

Remarks

Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee

March 25, 2014

Dr. Merle W. Harris

Nominee to the Connecticut Board of Regents

Good Afternoon, Senator Looney, Representative Janowski, Senator Fasano, Representative Camillo and members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. My name is Merle Harris. It is an honor and a privilege to be here today to discuss my nomination by Governor Dannel P. Malloy to continue to serve as a member of the Connecticut Board of Regents.

You have my resume before you so I will not go into the details of my background but instead, provide a quick overview. I have lived in Connecticut all of my life and have over 45 years of experience in education at many levels from pre-school through graduate studies. My experience has included classroom teaching, administration, and policy work. Although my positions and titles varied throughout my career, there is a single thread that has and continues to connect my experience - my belief that education is the key to a better life and everyone deserves that opportunity.

I retired five years ago having served as President of Charter Oak State College for 18 years. Many people have asked me why I don't just sit back and enjoy retirement. Why do I want to continue to confront the challenges facing education today? My response is simple. This is a critical time for both Connecticut and higher education. We need an educated workforce to ensure a robust economy and an educated population to maintain a vibrant cultural and civic life. It is the educational philosophy I articulated earlier and the importance of building a strong Connecticut higher education system that drive my continued interest in serving on the Connecticut Board of Regents.

As the Board works with the Governor and the General Assembly to meet the needs of our students and the state, there are a number of goals that should guide that work. These goals have been adopted by the Board of Regents and focus on student success, affordability and sustainability, innovation and economic growth and equity. We need to not only provide access to a college degree but students must earn that degree and use the knowledge they have gained in employment and other facets of their lives. This means high quality, student-centered education that is affordable.

When I was appointed to my first term on the Board of Regents, there was clear resistance to the new structure. Understandably, throughout my career people who are passionate about what they are doing often are resistant to change. Today, I am pleased to tell you that we are building a system of higher education in this state. People are working together to meet today's challenges and better serve the students of Connecticut.

A number of important initiatives are in progress or completed. The Board has adopted transfer policy and in the near future there will be clear pathways in every program designed for transfer so students can move from a community college to a four-year university without the loss of credit. Our program approval process looks at program need both in respect to program duplication and workforce demands. The goal is to have programs that are accessible to students, meet the needs of our employers but use our limited resources prudently.

A program that we hope to see implemented in the near future that is part of Governor Malloy's agenda for higher education and one I hope you will support is "Go Back to Get Ahead." This will be a system-wide effort led by Charter Oak to help adults who have started but never finished college earn their degree. This will be a truly collaborative initiative to help adult students learn the higher-level skills demanded by today's economy.

There are many challenges before us and I look forward to the opportunity to continue to serve on the Board of Regents. Working together, the Board of Regents, the Board's professional staff and the presidents of our 17 institutions will build a public higher education system that is among the best in the nation. Connecticut and our students deserve no less.