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Massachusetts Governor Proposes Higher-Education Overhaul That Would Split UMass System

By JEFFREY SELINGO

The governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, proposed a massive restructuring of higher education in the state on Wednesday, offering a plan that would eliminate the president's office at the University of Massachusetts system, spin off its flagship Amherst campus into an independent institution, privatize three public colleges, and merge several others. Among the goals: saving \$150-million.

The announcement, which the Republican governor made as part of a larger \$22.6-billion budget blueprint, stunned college officials, who tried to make sense of the plan, about which rumors had trickled out in the past few days.

"I learned of it about an hour before the governor announced it," said Daniel M. Asquino, president of Mount Wachusett Community College, which would be merged with Fitchburg State College under the governor's plan. "There aren't a lot of particulars yet."

The part of the proposal that had most college and political leaders talking on Wednesday -- and the portion that is likely to face the stiffest opposition in the state legislature, which has to approve the overall plan -- was the elimination of the 68-person president's office at the University of Massachusetts system. Its leader, William M. Bulger, was president of the State Senate for 17 years before being appointed to head the university system in 1996, and his political connections still run deep in the state.

Several lawmakers immediately criticized the plan to oust Mr. Bulger, whom the governor informed of the plan in a telephone call Tuesday night.

"President Bulger has done an outstanding job," said State Sen. David P. Magnani, a Democrat, who is vice chairman of the chamber's education committee. He particularly cited Mr. Bulger's aggressive fund-raising efforts, which have more than quadrupled the university's endowment. "The burden of proof will be on the governor that the president's office has not done the two or three things that it was created for in the first place."

Replacing Mr. Bulger's office would be a new Executive Office of Education, which would oversee the state's entire education system, including the public schools. That would be led by Peter Nessen, the governor's education adviser and a longtime member of the state's Board of Higher Education.

The elimination of the president's office at UMass alone would save the state \$14-million, the governor said. A few college officials noted privately on Wednesday that Mr. Bulger has not done a good job of controlling costs in the system office since taking over. They pointed out that the payroll has grown under his leadership, and that he had brought in several aides from his days as Senate president at

salaries of more than \$100,000 a year.

A spokesman for Mr. Bulger, Robert Connolly, did not return a telephone call on Wednesday.

Even if the plan to oust Mr. Bulger dies quickly in the legislature, lawmakers said other parts of the governor's proposal will be seriously considered as politicians struggle to close a \$3-billion gap in the state budget. Mr. Romney, who was elected last November, has pledged not to raise taxes.

Under the governor's plan, the state's flagship public campus, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, would be spun off "to become a premier research university." Making it independent from the system, the governor said, would allow the institution to increase tuition rates to be more in line with other public flagships so it could "more successfully recruit out-of-state students and compete for top research faculty and grants."

The university's other four campuses, along with the nine state colleges and 15 community colleges, would be grouped into seven geographic regions to allow them to share resources and eliminate duplication. While each campus would continue to be overseen by its own governing board, new panels appointed by the governor would coordinate education policy in each region. The chairman of each regional council would be a member of an expanded state Board of Higher Education.

In addition, the campuses would keep all the revenue generated by tuition rather than send those dollars to the state to be distributed through the budget, as they do now. Mr. Romney said with such control over tuition, it is likely that colleges would increase rates, but he promised that 46 percent of the funds generated by any tuition increases would be set aside for need-based financial aid.

The governor's idea of breaking apart a central administration to create regional boards struck Senator Magnani and several other lawmakers as running counter to what is happening in higher education in other states, and in other government agencies in Massachusetts. "The governor has been trying to consolidate other parts of government rather than diffuse power," Mr. Magnani said.

To save additional money, the governor also called for merging six campuses with low enrollments and high costs into three institutions. Besides the Mount Wachusett and Fitchburg State merger, Berkshire Community College would be combined with the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and Greenfield Community College would merge with Holyoke Community College.

How those mergers would work or who would lead the institutions remained unclear on Wednesday. Mr. Asquino seemed surprised that his institution was singled out since its enrollment grew by 17 percent last fall, to 6,000 students. "I have no idea why we were chosen," he said. "Maybe it's because we're in close proximity [to Fitchburg] and we have done a lot of projects together."

Governor Romney also suggested privatizing three institutions that "cater to a unique niche": the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the Massachusetts College of Art, and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. All three would become private over the next four years as state assistance was slowly reduced.