Regents face daunting task

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Gov. Tom Vilsack is expecting his new Board of Regents appointments to make some big changes to Iowa's three state universities.

There's been some recent unpleasantness on the board. It resulted in several vacancies, and Vilsack filled those openings with tough, thoughtful leaders - Mike Gartner, Teresa Wahlert, Ruth Harkin and Tom Bedell.

Few governors get the opportunity to reshape such an important board in one swoop, so I sat down with Vilsack last week to ask him just what he expected - his "marching orders," as he put it.

He was frank. He wants them to:

• Retain quality faculty. That takes money, and one way to get it is to redirect dollars already being spent. "The regents are challenged to impose a discipline on the university system where they are constantly looking for efficiencies and better ways to do things and avoid duplication, and that's always a tough issue on college campuses," he said.

• Help Iowa's economy. "From an economic-development standpoint, the regents have a very important role," Vilsack said.

"First, they have to create a climate of entrepreneurship" on the campuses. "They have to continue to revise the rewards they have for faculty. In the past it's been "publish a paper, write a book and you get rewarded." Well, now it's "come up with an idea, start a business and you'll get rewarded." Vilsack believes a "culture of entrepreneurship" is being encouraged at Iowa State, but that's less true at the University of Iowa.

To do it, he said regents must create more endowed chairs to land the best faculty in the sciences, financial services and insurance. And, the regents need to provide more infrastructure and equipment "that will allow professors to literally start their business on campus or adjacent to the campus. We've had some success, but we really do need to have a lot more success."

"The regents have the responsibility of making sure all this happens," he said. "This isn't about being a cheerleader for the universities. This is about being a prodder. It's about being a pusher. It's about being the accountability agent that makes sure the universities are headed in the same direction the state is. We can't have them going off in different directions as presidents change or as professors change."
"We need them focused. We have limited resources in this state, and they need to be targeted and they need to be focused," Vilsack said. "The regents need to find what's working, put their foot down and say, 'This is the way it's got to be.'"

He understands "there's going to be a lot of push-back on that. But the universities have to understand something that's different than it was 10 or 15 or 30 years ago. That is: Universities are not a separate and distinct part of the world. They are not their own little universe. They are part of our state, and they have a responsibility to the state.

"We, in essence, pay that with $600 million to $700 million in resources. Our state is in the top 10 states supplying support for higher education, and in exchange for that, we expect them to be part of the community, and we expect them to contribute to the community. I appreciate there are folks who think it's not the job of the university, but I think it is, given the nature of the investment.

"We're investing a lot of money, and I'm happy to do it, but I want them to be part of the team here. The states that have had economic success recently have had their university systems absolutely engaged and involved in this. At the University of Iowa, particularly, there is push-back on this, and that's why we put really, really strong business folks on the Board of Regents who aren't going to put up with that, who will ask the tough questions, who'll be creative."

He concluded: "Mike Gartner is going to be the next president of the board, and those are my marching orders to him."

Good luck.