

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
OFFICE OF THE FACULTY SENATE

“HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN RESTRUCTURE”
INTERVIEW WITH AIMS MCGUINNESS, NATIONAL EXPERT ON HIGHER EDUCATION
MANAGEMENT
BY KAREN BROWN, WFCR
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Introduction:

When UMass President Jack Wilson announced last week that he was restructuring the University leadership, many people were shocked and confused. The new structure will put Wilson in charge of the UMass Amherst campus, and eliminate the local Chancellor position, while also leaving Wilson president of the five campus system. But UMass is not the first campus to try this structure. To get a better chance of what these changes might mean, WFCR's Karen Brown talked with Aims McGuinness, a national expert on higher education management.

Karen Brown: Aims McGuinness has been watching universities try to transform themselves for 25 years. He's a senior associate at the National Center for Higher Management Systems in Boulder, Colorado. He says it's rare to see large university systems operate under the consolidated leadership that Jack Wilson is proposing.

Aims McGuinness: So generally, when you have a complicated statewide system with the scope of UMass, the pattern in the country is almost uniformly one in which you really have a system head, and then deliberate separation and a chief executive officer and academic officer on the research university campus.

Karen Brown: McGuinness says the proponents of consolidating leadership point to a few advantages. One is to eliminate tension between the leader of a flagship campus, like Amherst, and the leader of the system as a whole. Another is to streamline operations.

Aims McGuinness: If you look at a time when, under anybody's projections, higher education has to become more efficient, you'd have a rationale that it is going to make a lot more sense to try to draw together the system office with the campus and to try to make the system work, you know, more efficiently as a system.

Karen Brown: And a third advantage, McGuinness says, is to give the appearance of one large university with more money at its disposal. That can give it a higher place in national university rankings, something that current Amherst Chancellor John Lombardi has long advocated.

Aims McGuinness: So the larger scale you have in terms of volume of research, which you can achieve by merging places together, the higher the ranking you are. Now, whether that's good, bad, or otherwise, I think it's a distinctly insidious part of the rankings.

Karen Brown: But McGuinness says, in practice, there are equally compelling pitfalls to a consolidated system. On the one hand, staff at the smaller campuses, like Boston, Lowell, or Dartmouth, may feel their unique missions, much different from the flagship campus, will not be given full attention. At the same time, he says, faculty at the flagship Amherst campus could also feel a leadership vacuum, because even though the system president is their designated leader, he will need to appear impartial, not favoring one campus over another.

Aims McGuinness: Quite legitimately, a faculty of a university, like Amherst, will expect the chief officer of that campus to be deeply involved in campus affairs. They will see that person as their academic leader, and that requires time, attention, and a great deal of sensitivity to that mission. That has been the overwhelming challenge of a leader of that kind of an institution.

Karen Brown: UMass President Jack Wilson, in his initial message about the changes, referred to similar leadership models in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. But McGuinness says those university systems are not analogous to UMass. He says they are either smaller than the Massachusetts system, or they retain a quasi-chancellor at the flagship campus. And he points to one case at the University of Hawaii, in which the system president tried to make the same change UMass is proposing, but then reverted back after faculty revolted. Still, McGuinness stresses that he does not wish to doom the changes at UMass, and that much will ride on the quality of leadership.

Aims McGuinness: I think it really is important to develop synergies among the various units so that they are not just ships on their own courses. And, to the extent that developing the idea of the university as a single, more integrated operation, it can, in fact, enhance research opportunities, and, you know, the position of Amherst and have some advantage, that could be a positive one. I haven't seen that necessarily happen.

Karen Brown: UMass President Jack Wilson has said that, if the new leadership structure doesn't work out, it could be reversed. For WFCR and WNNZ, I'm Karen Brown.

The next UMass Board of Trustees meeting is June 21. UMass President Jack Wilson told the press to expect more details about the university's reorganization at that time.