misery of a failed education, wasted spending and a lost career.

“You are in a remarkable position if you seize your role to shape both the Regents Institutions and the State.

“I make these qualifying statements because some of my statements today, without this context, could appear to be unsupportive. That is not the case. Instead, I want to provide you a frank assessment of where I see our current system because it is only with that frank discussion that we can begin the dialogue that will make us better.

“I want to provide you some direction of what I believe you should focus on in order to maximize the incredible opportunities we have before us.

“The topic du jour when the Kansas Regents system is discussed is financial accountability. This is case because of the abuses that took place at Kansas State, primarily in the Athletic Department. They were unfortunate and unacceptable. I appreciate the leadership that you have taken in requiring audits to deter them from happening again. This is an important issue, but it is yesterday’s news.

“I want to talk about the future. The future to me is academic accountability. I’m going to discuss it in three different categories. The first is national rankings, the second is retention/graduation rates, and the third is graduate placement in the private sector.

“In my view, the job of the Regents is to hold our universities accountable on these three measurements; and when you do, the state will benefit.

“The first point I want to make is that rankings matter and we are not doing as well as we should. There are some that would argue that rankings don’t matter and I could not disagree more. Rankings matter to me for a variety of reasons. First, it is important that we have at least one university that is of such stature that we can retain the best and brightest of our high school graduates. We have “brain drain” when students leave Kansas after high school and never come back. A great university would slow that.

“Second, rankings matter because they reflect excellence. We need the best teachers, the best engineers, the best doctors, the best of everything and we can only achieve that with great schools.

“Third, success creates more success. The higher our schools are rated, the more alumni support they deserve and will receive. That support creates opportunities for greater excellence and synergies begin to develop.

“If you don’t think rankings matter, then the obvious question is why the Ivy League schools obsess over them. They understand the importance of rankings and have strategic plans to retain and improve their rankings.

“Unfortunately, our rankings are a mixed bag; and I want to say that this is no specific person’s fault. Nothing that I’m saying today is an indictment of any university, university leader, or any Regent. I view our overall position as mediocre for a variety of reasons, most of which are policy reasons outside the control of the Board of Regents or the individual institutions.

“You are probably familiar with the rankings of our institutions. In a nutshell, here they are.

“U.S. News and World Report does an annual ranking of thousands of colleges and universities every year. It classifies institutions into a variety of categories. The top category for universities is as a National University. There are 260 National Universities. Kansas has three National Universities: The University of Kansas is ranked 96th; Kansas State University is in the third tier; and Wichita State is ranked in the fourth tier

“Let me explain the Kansas State and Wichita State rankings. After ranking the first 130 universities, U.S. News then puts national Universities in either the 3rd tier, which is schools 134 through 196; or the 4th tier which is schools 197 to 260. It does not rank them.

“Our four other universities are in the Masters Program and ranked only against Midwest schools also part of the Masters Program. Masters Program schools offer a full range of undergraduate degrees, but very few PhDs. Here are the rankings of our four remaining schools. There are 141 schools in this category: Washburn is rated 36th; Emporia is rated in the 3rd tier; Pittsburg is rated in the 3rd tier; and Fort Hays is rated in the 3rd tier.

“The rankings stop after the top 70. The third tier consists of schools rated 72 through 104th; and the fourth tier is schools rated 107th through 141st.

“There are multiple ranking services and various rankings for individual schools; and as you look at those, there are some pockets of excellence. For example, the Department of Education at KU is rated 18th out of 278 and the Department of Education at Kansas State is rated 41st out of 278.

“There are also areas of concern. The law school at KU has dropped out of the top 50. The medical school at KU is not in the top 50. The veterinarian school at Kansas State is 18th out of 28 in the country. K-State’s engineering school is ranked 64th in the country and KU is in the top 90, but none of our other engineering schools are in the top 100.

“We can do better. If we are to compete with even our neighbor states, we must do better. But the 21st century doesn’t afford us that low of a bar. We must compete with the entire country, in fact the entire developing and developed world. We can do better, we must do better, and we will.

“I’m going to talk about the two additional areas of accountability and then I’m going to talk about how we can do better.

“The retention of college freshmen and the ultimate graduation rates of those freshmen in the United States is dismal. Only 60 percent of freshmen who enter a four year university in the United States graduate within the next six years.

“Unfortunately, our performance in Kansas is even worse than the national average. Again, I’m not pointing fingers here.

“There are policy reasons for this that you and the leaders of the universities have no control over. But I think it’s important that we understand the retention rates we have in Kansas, so we can develop strategies for improving them.

“At the outset, let me say that I’ve found at least three different sets of rates on the internet while researching this. For consistency, I’ve used the U.S. News and World Report numbers, which are generally more favorable than what I’ve seen by some other rating groups.

“Retention is the percentage of freshmen who finish their first year and then return the second year. Graduation rate is the percentage of students who enter the first year and graduate within the next six years.

“KU’s retention rate is 81 percent, its graduation rate is 60 percent; K-State’s retention rate is 79 percent and its graduation rate is 58 percent; Wichita State’s retention rate is 69 percent and its graduation rate is 39 percent; Washburn University’s retention rate is 65 percent and its graduation rate is 52 percent; Pittsburg State’s retention rate is 75 percent and its graduation rate is 51 percent; Fort Hays State’s retention rate is 67 percent and its graduation rate is 49 percent; and finally, Emporia State’s retention rate is 71 percent and its graduation rate is 44 percent.

“There are some rating services that compare the graduation rates of each institution to its peer group. Washburn excels in that category. Our other institutions lag. I’m particularly impressed that KU Chancellor Gray-Little has indicated that this will be a primary focus of her service at KU.

“I’ve asked you to hold the institutions accountable for their rankings; as well as retention and graduation rates. I’m also asking you to hold them accountable for what happens to the students that do graduate.

“No one has better tracking systems than the alumni associations. I could move six times in a year and am convinced the alumni associations would track me down. We need to put that same knowledge to use in figuring out what students are doing after they leave the universities. Only then will we know if we are training them for the jobs of the 21st century.

“That requires shaking things up in a way higher education administrators and educators are unaccustomed to.

“If we find out that graduates of certain programs just aren’t getting jobs in their fields, then it’s time to evaluate whether those programs make sense. Similarly, if we have 100 percent employment in other areas, it’s time to consider expanding those areas.

“We need data not just on where are students are going, but what they are doing and what sort of success they are experiencing. That will help us make changes necessary to shape our programs for success.

“In summary, I’ve asked you to hold the universities accountable for their rankings, their graduation/retention rates, and for the collection of data on the successes of their graduates.

“It’s easy to ask you to hold everyone accountable; it’s much more difficult to tell you how to do it. Here is what I would do as a Regent.

“First, we need an overall plan for where the universities should be in 10 years. What is acceptable? To me, acceptable would look something like this: at least one national university in the top 50. Because KU is closest at this point, it would make sense to me that this would be the institution to propel into that position.

“We must make sure that Kansas State is at least in the top 100, and certainly we must make sure that it doesn’t fall backward. We must make a commitment that no Kansas institution is in the 4th tier, and we must take steps to get our 4th tier universities to improve their rankings.

“We must improve our specialty schools. The KU school of law and medical school should be in the top 50; the K-State veterinary school should be in the top 10; and all of our engineering schools should be in the top 100. We should also analyze the possibility of developing a dental school at Wichita State.

“We must work to get our retention and graduation rates above the norm for our peer institutions and above the national norm.

“Second, you need to understand what it takes to move our rankings, our retention rates and our graduation rates. You need a strong understanding about what goes into the rankings.

“The good news is U.S. News and World Report provides us that information and it ends up all of this is interrelated. If you improve retention, you improve your national ranking. If you improve graduation rates, you improve your national ranking. And historically when you improve your national ranking, your alumni giving goes up, which further improves your national ranking.

“Here are the criteria that U.S. News utilizes: Peer Assessment is 25 percent; Graduation and Retention Rate is 20 percent; Faculty Resources is 20 percent; Student Selectivity is 15 percent; Financial Resources is 10 percent; Alumni Giving is 5 percent; and Graduation Rate Performance is 5 percent.

“Third, and most important, I would require the Board of Regents staff to work with you to develop a strategic plan. Each of the institutions should do the same. These plans would outline where each institution will be 10 years from now in national ranking and retention/graduation rates; and a strategy for getting there. It must include objective benchmarks so that you can monitor success on an annual basis.

“Finally, it is clear to me that some of this improvement will cost money, but some of it will not. For example, our open enrollment policy has hurt our rankings considerably. It has lowered our ACT and GPA scores and more importantly, resulted in students who are not ready for college-level classes enrolling in Kansas institutions. That ultimately hurts retention and graduation rates. I’m pleased that you now have additional flexibility with respect to admissions and I encourage you to use it.

“However, I am aware that this will also take money.

“The Kansas Legislature’s willingness to support higher education has been spotty at best. I am aware of that. But my belief is that the Legislature will fund success. So, if you present strategic plans that show an upward path and the funding needs to get there, I’m confident that the Legislature and alumni will fund the plans. I know it’s easy to say that, but I genuinely believe it. People want a plan. They want leadership. And when they see leadership with a plan they will usually follow. The Kansas Legislature is no different.

“Now, some may question why a ten-year plan. My response is that the plan must be realistic. KU can’t go from 96th to 50th in one year. It will take time. For example, graduation rates are measured over a six year span. Even if we figured out everything we needed to know about how to improve graduation rates, and it took us just two years to implement those changes, we wouldn’t feel the total impact on our graduation rate for eight years: two years of planning and then the six years that it would take the students to work through the system.

“We can see incremental improvements all along the way. But it will take 10 years to see the fundamental improvements that are possible.

“You are smart, active people and are aware of the criticism of the Board. Some contend that you are an advisory board; that you simply go along with whatever the leadership at the institutions suggests and there is no real oversight.

“I hope that is not the case. We can’t afford for it to be. We need you actively engaged as if you were a board of directors for a private company. That means that you are not yes people. Instead you ask questions, you challenge assumptions, and you force the Regents to perform at their maximum potential.

“That does not mean that you micromanage. I think of a good board member like this: a good board member challenges the executives when appropriate, but never crosses the line where they are either micro managing or just being a complete pest. A bad board member has been co-opted by the executives and is always a yes. Perform your fiduciary duties and get as close to the pest line as possible, but don’t cross it.

“So, in this context a good board would develop a 10 year strategic plan and would require the institutions to develop their own plans that would address the issues I’ve outlined, or whatever issues you think should be discussed. You would monitor the progress of the development of the plan, the execution of the plan and any changes that are needed as the plan is executed, but you wouldn’t micromanage the development of the plan or execution of it.

“The 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were centuries of the big national universities. I firmly believe that the 21st century will be the century of the community colleges and technical schools. I believe this because there will be scores of industries with job shortages and millions of great jobs with no one to fill them. Our community colleges and technical schools are in a perfect position to provide the training for those jobs.

“The Regents structure that we have, caused in no small part by then Lieutenant Governor Gary Sherrer and the Board of Regents, which places all of these institutions under one umbrella, is brilliant. It allows you to strategically plan for the role that each will take in the future. The role for the community colleges and technical schools will be enhanced if we succeed in retention and graduation rates at the university level.

“Part of that success will be getting the right students, into the right schools – finding the right fit for each person’s goals, skills and career interests. We need to change the mentality that ‘everyone MUST go to a University to be successful.’ Having all of this supervised in one system will help make that possible.

“Part of what we must do as a society is to reduce any stigma associated with a student not attending a national university. During the Renaissance, craftsmen and others of technical trades were held in great esteem, as they should be now. We must return to that view. We need to educate parents, teachers, high school counselors and the public about the incredible opportunities that are available across Kansas. The 21st century workplace has changed, and the way we prepare workers must change with it. Kansas employers need a technically skilled workforce, and they need it now.

“As the governing board for Kansas higher education, you bear some responsibility to work to convince parents and high school counselors to shed their prejudices about technical education.

“I’m asking for a strategic plan that provides an overall vision of where we want our seven universities to be in 10 years and how we intend to get them there. Within those universities I’m asking for a plan to for how we get our law school, medical school, veterinary and engineering schools to the level we would like. I’m asking for vision, leadership, and a plan that sets specific targets and holds specific people accountable.

“All of us take pride in the rankings of our football and basketball teams. We talk endlessly about these teams when they succeed, and sulk when they drop out of the top 10 in the country. Not one of us would be satisfied if we didn’t have a single sports team in the top 90; so, why are we satisfied that we don’t have a single University in the top 90? I’m not satisfied.

“It’s far more important to me that we have a university academically in the top 20 than that we have a basketball or football team in the top 20.

“Working together, strategically, we can make our great Regents system even better.

“Thank you for this great opportunity to address you.”