

Statement by President David McClain
March 7, 2006

Members of the University ‘Ohana:

Three months ago—in fact, three or four weeks ago—I fully expected to serve out the term of the employment agreement I signed in 2004 and to return to the faculty on Aug. 15, 2006. As my statement released Nov. 28, 2005 said in part:

“As citizens of this university’s community for the last 15 years, Wendie and I have been grateful for the opportunity to lead UH, and have found the experience to be very fulfilling. Still...we’ve concluded that we cannot make a full-term, 7-year commitment to this university. If I were to be chosen as the UH president, it’s likely that I’d only serve until 2009.... As a consequence, I do not intend to actively pursue the UH presidency.”

In my statement, I went on to express the general preference that a search be conducted. As the Board of Regents Task Group on the Presidential Search documented in its statement on Feb. 17, however, it came to a different conclusion. That conclusion was based on the advice of two national executive search firms, the former head of the Association of Governing Boards and a nationally known attorney specializing in higher education leadership issues.

In part, the conclusion was driven by the insight noted in the regents’ statement that “...there is no ‘best practice’ method for selecting a system president because there are different versions of the system position, each tailored to the circumstances and priorities of a particular set of higher education institutions. System presidents are quite different, in all of these versions, from campus chancellors who have direct campus leadership roles and responsibilities.” On Feb. 28, the full Board of Regents endorsed its task group’s recommendation.

Wendie and I have concluded that, consistent with our Nov. 28 statement, I will serve the University of Hawai‘i System as its president through 2009; we are excited about the opportunity, and we’re grateful for the chance to continue and advance the initiatives we started 20 months ago. We’re most appreciative of the Board of Regents’ support, and for its steadfast commitment to sustaining and improving this university for the benefit of our students and the state of Hawai‘i.

We’ve been gratified by the groundswell of support we’ve received from the academy and the community for our decision. Literally hundreds of those who expressed regret but understanding for our decision in December have told us of their delight at the recent turn of events. We thank all of them for their support, and will do our best to make them proud.

We’re well aware that not everyone endorses this path. Some of those in opposition prefer a comprehensive search, and some have disagreed with one or another decision I’ve made while serving as interim president—certainly their prerogative.

As I said in my convocation remarks last fall, we’ve made good progress since mid-2004, and we can all be proud of that. Our 2002 strategic plan raised hopes, and now that our financial situation

has improved on a number of fronts, we're beginning to finance those hopes. We've stepped up to address an enrollment surge and a booming economy's workforce needs, and we've launched several public-private partnerships to leverage our scarce resources in the construction of new facilities. But there's more—much more—to be done.

We need to improve the structure and safety of the facilities in which our students learn and live. We need to engage them more fully in the lives of our community, and in the celebration of the democratic ideals which define this state and this nation. We must support—and in some cases renew, given their current demographic profile—our truly excellent faculty.

We need more housing, both for our students and for the new faculty that we will recruit.

As Hawai'i's system of public higher education, we have been remarkably successful at providing access to a community college or baccalaureate education, a necessity in today's "flat" global economy where the skills and knowledge one needs for college are the same as those one needs in the workplace. Hawai'i ranks 27th out of 50 states in the performance of our public and private higher education institutions, measured in a variety of outcomes achieved per dollars spent per fulltime-equivalent student; our outcomes related to research and scholarship are particularly noteworthy.

However, as a state we've been markedly less successful in insuring that *access* to higher education turns into *success*, defined as completing a course of study in a reasonable time.

We at the University of Hawai'i must focus our limited resources more sharply so that the 50,000 students who pass through our doors taking courses for credit can reach their degree goals. And we must continue to reach out to partner with K–12 and early childhood education providers, supporting their efforts and, where appropriate, collaborating with them in developing innovative ways of providing instruction; the result will be better prepared students matriculating to our campuses.

It's of special importance that this "access with success" initiative yield positive results for our Native Hawaiian community, the descendants of the first people to populate these islands. We will need to devote additional resources, above and beyond those already committed, to achieve this goal.

As our campuses prepare their strategic plans for the second decade of the 21st century, we need to be clear about the role of public higher education in our state. How much higher education does Hawai'i need? Of that amount, how much should be publicly provided? In what amounts and in what locations with what technologies? How will public higher education be financed? How autonomous, flexible and entrepreneurial should our public system of higher education be?

(My vision for the university in answer to the last question is: highly autonomous—and accountable, very flexible and supremely entrepreneurial.)

As we address these questions over the next two or three years in concert with the students, faculty and staff on our campuses and with the community, we also need to clarify the roles of our

campuses and the system office. Five years ago, and for 17 years before that, the University of Hawai‘i System and the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa shared a common leader and a common support staff. Since then our roles and responsibilities have been evolving, but—again, in concert with the students, faculty and staff on our campuses—we need to bring more coherence to that evolution.

The system office needs to focus on taking the lead, in consultation with the campuses and the community, in developing the state agenda for higher education and taking the lead, again in consultation with the campuses and the community, in defining the roles the campuses will play in achieving that agenda.

Where economies of scale are overriding or regulatory or legal issues dictate a concentration of expertise, the system office also needs to provide operational support to our campuses, including but not limited to Manoa. Other campus support operations need to be placed at the campuses they serve.

More importantly, campus chancellors need to be given the full authority and responsibility to implement and administer delegated system policies. The president’s role is to hold the chancellors accountable for the operation of their campuses.

We also need to review the thicket of policies that have accumulated over the years to ensure that policies currently in force support the university’s mission in an efficient matter.

We are on the threshold of celebrating 100 years of higher education in Hawai‘i, a century in which your university has been the central agent of change in our society, providing economic opportunity and social justice as we have transformed students’ lives and given them some of the ingredients they need for success.

We’ve done so in large part because this university represents a place—sometimes one of the only places—in our state where new ideas, sometimes unfashionable and unpopular, can be expressed. I pledge to sustain that tradition of academic freedom in my time ahead as the leader of this great university. The people of Hawai‘i deserve nothing less.

It continues to be true, as I said in November, that the university’s progress during the past 20 months owes much to the encouragement of the community at large, as well as to the support of a dedicated and talented cadre of vice presidents, chancellors, faculty and staff and, of course, our students and, again, our regents. Wendie and I look forward with enthusiasm to working with the entire university ‘ohana to continue to provide opportunity and excellence on behalf of the remarkable people of these rare and beautiful islands.