

A Conversation With Chancellor Jim Rogers

Jim Rogers is somewhat of an enigma to higher education. A well respected leader in the business community and a nationally recognized philanthropist, Rogers set education on its ear when he volunteered to serve as the superintendent for the Clark County School District in 2000. While the CCSD trustees rejected his offer, the ivory towers of higher education opened their doors to Rogers when Chancellor Jane Nichols announced her resignation in 2004. While purists thought a businessman, even with Rogers' credentials, could never lead a system and that higher education could not be run like a business, the Board of Regents disagreed.

In May 2005, the regents asked Rogers to remove the "interim" from his title and named him the ninth chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education.

Regents' Review: *When you arrived on the scene in May 2004, you had a full plate put in front of you with an ongoing conflict with the attorney general's office, negative perceptions surrounding the credibility of the Board of Regents, and an impending legislative session where experts were forecasting stormy weather for higher education. Thirteen months later, what do you feel you have accomplished?*

Rogers: I think bringing the eight institutions to work together as a System is on the top of my list. In the past, there has been an excessive competitive environment between our two universities, as well as our other



institutions. What we have had is siblings fighting among themselves which didn't help any of them. They would go to the Nevada Legislature separately and say "I've got a great program, but theirs is no good." That doesn't work when you're one System. We worked hard this past year to put a stop to that and you can see that we have been very successful.

Organizations throughout the world function in similar ways, even though they have some minor differences. The reason I felt comfortable from the beginning that I could do the job as chancellor is that management principles transfer from one organization to another with little or no difficulty. For example, the new chairman of Albertsons Food is a former vice chairman of General Electric. As far as I know, General Electric does not own any grocery stores. However, management principles that were used by the vice chairman at General Electric were totally transfer-

able to Albertsons. For me, it wouldn't make any difference if I were running a TV station, a bank, a university system, or a K-12 school district. Leadership is leadership. The fundamental principles of management apply in every leadership role.

RR: *When you were hired, you said this was the first time you've worked for someone else. How has your relationship been with your 13 bosses?*

Rogers: I have always thought it has been very good. I talk to individual regents all of the time and I haven't found them unwilling to discuss anything with me, nor have I attempted to keep anything from them. I try to be as straightforward as I can and, in turn, I feel they have been straightforward with me. We have a great working relationship.

RR: *One of the challenges that now face the Board of Regents has been the passage of Assembly Joint Resolution 11 which would eliminate the voters' right to elect their own higher education representative. The bill turns that right over to the governor. In your mind, what should be the regents' next step?*

Rogers: The problem of the regents doing much direct politicking is monumental because they have a vested interest in this issue. Unlike most other elected officials, the regents have historically received no compensation for their work, yet they all have a great sense of pride in their ability to develop

a world-class higher education system. Rather than go out and pitch their cause to the electorate, they need to make sure that everything they do going forward is beyond question. I'm not talking about honesty or dishonesty. There's never been a question about the integrity or the honor of the Board of Regents. There have, however, been questions about their judgment from time to time and how they have dealt with each other in solving problems.

I have concluded that all of the regents are very smart. They care about their job and the System. Frankly, from my standpoint, I believe they are a very good Board. Their only problems relate to the public's perception of how they function. They have all worked hard to repair that perception over the last year and they continue to do so. I think civility, or the lack thereof, has been their primary problem. And that is, and has been, easily cured.

RR: *This year also marked the first year in which you've worked with the Nevada Legislature. What was your experience like?*

Rogers: I come from the legal profession where battle and confrontation, as long as it's done properly and ethically, are designed to find the truth. I believe in the democratic process with a lot of open debate. I have watched the legislators carefully and have been very impressed with how hard they work. For the amount of pressure and stress they are under, I'm surprised there aren't more deadlocks and confrontations. I believe they have worked well together even though they each come from diverse cultural and political backgrounds. I've been very pleased with the process.

The first time I met with members of the legislature, I said, "I need an act of faith. I need for you to believe that if you give us substantial money that we can go out and raise substantial funds from the private sector." We got that act of faith from Governor Kenny Guinn when he recommended a capital budget of a little over \$125 million, which included \$29 million from the Estate Tax fund. We then got that act of faith when the legislature decided to invest more than \$250 million in our capital budget. So yes, I've been very pleased with the process and the results.

I think the legislature gave us a great foundation. But, it's only the beginning and I think that we need to do two things. First, we need to develop the curriculum by concentrating on those pockets of excellence within the System, where with a concentrated effort, we can develop those pockets into world-class academic centers.

Second, we need to ensure that we are operating as efficiently as possible. I have always been very leery of multiple layers of management, that is, the number of people between the CEO and the person on the front line. Every time you insert a layer of management between the president and the professor teaching in the classroom, you create a whole new series of problems. I'm hopeful that we can assemble a System-wide task force to take a look at what we can do to streamline our operation and eliminate as many of these layers as possible.

RR: *You've been a strong proponent of developing relationships between higher education and business and the K-12 community. Why is that important to you?*

Rogers: Because the entire education

system must be efficient for us to be successful. We're always going to be an adequate System of higher education with state funding. We're never going to be a world-class System without private money. The University of California System is a great example. Berkeley is known as the number one university in the world. Private investment, much of which comes through research grants, has made Berkeley the number one university. We're going to be following that model in many ways, but it's going to take a lot of private money, including continued development of our research abilities to accomplish that.

We also need to strengthen our relationship with the local school districts. We need to get the presidents of the school district trustees, the various superintendents, our Board members, and the chancellor in one room to start this process. Having 50 people in those first meetings will not get us anywhere. My plan is to start with the Clark County and Washoe County school districts and then continue those dialogues, one at a time, with the other school districts in the state.

In my opinion, the first issue we need to address is remediation. There appears to be a disconnect between our curriculum and that of K-12 which is manifesting itself in students who simply are poorly prepared for college. We need to work together to confront the way these children are educated and candidly ask ourselves if we are exacerbating the problem or embarking on a course of conduct that over time will help solve this issue.