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Regents Can't Be Beholden To Politics

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The academic leadership, faculties and students of the University System of Maryland have suffered a series of embarrassing scandals and inexcusable improprieties involving members of the Board of Regents.

Although some dedicated and well-qualified regents serve the system, Maryland's practice of allowing a governor to select the regents without any screening is not working. As a result, the reputation of the board and its ability to perform at the highest level have been impaired.

Twice in the past 10 years the state legislature has been called upon to adopt legislation that curbs practices by regents that it has deemed harmful to the mission and integrity of Maryland's university system.

Like his predecessor, Parris N. Glendening (D), Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) too often has failed to appoint regents with a background and knowledge of higher education to do what is best for the system. This has impeded the ability of Maryland's public institutions of higher education to deal with the tremendous challenges they face.

As our nation makes the transition to a knowledge-based economy, Maryland's universities have become an economic engine for the state. University-based research is our best hope for developing the next generation of technology, which will enable our nation to maintain its present standard of living and its global economic leadership. Yet nationally and in Annapolis, state funding of public universities is in decline. Federal support of higher education no longer is a priority in Washington, either.

Since its inception, the University of Maryland at College Park, the flagship campus of the system, has never been funded by the state on a comparable basis with funding of public universities in other states. But in the budgets for fiscal 2003, 2004 and 2005, the governor drastically reduced even that state support.

As a result, the University of Maryland at College Park was forced to raise tuition by more than 36 percent in just three years. In 2012 Maryland's public colleges and universities will face 20,000 additional qualified high school graduates trying to enroll. To accommodate that increase, the system would need to build two campuses the size of Towson and Salisbury universities.

To face these and other formidable demands, regents need to have experience and a vision for higher education. They need an awareness of the state's economic needs and an appreciation of and insight into state government and its relationship to public higher education. Perhaps more important, they need to protect and advance the highest and best interests of the state's colleges and universities, regardless of the personal or political consequences.

Too often, appointments have been made based on political or financial support instead of merit. To stop this practice, Maryland should review the examples of how South Dakota, Illinois, Minnesota and Virginia select

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university regents and reform its system.

Like Virginia, Maryland could establish a high-level, nonpartisan screening commission to be appointed by the governor. This commission would have the responsibility and authority to recruit, screen and nominate Marylanders of outstanding qualifications. It then would submit three names to the governor to fill any vacancy on the regency board. The governor could pick only from that list of three nominees.

Future appointments to the board of regents should be independent of any governor's personal or political agenda. The economic strength and vitality of Maryland depends on building the strongest possible public system of higher education. This cannot and will not happen without a more knowledgeable, credible and independent board of regents.

-- Charles Larson -- Joe Tydings

are former regents of the University System of Maryland. Larson is a longtime Republican who ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor as a Democrat in 2002, and Tydings is a Democrat who served a term as U.S. senator in the 1960s.

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