

Easter addresses what U. of I. needs in its next leader

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U. of I. President Bob Easter told members of the [presidential search committee](#) that the new university leader must have a “presidential personality” capable of serving a long list of constituents with diverse needs.

Easter, who has served two years as president, will retire next year. A replacement for him is expected to be named by the end of this year following a search led by a diverse committee with representatives from the three campuses.

“I believe this job is substantially external,” Easter told the committee at its public meeting July 11 at the Alice Campbell Alumni Center. “There’s a lot of time spent ‘out there.’ There’s a balance, but I’m not sure what that balance is.”

Easter said there are so many competing outside interests for a president’s time that there is little time to address day-to-day campus issues.

“The university is much more than Champaign-Urbana,” he said.

Easter said the president’s position should be broadly defined, as it concerns so much effort at the state, national and, increasingly, the international levels. The president’s responsibilities also include making and keeping connections with alumni, donors and government.

Easter said much of the focus of his tenure has been attending legislative hearings in Springfield, in-district meetings with legislators and members of Congress, keeping regular contact with the Illinois Board of Higher Education, donor-related activities and international travel like his recent three-nation trip to Asia to strengthen academic and alumni connections.

“All of these roles at some level are active roles,” he said, adding the next president also should be “someone with substantial global experience.”

And as the committee attempts to define exactly what the president’s role should be, Easter said the university should take the time to be introspective as to its own mission – supporting the state of Illinois.

“Our ultimate bosses are the residents of Illinois,” he said. “We must reinvigorate the contract between the people of Illinois and the university. We need to demonstrate real value to every citizen of the state through academic programs and service activities.”

He said the university has a symbiotic relationship with the state, with each side benefiting from the success of the other.

“We have the opportunity to show value in many ways, and the university president needs to take advantage of that,” he said. “We have literally a presence in every county in the state. That’s a real advantage to us.”

Despite some of the worst economic conditions in the country, the state of Illinois contributes more than \$1 billion of the U. of I.’s \$5.6 billion budget for direct operating expenses, employee benefits, student financial aid and research grants. The difficulty in the relationship is that the state also requires the university to adhere to some burdensome regulations.

By statute, Easter said, the U. of I. is one university with three campuses. He suggested efforts to better serve state residents would have to build on the specific strengths of each campus, while keeping the channels of communication open between them to ensure effective collaborations.

"We have to have a strategy that links all three as one, but still allows them to retain their uniqueness and their individual strategic futures," he said. "There are not enough resources to allow each campus to do whatever it wants."

As for state-centric issues needing immediate attention, Easter said improving diversity and increasing enrollment of qualified in-state students are imperatives.

He recommends a presidential role that allows the chancellors to run each of the campuses based on their own strategic plans and goals (ultimately approved by the board of trustees).

As for the new president's leadership style, Easter suggested someone who is a team builder, who believes in the concept of shared governance and has an interest in "learning lots of stuff." He said "indirect leadership" may be more important than a leader who is too hands-on.

"By the time someone becomes president, they shouldn't be looking for applause from the audience," he said. "The president has to do things to influence the culture. It's the way you act that sends that message."

James Applegate, the executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, also attended the committee meeting, offering his insight in identifying the characteristics and duties of the next U. of I. president.

He said the future of the state is inextricably linked to higher education, and the U. of I. president can be an "advocate and catalyst for change" to help make the case for continued high-level investment.

"The U. of I. president is a key figure in the relationship with the IBHE," he said. Without that connection, "there's no coherent, strong voice as a system. There is so much capacity in Illinois to make progress, but we need someone who gets it. We can work together to make the case to the leadership in this state."

Applegate said higher education is the key to turning the state's economic prospects around.

But for now, Illinois is far from achieving the goals of the Public Agenda for Education and Success, which has a goal of 60 percent of residents with a college degree by 2015, he said. Right now it's 42 percent – and it's predicted that two-thirds of future jobs in the state will require a college education.

"The talent gap in Illinois is starting to strangle productivity," he said.

Applegate said state education issues include affordability, the widening gap limiting minority access, better preparation of secondary school students, the demands of the global economy and ensuring that adults who start college training finish it.

He said state universities, and the U. of I. in particular, must develop better strategies to commercially capitalize on research.