Margaret McKenna Named Suffolk University President
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Suffolk University taps Margaret McKenna as new president

Margaret McKenna, who helped raise Lesley University’s reputation during two decades leading the school, has been selected as the next president of Suffolk University, the downtown college announced Tuesday evening.

McKenna, a civil rights lawyer who currently teaches at Brandeis University, is set to begin at Suffolk this summer. She said Tuesday said she has had her eye on Suffolk, but the timing was never right — until now.

“I wasn’t looking for a job, but this is one I have such admiration for,” she said.

The Suffolk board of trustees selected McKenna over another finalist, Louis E. Caldera, who served a short term as president of the University of New Mexico.
Drew Meyer, president of Suffolk’s trustees, would not reveal the vote of the board, which chose McKenna in a closed-door meeting Tuesday afternoon. The board also discussed the selection of a law school dean but made no announcement about that appointment.

In a phone interview Tuesday, McKenna said she plans to make fund-raising a top goal at Suffolk, whose budget relies almost entirely on tuition revenue. She said Suffolk, which also has a business school, appealed to her because it is a private institution with a public mission, focused on the city. Many judges, lawyers, politicians, and government officials hold Suffolk degrees.

“People in the community love the place,” she said.

McKenna will replace interim president Norman Smith, who has served since September 2014, when president James McCarthy resigned after 2½ years.

Meyer said a contract has been negotiated “in principle,” but would not reveal the details. At Lesley, which she led from 1985 to 2007, McKenna made $635,000 in total compensation.

McKenna said she agreed to the Suffolk board’s request for a five-year commitment. She also said she is happy to be an at-will employee, serving only as long as the board is pleased with her work.

McKenna led Walmart’s charitable foundation for four years after she left Lesley.

Martin Meehan, who was tapped two weeks ago as University of Massachusetts president, has said that Suffolk had pursued him as a possible candidate, but he told them UMass was his first choice.

In a forum with faculty last week, McKenna spoke candidly about herself, her leadership style, and her goals for the university.

She was frank about everything from board relations to her love for students and why she chose to close a profitable business school at Lesley.

McKenna said her philosophy is to only do things that a school can do as well as or better than others, and the Lesley business school was outpaced by others. She promised not to close any schools at Suffolk.
There should be more fund-raising, research, and professional development for faculty at Suffolk, she said, and more of a community feel for students.

She termed the school’s website confusing and said its marketing “doesn’t excite me.” The school needs a clearer mission and a better elevator pitch, she said.

McKenna last week said the job of the trustees is to hire and fire the president, approve a long-term plan, and a budget. McKenna, who has two grown sons and a dog, said she has observed there is more daily involvement from Suffolk’s board than is typical and said she told the panel as much.

“You hire me, you give me the keys. I’ll report to you. You’ll never be surprised. . . . You have got to trust me to make the right decisions,” she said. McKenna also said she believes college presidents are paid too much.

On Tuesday, she said her experience with the board so far has been positive and assumes that will continue. Her goal, she said, is to be respected.

“The only agenda I have is the best interest of the institution,” she said.

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Editorial: A new day at Suffolk University

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT: May 15, 2015, 6:00am EDT

Staff Boston Business Journal

Last week it was the University of Massachusetts naming Marty Meehan as president of its the five-campus system. This week, Suffolk University followed suit, tapping Margaret McKenna, a former president of Lesley University and former Walmart Foundation chief.

McKenna has said that her main goal will be fundraising, which certainly makes sense at first blush. Times have been challenging for Suffolk University, with revenue falling by about $2 million last year and undergraduate enrollment sinking by about 5 percent. But it’s not clear that Suffolk’s challenges will be solved simply by raising funds. Rather, it will be equally, if not more, important for McKenna to solidify Suffolk’s position and mission.

McKenna is the school’s fourth president in five years. Two of her predecessors were interims, contributing to a lack of consistency in the corner office that naturally allowed for mission drift.

The downtown university is in a unique position among Boston’s institutions of higher education: It is one of the few privates that specialize in serving a middle-class, urban population. Whether that is the appropriate focus for Suffolk’s future remains to be seen. Competition from outside sources are on the way, for example, as UMass plans to locate a satellite center at One Beacon Street — literally across the street from Suffolk — that will draw on all five UMass campuses to provide classes in downtown Boston starting in January 2016. The move was prompted by an opportunity to provide education to people working in the heart of the city’s business and government sectors.

UMass will undoubtedly compete with Suffolk by providing similar services at a state-subsidized cost. And even with the average discount for first-year students at private colleges at a whopping 46 percent, the list price for similar classes will be interesting to watch.

And then there’s the changing dynamics of demand, how students want to be educated. Suffolk is not known for its online courses, yet that is where many of the busy downtown population is looking to advance their education. It hasn’t been part of the conversation in Suffolk’s presidential search, and it hasn’t been raised by McKenna. But it will certainly be something the school will have to consider as it moves forward.
Suffolk University’s new president sees opportunity in her new role

May 12, 2015, 6:43pm EDT   Updated May 13, 2015, 12:13pm EDT

Mary Moore
Boston Business Journal

With recent news that University of Massachusetts Chancellor Marty Meehan was the front-runner for the presidency at Suffolk University, one might wonder if Margaret McKenna, who was named to the post Tuesday, might feel like a runner-up.

Not at all, she said. What McKenna sees is opportunity.

“Was I first, second, third or whatever? Marty Meehan is an alumni and he’s definitely going to be one of my first fundraising calls,” McKenna quipped. (Meehan has been named president of the University of Massachusetts system.)

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Such quick wit and determination will serve McKenna well as she takes on the leadership role at Suffolk. A former president of Lesley University and of the Walmart Foundation, McKenna replaces interim president Norman Smith, who was appointed last August.

Smith had taken the reins from Suffolk’s previous president, James McCarthy, who resigned abruptly last
summer.

An attorney who started her career in civil rights, McKenna served as president of the Walmart Foundation between 2007 and 2011. Most recently, McKenna has been teaching at Brandeis University and leading a philanthropy center there.

“Suffolk is such an important place - the role it plays in the city and state. There are very few independent mid-size urban universities in the whole country and especially one where your classroom is the city. It’s right in front of you,” said McKenna.

Yet, McKenna is well aware that she is inheriting a number of challenges at Suffolk University, not least of which is its financial situation. With budget declines and enrollment challenges, Suffolk University announced last June that it would freeze faculty salaries. Further, the bulk of Suffolk University’s revenue comes from tuition and room and board paid by students. Its law school has struggled with enrollment and has cut class sizes.

The university’s reputation has suffered since last summer, when it pulled the plug on the highly regarded Rappaport Center for Law and Public Service followed by McCarthy’s quick and largely unexplained departure.

The challenges are not lost on McKenna, but she had an upbeat attitude about what’s ahead of her.

“There are not a lot of places like Suffolk around the country. I want to make sure undergraduates that are looking for exciting urban experience - I want Suffolk to be on the list. They may not come here but I want Suffolk to show up,” she said.

McKenna said she is drawn to Suffolk University’s commitment to being accessible, and she has no plans to change that. But her goal is to increase Suffolk University’s profile nationally and to focus the school on the things it does best. Suffolk University’s strengths are its programs, most notably public policy and public administration programs, she said. Among her priorities, she said, will be to build cooperation within the different schools and programs at Suffolk University and also create new relationships with businesses and with other colleges and universities. Working closely with Suffolk University’s faculty is another priority, McKenna said, referring to professors as “the soul of the institution.

Suffolk University’s board chairman Andrew Meyer said the university in the last week surveyed faculty members to gauge their impression of McKenna (and the other finalist,
Louis Caldera, a past president of the University of New Mexico), and “they came back with extraordinarily supportive and strong reviews” of McKenna.

“My experience is if you respect them they respect you,” McKenna said. “I am a good listener. Faculty haven’t always agreed with me, but they’ve always known where I stand and why I’ve made the decisions I’ve made.”

Addressing Suffolk University’s dependence on tuition revenue, McKenna said she will be aggressively fundraising.

“You ask for money. You can’t get money unless you ask for it,” she said. “We’ve got great large alumni base. We need to engage them and get them excited about what Suffolk is today and go after them.”

McKenna spent 22 years at Lesley University, from 1985 until 2007, and is credited with growing its endowment to $77 million from a mere $1 million when she started at the Cambridge school. She also transformed Lesley from a college to a university and led its growth from 2,000 students to an enrollment of 12,000.

As the president of Walmart Foundation, McKenna said, she did not have to fundraise, but being a foundation president gave her new insights about what it’s like “being on the other side of the desk.” Since leaving the Walmart Foundation, McKenna has been a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics and, more recently, a visiting professor at Brandeis University and the acting director of the university’s Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy.

While she was at the Walmart Foundation, McKenna concedes, she missed working in education – and she is happy to be back in a president’s role.

“I loved being part of creating an environment for students with the help of faculty. Not only providing the education and skills, but also the knowledge and the sense of mission to give back and get involved,” she said.

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New Suffolk University president Margaret McKenna plans to focus on fundraising

May 13, 2015, 12:38pm EDT

This week Suffolk University named its new president, civil rights lawyer Margaret McKenna.

McKenna served as president of Lesley University before leading Walmart’s charitable foundation for four years. Now she takes the helm of the Boston school, prepared to enhance Suffolk’s national reputation and focus on fundraising.

Suffolk has struggled with enrollment challenges and announced last summer it would freeze faculty salaries as the school’s budget declined, the Boston Business Journal (a Bizwomen sister publication) reported.

That’s why McKenna is making fundraising a priority.

“You ask for money. You can’t get money unless you ask for it,” McKenna said to the Boston Business Journal. “We’ve got great large alumni base. We need to engage them and get them excited about what Suffolk is today and go after them.”

Historically, the office of college president is one that has been occupied by men. But over the years, more women have risen through the ranks to run colleges and universities around the country.

The latest national survey of college presidents found that just 26.4 percent of college leaders were women in 2011. That’s compared to 23 percent in 2006 and 10 percent in 1980. But last summer 23 women presidents attended the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents – almost half of the 50 people in attendance.

McKenna is the latest addition to that list.

“Suffolk is such an important place – the role it plays in the city and state,” McKenna said. “There are very few independent mid-size urban universities in the whole country and especially one where your classroom is the city. It’s right in front of you.”

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Hilary Burns
Bizwomen Reporter
Suffolk University’s board of trustees has approved Margaret A. McKenna as president and Andrew M. Perlman as dean of Suffolk University Law School.

McKenna, the first female president in the history of the school, began her career as a civil rights attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice and later worked as deputy White House counsel to President Jimmy Carter. She helped establish the U.S. Department of Education in the 1970s, when she served as deputy undersecretary.

She became vice president of Radcliffe College in 1981, leaving four years later for Lesley College, where she was president for 22 years. She went on to serve as president of the Walmart Foundation for four years. She comes to Suffolk from the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University.

Perlman has been on the Suffolk faculty for 14 years and is the founding director of the Institute on Law Practice Technology and Innovation and the related Legal Technology and Innovation Concentration. He was the chief reporter of the American Bar Association’s Commission on Ethics 20/20 and was recently appointed vice chair of the new ABA Commission on the Future of Legal Services.

He succeeds Dean Camille Nelson, who joined Suffolk Law in 2010.
Suffolk University names new president

Wednesday, May 13, 2015

BOSTON — An attorney who has already led one Boston-area university has been selected as Suffolk University’s next president.

The school’s trustees on Tuesday named former Lesley University president Margaret McKenna as the 10th president of Suffolk.

McKenna is currently the acting director of Brandeis University’s Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy.

Trustees Chairman Andrew Meyer Jr. says McKenna was selected because of her “experience, innovative ideas and bold approach.”

During McKenna’s 22 years as president at Lesley, the school grew from 2,000 to more than 10,000 students, from a college to a university and from a small regional college to a nationally recognized leader in teacher education.

She says Suffolk is an attractive job because "it continues to provide an education that is student centered and individually tailored."

Author(s): Associated Press

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