

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

[CONFIRMATION]

The Committee on Education met at 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, May 26, 2009, in Room 1525 of the State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska, for the purpose of conducting a public hearing on gubernatorial appointments. Senators present: Greg Adams, Chairperson; Gwen Howard, Vice Chairperson; Bill Avery; Robert Giese; and Kate Sullivan. Senators absent: Brad Ashford; Abbie Cornett; and Ken Haar. []

SENATOR ADAMS: (Recorder malfunction)...Greg Adams. Thanks for joining us this morning. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Not a problem. It's better than a drive across Nebraska (laughter). [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Well, we're going to grill you from afar here then. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Okay. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Thank you for coming on and thank you for your willingness to serve again on the commission. Our committee is a little shy this morning, because the Legislature decided to convene at 9:00 a.m., so we're going to move quickly. Senator Giese from South Sioux City is here and Senator Sullivan from north central Nebraska is here along with staff and staff from the coordinating commission as well. So, can you give us just for the record, Ron, just a little bit of background on yourself and your current service on the commission and then field a couple of questions if we have them? [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Sure, you bet. I'm a graduate of the University of Nebraska. I graduated from the College of Dentistry in 1970 and went on active duty with the military. I had four years of reserve time at that point, retired from the military in 1992 and came back here, bought a farm, decided not to practice dentistry. I had some physical problems and I didn't think I wanted to continue that. I was afraid I'd hurt somebody. So farmed for a few years and found out that I was having a little problem with that too, so now I live here and lease out the land and no longer keep cattle. I sold cattle here a few years ago, and that's pretty much it. Enjoy the working with the Coordinating Commission and Education. And it was very important. I am a little dismayed by what I see in my area here, but that's...you know, that's a long-standing problem. So, other than that, I anticipate working with the Coordinating Commission. Again, it takes a...I think it takes a couple years to figure out exactly what they do (laugh). I'm not sure I'm there yet (laugh), but it's been great. I thoroughly enjoy it. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay. Questions from the committee? Senator Sullivan has lost

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Education Committee
May 26, 2009

her voice today, so she may squeak a question at you or write one down that I could give you. Maybe Senator Giese has questions. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR GIESE: Ron, good morning. Any special challenges that you see as a member of the Coordinating Commission as we move forward from here?
[CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: I don't think I see any really particular challenges. I think we're all facing challenges with our economic situation the way it is. But I don't...I guess I don't have anything that really pops to the front of my mind when it comes to...I have no idea what the Coordinating Commission did when I started this a couple of years ago. And I think I have a little bit of an understanding now with what they do, but I'm still amazed at the breadth of things they do. And so, they get involved in a lot of things (laugh), so I'm sure there are very special challenges out there, but right now I'd say it would have to be physical problems. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR GIESE: Uh-huh. Can you tell me then a couple of things maybe or one particular thing that you've worked on or been involved in, in the two years...you've been on two years? [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Well, I've mainly worked with the academic side of it. I've been the chairman of the Academic Committee, well, last year and got reappointed again this year. So I guess I didn't mess things up too badly...or elected. But I'm...so most of my experience with the committee has been academic. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR GIESE: Okay, thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Ron, Senator Avery from Lincoln has joined the group now, too. So Senator, we're...Ron Hunter is on the phone, and if you have a question for him.
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: Not right now. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: All right. Ron, on the academic side that you've been working on, what broad challenge do you see that we're faced with in Nebraska there that the Coordinating Commission and potentially this committee need to address down the road? [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Again, this probably...it probably ties back into the fiscal part of this. But I've been really amazed at the...a state the size of Nebraska, with the academic things that we support. And it looks to me like we have...we're going to have a little challenge to continue to support some of these things maybe. We've got...not a huge population in the state, but we have wonderful academic facilities within the state, not just state-run,

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Education Committee
May 26, 2009

but also private and the whole process. (inaudible) the university so (inaudible)...
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: We're robbing each other of students? [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: ...(inaudible) keep it going or not. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: All right. Senator Howard, Vice Chair of the committee from Omaha has also joined us now, Ron. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Okay. Committee, are there additional questions? Senator Avery.
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: Thank you. Mr. Hunter,... [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Yeah. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: This is Senator Avery from Lincoln. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Um-hum. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: From time to time I have raised the issue in this committee about the...what it seems to me to be a rather top-heavy administrative structure in higher education in the state with overlapping boards of directors and commissions. Have you thought about that at all? Do you think that you might offer an opinion about whether we might have too many of these boards and commissions that oversee higher education? You have the Board of Regents, of course. Then you have the state board and you have the community college board, and then you have the Commission on Postsecondary Education. Does that sound like a lot, maybe we're overdoing it?
[CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: I have thought about that a little bit. I'm up here very close to South Dakota, and I do a lot of things in South Dakota. And I have some friends that are involved in higher education in South Dakota, and their system is somewhat different than ours. And they seem to have a serious problem too. When you're bringing up the Board of Regents...the Regents in South Dakota run everything except the less than four year granting four-year award of degrees. If you get down to the associate degree program, they don't...they're not involved in that like Western Dakota Tech up here in Rapid City is run by the local school districts. And so, I guess that's the other extreme from what we're doing here which is...and our system seems to work fairly well. Maybe it's a little top-heavy; I don't know. I guess I haven't thought too much about that. It's one of those things that seems to function. But they have serious, serious problems up here with keeping things together on a state level. So I'm not so sure that our system is all

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

that bad. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR AVERY: If you were to recommend changes, what would you recommend?
[CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Well, I'm not sure that I am really prepared to recommend anything, Senator. I haven't really studied this that closely, I guess. I...like I said, I think you can go too far in either direction, and I'm not sure that we want to maybe go in and create some difficulties by reworking the system. The commission itself, the Coordinating Commission, the breadth of activities that they do, I think are pretty amazing. And maybe it's another set of eyes, I don't...it seems to me that it fairly works well so...works fairly well. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Senator Howard, did you have a question? [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR HOWARD: I did, actually, thank you. And I apologize for being late. I went upstairs and punched in. But I'm going to risk asking you one of those hot button questions and I just (laughter)...early in the morning even. I just would like to know your view on the for-profit colleges that we seem to be getting a number of in this state.
[CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Quite frankly, if you'd asked me this a year ago, I would have probably said I don't really see how...why we need them. But now I'm not...I think I've changed my views on that a little bit. They appear to me to fill a niche that perhaps we're not filling with the state institutions. You wonder why someone would go to a for-profit institution that costs them more money in order to do that, to get the same degree that's offered by the state institution. And I think that over the last couple of years, I've come to realize that they're perhaps more adaptable than the state institutions are able to be. They tend to appeal to the nontraditional folks, and so I've kind of changed my view on it. As long as they're offering quality programs, I think they definitely fill a niche.
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR HOWARD: Well, I very much appreciate your thoughts on that. Thank you.
[CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Are there other questions from the committee? Well, Ron, seeing none, thank you for calling in this morning. I appreciate it and thank you again for your service to the state. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Thank you. I enjoy it (laugh). [CONFIRMATION]

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay. Have a good day. [CONFIRMATION]

RON HUNTER: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: We have Eric Seacrest coming up next, that will also be a phone interview. And then the last one, Colleen Adam. She's not going to be here, but Carna is going to represent her instead. I don't see why the hospital could not have changed that appointment, but...for us. They just didn't see it that way. Her daughter is having a C-section right now. [CONFIRMATION]

CHUCK HUBKA: Hi, there. This is Chuck with the Communications Committee, and they already (inaudible) call in to the hearing room for the confirmation hearing. Yeah, area code 402. Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Is he about to call in? [CONFIRMATION]

CHUCK HUBKA: Just...yeah. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay. Eric, are you there? [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Yes, I am here. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Eric, this is Greg Adams. [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Good morning, sir. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: And we have almost a full committee this morning. We've got Senator Avery, Senator Sullivan, Senator Howard, and Senator Giese with us this morning. And if you could just maybe give us a little bit of background on yourself, Eric, and your long-time participation in the commission and then field a few questions that the committee has. [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Certainly. Thank you for this opportunity and thank you for accommodating your schedule to...especially with the Memorial Day holiday. The experience has been a great one. I love this state and there's probably nothing more important to our present and future than education, and I've served on the Coordinating Commission since it was constitutionally created. And we've, I think, been responsible to (inaudible) and the Constitution told us to do. There's certainly been challenges along the way and there remain challenges, but, by and large, I think we can be very proud of what we have created in our higher education system. Compared to virtually all other states, Nebraska has much to be proud of (inaudible--someone coughing) further challenges, and maybe your committee has dealt with many of them such as how to fund community colleges and others. And I would be happy to answer any questions.

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay, thank you, Eric. Committee, are there questions for Eric?
[CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR GIESE: Good morning, Eric. Senator Giese. You mentioned special challenges that...do you want to...can you touch briefly on one of those that you see, and then also maybe just give us a brief, maybe one or two things that you have been involved with recently as part of the commission just for our information?
[CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Well, I'd be happy to. I'll start with just some things we've done recently. From the beginning, the commission has been an advocate for access, and one of the means has been financial aid for students. And the (inaudible) has gradually and steadily improved financial aid and been involved in many reports, provided much information. And I think we can be proud of the progress we've made, but we still have many students who have very major difficulties affording college. Another thing we did not too long ago was look at the institution in Curtis, Nebraska, and what it needed. And we're continuing to make improvements there. The challenge at that institution is getting it up to a critical mass of students. Looking forward, it is clear across America that financial resources for higher education are going to be harder to come by whether it's due to appropriations in all states or tuition from students or from the resources and endowments. All of these revenue sources are challenged, and we're going to have to look for productivity and ways to manage this problem. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR GIESE: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Are there other questions? I've got one written out here in front of me, Eric, if the committee doesn't have any right now. And this question comes from Senator Sullivan who is sitting here with us, but she's lost her voice today, so I'll read this. As a member of the Midwest Higher Education Commission, have you seen things in other states that might be improvements for us here in Nebraska? [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: There are some. As a matter of fact, they recently assigned the Coordinating Commission the duty to look at funding formulas for the community colleges. This may or may not be applicable to Nebraska, but some states use in their formulas the number of completers or the number of graduates in addition to the number of students who are going to a particular school. There may be some advantage to at least consider that. That's just one example. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay. Eric, let me ask you a question. You talked about the community colleges just a little bit, and certainly I'm not going to ask you to take a side in that. But how do you view the role of the Coordinating Commission in that this new

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

mission that you have between now and December 15th dealing with the community colleges? [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Well, I probably would view it the way we view all of our laws. We, first of all, look at what the law says and then we try to do it. One aspect in the law that I think was wise is there's a considerable interest just on getting feedback from the community colleges and the stakeholders at the community colleges. So issues they raised will be considered carefully. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: All right. Thank you, Eric. Are there other questions from the committee? Well, I'm not seeing any right now, Eric. Thank you for joining us this morning and all of your service with the coordinating commission, and your willingness to continue to serve. [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Thank you, Senator. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Have a good day. [CONFIRMATION]

ERIC SEACREST: Best wishes. Bye. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay, Carna, we're going to have you come up to the microphone, and if you can...Carna is going to sit in for Colleen Adam, our last appointee today. So Carna. [CONFIRMATION]

CARNA PFEIL: Colleen has been with the commission since 2004, and she has served in several positions. I think if you ask her, she would tell you that she had a different opinion of the commission also when she first started. She has grown exponentially, and is just very, very involved with the commission. She actually has...we've written a couple of speeches, because she has gone out to talk to people about the commission. She is now chair of the commission, and her chairmanship ends January of 2010, so she will go through the community college study that will be her last challenge, I think as chair, and I'm sure that she thinks it will be a challenge also. She's very involved in her community, and she...I think if you ask her, she will tell you she is one that is very high on education. She's an audiologist, and practiced being an audiologist for awhile. And she...Senator Howard, when you ask about private career schools, because we've had some that do nursing and that have some medical dental technology, that kind of thing, and she has been very hard on them, because she believes that they need to offer quality programs. If they are going to be doing this, it has to be a quality program. So she's one of those that is...brings some challenges to them on what they're offering, so I think that's all I'll say. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Okay. Now, it's kind of tough for us to fire questions at Carna about somebody else (laughter), but certainly, committee as long as she's here, if you do have

Transcript Prepared By the Clerk of the Legislature
Transcriber's Office

Education Committee
May 26, 2009

a question. Okay, thank you, Carna, for being here today. [CONFIRMATION]

CARNA PFEIL: Thank you. [CONFIRMATION]

SENATOR ADAMS: Committee, as long as we have a quorum here so that we don't have to have a call underneath the awning,... [CONFIRMATION]

Chairperson

Committee Clerk