

Thinking Big: A Texas Perspective for the U. of California's New President

By PAUL FAIN

For the first time in decades, the University of California has appointed an outsider as its chief. Mark G. Yudof, who has been chancellor of the University of Texas system for the past six years, was appointed last week to become the California system's next president. He is also a former president of the University of Minnesota (*The Chronicle*, April 4).

In an interview with *The Chronicle* on Wednesday, Mr. Yudof talked about the challenges he will face in California, where the system competes for an ever-tighter pool of state funds (*The Chronicle*, January 25), and what he hopes to accomplish in his new job. He must also gain public trust for the system, which has been battered in recent years by a compensation scandal and doubts that Californians are its priority (*The Chronicle*, May 18, 2006).

Excerpts of the conversation follow:

Q. Has the University of California failed to convince Californians that it serves the state?

A. I think we have a high regard in California. But I'll just say it: I don't think we've been as effective in Sacramento in expressing our needs, our point of view, our perspective. And I don't think we've engaged in enough efforts of strategic communication. So I think we're highly regarded, but there's much work to be done.

Q. How will you better sell the university?

A. This is the basic proposition: You need to explain to Californians what a great job you do of educating their children. You need to explain that the research that goes on in those 10 campuses strengthens the economy, creates jobs, brings in industry, and so forth. But what you primarily need to explain is why a Californian should care what happens at the University of California even if they do not have a son or daughter, brother or sister, who is currently enrolled there or are currently a professor or staff member. That means you talk about the contributions to the culture of the state. You talk about the fact that when you receive medical care, many of those physicians, nurses, and dentists are trained at the University of California. That the University of California is addressing itself to the problems of the public schools. I think that is the message. It's a soft message, but it turns out it's true. That is, California would be a much poorer place in many ways without the University of California.

Q. Will you also need to improve public trust?

A. There's a lot of trust and confidence in the campuses. The campuses are strong. It's the premier public university system in the world. But I do think there has been a sense that in Oakland, the office of the president, or what I would call the system office, that it needs to slim down, it needs to be more efficient, it needs to make sure that it's not an obstacle to the campuses' achieving their purposes. That when the system has an initiative, it should add value. It should be something that is more difficult for the campuses to do by themselves.

Q. In Texas you had success recruiting star professors. Will California pay for top talent?

A. That's my hope and my expectation. My feeling is, let's start with the faculty. This faculty, a great faculty, is competing with the University of Michigan and other places. But it's mainly competing with the University of Chicago, with Yale and Harvard, and Stanford, and the great private institutions.

Faculty salaries, in my judgment, need to be raised. That has to be a high priority. And you need absolute disclosure. I'm a government-in-the-sunshine guy. The idea that you put something out there that is not a complete picture of the entire transaction is unacceptable. And I think the board has corrected that, by the way, so I'm not whistling in the dark here. I just hope to convince Californians that it's worth it to pay those salaries. And also, particularly at administrative levels, that we go for the best talent, but we make sure it's pretty lean –talented, well-paid people, but not too many of them.

Q. You'll be dealing with an assertive Board of Regents. Will you have the power you need to be successful?

A. I'm very optimistic. I met with quite a few members of the board individually, or in small groups, and in every case I sought and received assurances that the president would be in charge. Now, the Board of Regents sets policy. I'm an at-will employee. If I haven't heard by 10 that morning, my job's good all day. But I'm very optimistic. It's going to be complicated. In my judgment, the crisis of the last two years has presented a historic opportunity to do some things that probably should have been done 10 or 20 years ago. And there's intellectual agreement that it needs to be done. Now it's a little like a base-closing committee. Everyone agrees intellectually that the cuts need to be made, and there may be some ruckus when the base near your home is getting closed. So I don't say it will be effortless.

Q. You have faced tight budgets in Texas and Minnesota. Do you think you've been well prepared for California budget battles?

A. I do. I think there are cultural adjustments. The University of Texas is a heterogeneous system. We have schools which are only minimally selective in admissions policy. Then we have the University of Texas at Austin and the Southwestern Medical School, with very high admissions standards. California is a mature system, with six campuses in the Association of American Universities. I think in a mature system you have to behave differently than when you have a heterogeneous system at different points in their evolution. And I'm just learning all the California rules right now. So the context is different. But I think the idea that a system office should add value and should not increase the rigmarole and the difficulty of achieving what you need to achieve, I think that's really quite similar.

Q. You recently spoke with California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. How was the conversation?

A. Very cordial. He's a very pro-higher education person. I'm looking forward to sitting in the governor's tent there and congenially exchanging views on the University of California.

Q. Some people say you're a "fixer" a short-term president who will stay three years or so. Are they right?

A. I'm intending to stay for the long term. I'm 63 years old. It depends on my health, whether the board will have me, and how things are going. There's no doubt I'm partially a fixer. But I wouldn't want to leave office just having fixed some administrative problems. That wouldn't be any fun. What I want to do is fix those problems and then move on to improve those institutions.