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Herbst putting UConn on the fast track

New president says university is 'playing catch up' on research, tech transfer

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The University of Connecticut has made great progress in its technology transfer efforts in recent years, but still has a ways to go before it reaches its potential, says the school's newly minted president, Susan Herbst.

Herbst, in a recent interview, said more investment in faculty, equipment and labs are needed to make UConn more of a force in driving the commercialization of its research and attracting top scientists and the all important federal research dollars.

"UConn needs to play catch up in a lot of ways," said Herbst, who is the school's first woman president. "We are not where we need to be as a top research university."

Herbst, who was named UConn's 15th president in December, takes the reins of the state's flagship public university at a crucial time in its history. While the state continues to deal with its fiscal woes, UConn is facing short-term funding cuts. At the same time, significant long-term investments are being committed to UConn to bolster its reputation nationally and internationally as a research university.

Herbst said UConn needs to be a greater economic development force for the state and it starts with nurturing faculty who are the inventors that do the kinds of science and research that can be commercialized.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

UConn President Susan Herbst says her goal is to help make the school a top notch research university and a major player in technology transfer.

It will also require infrastructure improvements like the addition of lab space and equipment that will attract top scientists to Connecticut.

“It will take resources and money,” Herbst said. “We are on the right path, but we need to accelerate that path.”

A key early win for Herbst is the passage of Gov. Dannel P. Malloy’s “Bioscience Connecticut” initiative that will inject \$864 million into the UConn Health Center in Farmington. That facility is fast becoming ground zero for UConn’s tech transfer efforts, particularly in bioscience research. Storrs also plays a leading role as home of school’s main campus.

The “Bioscience Connecticut” project calls for a major renovation of the John Dempsey hospital and adding a patient care tower at the University of Connecticut Health Center. It also greatly expands bioscience research and training facilities and increases student enrollment in the medical and dental schools.

Herbst said the investment is a huge step in UConn’s evolution as a top research university. The funds will help the school attract top talent and provide them the tools and equipment they need to do their research. That should lead to more federal and industry research dollars. State officials hope to see research grants double at UConn as a result of the large investment.

Currently UConn pulls in over \$210 million in research funds.

“A research university sets itself up so it’s the kind of place the federal government wants to invest in,” Herbst said. “That’s what all the states are after. And it’s not just the sheer number or amount of grants; it’s also what we do with it.”

Herbst comes to UConn from the University System of Georgia where she served as executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer. She has a deep background in political science, a subject that she has taught and written on extensively. She hopes to teach at UConn as well.

Herbst also played a role in driving technology transfer efforts in Georgia, something that gives Matthew Nemerson, president and CEO of the Connecticut Technology Council, hope that she will be able to do the same in Connecticut.

“I think they’ve found a president who comes from a community of academic leadership,” Nemerson said. “Whatever she does, you know her background is in making things work and creating a powerful innovative ecosystem.”

Nemerson said one of the key things Connecticut needs to figure in terms of building a technology and bioscience hub is working with “the geographical cards” the state has been dealt.

With key research areas developing at Yale University in New Haven, as well as Farmington and Storrs, the geographic connectivity isn’t perfect, he said.

“We have to be open to her sense of what the geographic or organizational model needs to look like for Connecticut to be globally competitive,” Nemerson said. “It’s all about creating more partnerships and collaboration to feed growth and achieving that critical mass.”

Herbst said one of the things she’s been impressed with at UConn so far is the collaboration between different schools and departments, which is key for growing a vibrant technology environment. The school will need to build on that momentum and establish more partnerships with private industry as well, she said.

“UConn is not a place where deans won’t work together,” Herbst said. “It’s very integrated and collaborative.”