

## **History of the North Dakota University System**

Prepared by the NDUS Office

The constitution approved by the people of North Dakota upon attaining statehood in 1889 included a provision for the first session of the state legislature to establish a uniform system of public schools, including all public colleges and universities. Until 1919, the Legislature exercised control over state colleges and universities through establishment of various boards, and, eventually, a single board of regents for all higher education institutions was created.

Legislative control of state colleges and universities continued until Gov. Lynn Frazier persuaded the 1919 legislature to assign responsibility to a board of administration under his control. In 1937, Gov. "Wild Bill" Langer attempted to gain control of the North Dakota Agricultural College (now North Dakota State University) and about \$20 million per year in benefit payments to farmers, which resulted in the firing and resignations of several faculty and staff members, including the college president. These actions led to public protest and a 1938 initiated measure that placed control of the state's higher education institutions under a constitutionally independent State Board of Higher Education and gave the SBHE authority over all public colleges and universities.

The autonomy of the SBHE was emphasized by the granting of broad authority to the board with limited allowance for legislative involvement, except for control of the allocation of public funds. The same constitutional amendment gave the governor power to appoint board members by choosing from a list of three nominees selected by a nominating committee with appointments subject to confirmation by the Senate.

Seventy years later, this powerful initiated measure provides the foundation for interaction among the executive and legislative branches of government and the state's public higher education system. Many changes have occurred over time, some of which have been put to a vote of the people. One of the most notable changes was the 1984 public vote that moved three two-year colleges under the governance of the board, bringing to 11 the total number of state colleges and universities. Then in 1998, voters rejected an amendment to remove institution names, locations and missions from the state constitution, thus thwarting what many perceived as the first step in an effort to close some campuses.

While the people of North Dakota took up these important matters, the SBHE also considered the meaning and function of a true state system of higher education. In 1990, the SBHE created the North Dakota University System as a unified system of higher education under the leadership of a system CEO to be known as the chancellor. The board focused on using the system's diverse, collective resources to serve all of North Dakota and began to emphasize collaboration on academic and administrative

issues. In 2001, the Legislature enacted legislation codifying the 1990 action of the SBHE and recognizing a unified system of higher education as established by the board.

Another landmark action occurred in 1999 when the Legislature passed a resolution directing a study to address expectations of the NDUS in meeting the state's needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An interim committee on higher education was formed. The group of 21 legislators joined with 40 state leaders from the executive and legislative branches, the public and private sectors, and higher education to become the Roundtable on Higher Education. This national award-winning initiative established consensus on a common vision, a clear set of expectations and a series of accountability measures. The roundtable provided University System campuses additional operating flexibility with more accountability. In addition to its traditional role of providing high-quality education, the University System was charged with playing an expanded role in enhancing the state's economy. Roundtable members said the state and the University System must grow together, not contribute to one another's decline.

The years since formation of the Roundtable on Higher Education have been a period of rapid change for the University System, both in expanding educational access and quality and in contributing to the state's economy. The work of this group now shapes the strategic planning as well as the day-to-day operations of the 11 colleges and universities that make up the University System.

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### **Prior to 1919**

Legislature exercised control over state colleges and universities through establishment of several boards including, eventually, a single board of regents for all institutions

### **1919**

Legislation enacted assigning management of colleges and universities to a board of administration controlled by the governor

### **1938:**

In response to Governor Langer's politically-motivated interference at NDSU and dismissal or resignation of the NDSU president and other officials, which resulted in loss of accreditation, a voter-initiated constitutional amendment is adopted (effective 1939)

- SBHE is established for the "control and administration" of all state colleges
- Position of commissioner established as board chief executive officer
- Duties of commissioner are as "prescribed by the board"

### **Prior to 1990:**

Presidents report directly to board

Presidents' council reports to board

Board agenda divided into board matters and separate agendas for each institution

### **1990:**

Board creates unified system

Commissioner designated system chancellor and CEO of board AND system

Presidents' council replaced by chancellor's cabinet

Interim chancellor appointed

### **1991:**

Board appoints new chancellor

Board meeting agenda restructured to eliminate separate institution agendas

### **2001:**

Legislature enacts NDCC § 15-10-01.3 to codify unified system "as established by the board"

### **2003 – 06:**

Two separate board task forces review roles and responsibilities and board reaffirms unified system structure with presidents reporting to chancellor