Cutler: Future UMS business, law center provides “opportunity to become great”

BANGOR, Maine — The University of Maine System on Wednesday confirmed that it has hired two-time former gubernatorial candidate Eliot Cutler to lead the merger of graduate business programs at its two largest campuses with the University of Maine School of Law.

Multiple independent sources announced the hiring last week.

Cutler will guide the creation of a center in Portland that will combine the graduate business programs at the University of Maine in Orono and the University of Southern Maine with the University of Maine School of Law. Part of the goal is to form closer ties with the business community and meet the needs of Maine employers.
“The economy is changing, it’s been changing for a long time,” Cutler said in a Wednesday morning interview with the Bangor Daily News. “The old, traditional degrees, and the curricula that have been the foundation of those degrees, are narrower and more siloed than the economy today demands.”

Today’s economy calls for employees with a wide breadth of training, he argued. Lawyers, for example, need to know how to read a balance sheet and understand the finances of their business clients. The schools, through the center, can collaborate more closely to offer broader education and produce better trained students, he said.

As CEO of the center, Cutler will be charged with creating the blueprint to make that happen. Cutler’s initial term will run through September 2016, and his annual salary will be $195,000, according to the system. His salary is being covered by a grant given to the system by the Harold Alfond Foundation, which gave a total of $1.25 million to fund “early leadership and program development efforts” toward creating the center.

Cutler, 68, ran for governor in Maine as an independent candidate in 2010 and again in 2014, losing narrowly to Gov. Paul LePage in 2010 and placing third in 2014. The Bangor native, now a Cape Elizabeth resident, worked for U.S. Sen. Edmund Muskie and, later, President Jimmy Carter in the Office of Management and Budget before going on to start his own environmental law firm in the 1980s.

Cutler was selected following an “executive search” by a system steering committee looking for the CEO to start the initiatives, according to UMS Chancellor James Page. Members of the board of trustees and others on the committee cobbled together a list of 25-30 names of people they felt could do the work and fill the temporary role to start the center.

Page said the panel was looking for someone with a resume of successfully building organizations, a “tested understanding of the role education plays in economic development,” and a commitment to Maine.

Cutler filled all those requirements, and the system was pleased to have “a highly accomplished and proven Maine leader” on board, the chancellor said.

During the fall and summer of 2014, Parthenon Group, an outside consultant, worked with system administrators, faculty and leaders in the Maine business and legal communities to explore the potential of a “professional and graduate center” in Portland.

The group found, in part, that such a center could be a “transformative concept” for the system and that bringing the programs under one roof could catalyze business growth across the state. Parthenon was paid up to $500,000 by the Harold Alfond Foundation on behalf of the university system to explore the possibility of consolidating the programs and offering an interdisciplinary program with the law school.

“For too long, educational institutions have ignored increasing costs and inefficiencies, responding to financial pressures by raising tuition and fees rather than focusing on providing a better product in a more cost-efficient manner,” said Maine Law Professor David Cluchey in a prepared statement
Wednesday. “The business and law initiative is about providing a better product to our business and law students in a more efficient manner.”

The new center could be among the first highly visible changes under UMS Chancellor James Page's One University initiative. That plan, aimed at helping to make the system more fiscally sound, seeks to establish “mission-differentiated campuses” with each institution focusing on the programs that make it stand out.

“I view this as an opportunity to become great — to create a great institution that serves the entire state of Maine and that equips our young people and attracts more young people here,” Cutler said.

“But we can’t do it the way we’re doing it today. It’s not going to happen.”

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