

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST
OFFICE OF THE FACULTY SENATE

From the 633rd meeting of the Faculty Senate held on October 21, 2004.

ADDRESS BY SENATOR STANLEY ROSENBERG (D-HAMPSHIRE AND FRANKLIN DISTRICTS)

Good afternoon. When you say address, it always sounds so formal. I think of it more as a few comments and then a lot of questions. I thought that I would use the beginning time to summarize for you a little bit about this special Task Force that Senator Panagiotakos from Lowell and I are co-chairing on the future of public higher education and then we can go into questions and discussion of the things on your minds.

In the final two hours of the budget process, not this June, but the previous June when, because we hadn't funded the collective bargaining agreements, because of a combination of problems on the executive side and the fact that the House would not take them up when the Senate sent them over almost a year earlier—I ended up forcing a caucus, a Democratic caucus. We spent one full hour, which was the longest time in all of the years that I have been in the legislature, discussing nothing but public higher education. In the course of that conversation, a number of senators who had previously been pretty much mum on the subject of public higher education, spoke up and were talking about a range of concerns that they had around access and affordability, as well as the pay raises. The conversation became a very wide-ranging conversation and not just focused on the unfunded collective bargaining agreements. I was actually pleasantly surprised at the range of discussion and started to push a little bit with the Senate President, who was then the new Senate President, that we could not keep hobbling along as we had been doing and really needed to come up with some comprehensive plans and financing policies for the public higher education system. Several other people started to do the same thing, both inside the Senate and outside the Senate and then finally, actually a couple of days before New Year's, I got a call from the Senate President who said, "I want to convene a meeting with you and a couple of other people to talk about this idea that I have to have the Senate organize a Task Force on the subject of the future of public higher education." I was ecstatic at that prospect.

A few months later, he named Senator Panagiotakos and myself as the co-chairs. Senator Panagiotakos comes from Lowell, obviously where the [Lowell] campus of the five-campus system [is located]. He and I have been working for a number of months now in doing the preparatory work and have just begun the public hearings. The first hearing was this past Monday, and there will be three additional hearings over the course of the next four or five weeks, and we hope to produce a set of recommendations and a report, which will be filed, if not by the end of December, then surely by the end of January. Then we would want to file companion legislation to take the recommendations and the ideas in the report to carry forward in legislation, some of which might be able to then be incorporated in the fiscal '06 budget discussion.

We are focusing on four broad areas. The first area is finance, which focuses on adequate funding for the institutions and reasonable student charges, trying to bring those back into balance, and trying to see if we can put into statute and into place permanent policies (or as permanent as is possible through the legislative process) so that we can get rid of the instability and the ups and the downs, etc. The second area is what you might loosely call management and efficiency, taking a look at the system and trying to figure out whether we are doing everything that we can to use the dollars that we have effectively. Some of you will recall that the Mass Taxpayers Foundation put out a report about five or six months ago in which they made a series of recommendations that would squeeze out inefficiencies that are in the system around things like waste and construction. We spend about a third more on the typical construction project than you would pay in the private sector, most of which is actually attributable to time, not to prevailing wage and things of that nature. Essentially, it takes so long to get a building built, that construction inflation eats up a ton of money. So you either have to then appropriate a larger sum to get the project done at the scale you intended or you have to cut back the scale of the project in order to stay within budget. So, that would be an example of the kind of thing that we could look at.

The other major area is the role of the public higher education system in economic development in the Commonwealth. In that regard, we are looking at each of the three segments and trying to identify the unique role that each plays beyond the common role that they all play, which is to provide an education for our workforce. [We are looking] to identify the unique aspects of each of the segments of the public higher education system: community colleges, state colleges, and the five campuses of the University, and then try to drive some policies and some proposals that will help the institutions fulfill the unique role—not just the basic educational role that you have—which I see as being more in the nature of a discussion about adequate funding for making sure that there are operating budgets that will allow the individual institutions to fulfill their specific missions based upon the votes of their respective boards of trustees as approved by the Board of Higher Education. So, we hope to have some very specific recommendations and proposals in each of these three or so broad areas.

I'll finish this little talk by saying that we made some really good progress in the 90s as we came out of the fiscal crisis of '88-'92, not only in rebuilding the budgets more quickly than we had in some of the previous fiscal crises, but also in getting into statute certain policies that would help us with stability, predictability—building on the fight of the 60s for fiscal autonomy. We got a number of the provisions that were in the Fair Share Plan into law, but we did not get the key provisions into law.

That is where I want to end this piece of the discussion, which is, can we learn from our collective effort in the 90s that there is no perfect world and that, to make progress, everybody has got to decide that they are willing to play and be in the game and be on the same page, even if it means that you cannot have one hundred percent of what you want?

I was responsible for getting a budget amendment in many years ago, which forced the central coordinating board—at that time, I think it was the Board of Regents—to answer the question, “what is the fair share contribution that students should make to the cost of their education?”—which then led to the broader discussion of the range of fiscal policy questions that you have to answer as a way to start the conversation. We came up with a set of rational policies, called the Fair Share Plan, and then everybody gave lip service to it publicly, and especially if they were talking to me, because they knew I was the author of the plan, but then, behind the scenes, they did everything that they could to try to undo any progress we were making on it, because it was not a perfect plan. It was not a perfect plan because each constituency has a self-interest that could not be achieved in the ideal world. Students want to pay this much [indicating zero percent], college administrators want blank checks those are not real world considerations. You can want that, but you are not going to get it.

We made extraordinary progress in rebuilding the budgets in the 90s. Then the fiscal crisis came along, and that was interrupted and we discovered that we did not even get back to where we were, adjusted for inflation, before the previous fiscal crisis. I want to challenge everybody who has a vested interest in the public higher education system to think about the fact that, in the absence of the possibility of perfection, we work together and get behind something that is achievable and try to take this next opportunity, which Senate President Travaglini is putting before us, to see if we can do better than we did in the 90s and better than we did in the 80s, and get ourselves together around a plan and if it is not perfect, accept the fact that it is not perfect, but still fight to make it happen.

The courts are going to come back and tell the legislature in three to six months from now that we did a good job on education reform in the 90s for K-12, but we did not do enough and equal education opportunity is still not achieved in Massachusetts. Whether they tell us how much to spend or prescribe certain activities or what, it does not matter. The bottom line will be that we will be in a situation where we will have to take the next steps for K-12. I am arguing that we should change the discussion, and the discussion should now be pre-K-higher education.

In my opinion, based on the numbers that I have seen, on any given day in Massachusetts, there are in excess of million people who have a direct vested interest in the health of the public higher education system: hundreds of thousands of alums, hundreds of thousands of students, the tens of thousands of employees, the businesses who serve those employees, and the family members of all four of those groups ; and so conservatively, on any given day, there are a million people who should care about our community colleges, our state colleges, and our university system. I am hoping that the imperfect plan that the Senate proposes will still be useful enough that people will decide that they are going to get behind it, and they are going to work with us to try and shift the debate and shift the paradigm from the K-12 debate to the pre-K-higher education debate and that we will be able to win a multi-year commitment for a funding stream and program that will bring the University and the rest of the public higher education system to a place where we have predictable, more stable, fairer funding arrangements and sharing of responsibility between the students and their families, the state appropriation, and the private support that we garner through alums and through businesses and grants and contracts and all of those sorts of things.

I throw that out as some thing for you to think about and to challenge us, because I have witnessed this now, conservatively, three times and the missing element, in my opinion, is a mobilized constituency of a million plus people all on the same page, singing the same tune, pushing for the same ideas and insisting upon winning a package of policies and support for public higher education that will help us move beyond the rhetoric, to the reality of the kind of public higher education system that this Commonwealth needs given that it is a knowledge-driven economy with tens of thousands of jobs that sit vacant everyday, because there are inadequately trained and educated people to fill those jobs. I throw that out as both an opportunity and a challenge. And with that, I'll be happy to entertain questions and comments on the range of concerns that you might have.