

From the top, Kirwan takes new view

Chancellor: The man who helped decentralize the Maryland university system returns for a central role — one he now sees as needed.

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TO UNDERSTAND the challenge faced by William E. Kirwan, the next chancellor of the state university system, consider Newt Gingrich's vision for America.

That's right. The lanky and charming Kirwan, the former president of the University of Maryland, College Park, might not bear much resemblance to the stocky former Speaker. But the two men's paths to power share a telling likeness.

Gingrich ascended to the speakership of the House of Representatives in 1994 on the crest of the Republican Revolution, which called for a drastic reduction in the role and size of the federal government. This left him in a trying position that was easy for his foes to exploit — holding authority in a government whose power he believed should be returned to the states.

Kirwan faces a similar paradox: As College Park president between 1989 and 1998, he was a leading proponent of dispersing the power held by the chancellor's office to the system's 11 campuses. He and his fellow presidents could not be expected to transform their colleges into distinctive institutions, he said, unless they could make decisions — and lobby for state funds — without having to go through the system's bureaucracy. Occasionally, he advocated pulling the flagship College Park campus out of the system altogether.

Kirwan now finds himself taking the post that he argued for weakening four years ago, before leaving for the presidency of Ohio State University. In fact, the chancellorship he will assume Aug. 1 carries less weight than it did during his years at College Park because of reforms spurred partly by his arguments.

Will Kirwan be able to resolve the contradictions of his role any

better than Gingrich did? He believes he will. While he readily recognizes the irony in his new position, he told a crowd of campus presidents and regents last week that he could lead the system without infringing on campuses — precisely because he knew what it was like to suffer the system's constraints.

"I am keenly aware of the high degree of autonomy and independence needed for ... the presidents, who must be strong and visible advocates for their institutions. I am an ardent defender" of such autonomy, he said. "But if the whole is to be greater than the parts, there must also be synergy and complementarity among the institutions, to ensure that the right balance is struck..."

Kirwan said he would encourage such synergy by developing goals for the whole system, advocating for those goals in Annapolis, and then monitoring the progress of the institutions — and the presidents — in reaching them.

"For me to take the job, I wanted a clear understanding of the position as the regents saw it, and they made clear they were looking for a CEO for the system," he said.

But acting the chief executive officer in a role that Kirwan himself has argued should be limited in scope won't be easy, some say. Under legislation based on findings of the 1998 Larson Commission, campus presidents have won primary authority over their academic programs.

"The Maryland system he left is not the Maryland system he helped change. The nature of the new legislation segued into a new relation between the [system] and the campuses, which are much more autonomous," said Edwin S. Crawford, who served on the Board of Regents during Kirwan's tenure at College Park.

The same holds true on the financial side. When the state's campuses were pulled into a system in 1988 — making Maryland one of about 30 states with such a structure — one of the chancellor's primary functions was to be the lead advocate for state funding. But today, the campus presidents enjoy a higher public profile and spend more time doing their own lobbying in Annapolis.

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This, again, is a trend that Kirwan encouraged. In a 1998 interview with *The Sun*, he said it was a "source of wonderment" that the two public campuses outside of the system, Morgan State University and St. Mary's College of Maryland, could lobby lawmakers directly, while mighty College Park's funding requests were subsumed in the system's pitch.

"It's very difficult for the regents in a system like ours to be an advocate for any one institution," he said in 1998. "The regents have to advocate for the entire system, whereas an institution with its own governing board has a built-in constituency that can advocate on behalf of [its] needs."

Now Kirwan sees it differently. His experience in Ohio, he says, showed him that there are down-sides to public universities that are each governed by their own boards; and he sees a need for a chancellor who can make a unified pitch for the system.

The current Maryland chancellor, Donald N. Langenberg, says it doesn't have to be "either-or." He argues there's no reason why both chancellor and presidents can't lobby Annapolis, and why other leadership duties can't be split between the campuses and system headquarters.

"It's just like the balance between states' rights and federal authority — it's a very live balance," said Langenberg, who retires April 30. "You have to work continuously on getting the balance between the local, state and federal authorities right, on getting the benefits of [states' rights] while cooperating when it's to everyone's benefit."

Langenberg's predecessor, John S. Toll, agrees that Kirwan's mission is doable — as long as he maintains a lower profile than he's used to. "It's like a basketball team. The chancellor is the coach, the presidents are the star players," said Toll, the president of Washington College and former president of UMCP. "He has to motivate the presidents to stand up tall but also to be team players."

That brings up a related challenge: Will Kirwan, after 13 years leading large universities, be satisfied with the chancellor's sideline role? State university and political leaders might be welcoming him like a returning hero, but he'll be working out of the system headquarters' nondescript office in the Adelphi woods. College Park President C.D. "Dan" Mote, Jr. will be in the grand, oak-paneled office a few miles away, overseeing the flagship

campus and giving out the football tickets.

Will that produce tensions? Marvin Breslow, former head of the UMCP faculty senate, doesn't think so: "The two of them are very intelligent, sensible administrators. They're too smart for that."

Kirwan says ceding the spotlight won't be a problem. He's almost 64 years old, and what he's looking forward to most in his return to Maryland is spending time with his children and grandchildren. "This is a role I think I can play," he said of his new job last week.

Not to mention that the chancellorship, despite its limitations, remains the highest-paid job on the system's payroll — \$375,000 in base salary, plus a car, a Baltimore County mansion and additional compensation.

Given all that, don't expect Kirwan to carry his earlier criticisms of the system to their natural conclusions and dismantle the system headquarters from within. As occurred with the Republicans in '94, anti-government rhetoric tends to wane when the revolutionaries assume office.

"If I were the Board of Regents, I would say: 'If you take this job, you support the system,'" said James L. Fisher, the former president of Towson University and a proponent of doing away with the chancellor's position. "You wouldn't be appointed unless you agree to maintain the system."