

# UMRA Liaison to the University of Minnesota Regents Annual Report: 2024-2025

By John Finnegan  
(6-18-2025)

In February 2024, I was asked by UMRA Board member Dr. Frank Cerra about my interest in serving as UMRA’s liaison to the University Board of Regents. I responded positively. I discussed this in March with then UMRA President Eric Hockert, his successor, Julie Switzer and Dr. Cerra. We agreed that reinvigorating the role of UMRA’s Regents’ liaison would be a good start. We drafted its purpose: “... to help the Regents and UMRA build a mutually useful and effective relationship through regular contact and communication.” I met with Regents and University administrators and staff who expressed support.

Following those conversations, we drafted a more formal description of the role than had existed heretofore, as follows:

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## UMRA Liaison to the University of Minnesota Regents: Purpose and Activities

**The Board of Regents** is the primary governance authority of the University of Minnesota established by its Charter in 1851 (Chapter 3, Minnesota Territorial Laws). The issues considered and the decisions it must make are no less vital to the institution’s present and future success as in the past. Consultation, information input and analysis, and the formation of University direction and policy in partnership with the President have long been hallmarks of Regents’ governance.

**UMRA**, the University of Minnesota Retirees Association formed in 1978. It provides opportunities for retired staff, faculty, administrative leaders and spouses and partners to use their knowledge, skills, interests, and experience in volunteer service to the University.<sup>1</sup> As the Board of Regents faces the challenges, issues, and decisions it must make in an increasingly uncertain century, UMRA seeks a more formal relationship for the benefit of the University. A step in that direction is the renewing the role of the **UMRA liaison**. While this is not a new position, clarification of its purpose and activities is in order.

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<sup>1</sup> [UMRA’s website](#) provides in-depth description of the organization’s considerable University support through its 900 current members.

## **Purpose and Roles:**

1. The purpose of the liaison is to help the Regents and UMRA build a mutually useful and effective relationship through regular contact and communication.
  2. Activities with this purpose in mind include:
    - a. Providing a two-way channel of information and input to the Board and UMRA membership regarding priorities, issues, and decisions under Board consideration.
    - b. Building UMRA members interest in Board issues and increasing their exposure to online Board documents and related resources.
    - c. Providing the Board with access to UMRA members (individuals, groups) that possess expertise relevant to Board issues and decisions.
    - d. Transparency and coordination of activities and information through the Board Executive Director & Corporate Secretary.
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Working with Kris Mortenson, UMRA newsletter editor, we have crafted articles to alert and inform our membership. Working with the Program Committee, we have also offered UMRA membership a new interview format at our annual meeting. These are mentioned below.

### **UMN Challenges of 2024-2025**

As UMRA's liaison, I attend the Regents' working committee meetings (usually on a Thursday) preceding the Board's formal meeting, usually held the next day. This gave me an opportunity to speak in-person with Regents and others including the President to ask questions and better understand the issues. I also tune in to the Regents' webcast channel for its formal decision meetings and occasional special meetings.

Some major issues facing the UMN, its new President and Board of Regents included the following:

1. The ongoing challenges between Fairview and the UMN Medical School in the continuation or termination of their partnership and business arrangements. Challenges include the role of the Minnesota Attorney General, in resolving the Fairview-UMN Medical School dispute. There are also emerging relationships between the Medical School, CentraCare, and Essentia health systems, and a yet-to-be fully developed strategic plan including all the health sciences and professional schools in an integrated Minnesota health strategy.  
**(The May UMRA Annual Meeting featured a new interview format proposed by J. Finnegan and Regent Dr. Penny Wheeler to the Program Committee in which some of these issues were addressed).**

2. Campus protests over the war begun by the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas on Israel, and Israel's subsequent military response in Gaza. A major issue of "who speaks for the University collectively," led to a review of the University's policy on Institutional Communication.

**(The UMRA newsletter ran a story on this by J. Finnegan).**

3. A system-wide strategic planning effort entitled "Maroon, Gold & Bold" to engage all UMN stakeholders in crafting strategies to ensure the University's future.
4. The University's funding from the Legislature is flat for FY26. Given the state's projected deficits in upcoming fiscal years (FY27-28), declining state funding necessitates some austerity but also creativity to ensure that the University's future is high quality. A budget adopted by the Regents June 18, 2025, on a vote of 9-3, calls for a mix of program and administrative cuts and a tuition hike among other details.
5. On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump took office as U.S. President for the second time. Almost immediately, research in the areas of federally funded research and higher education itself came under attack from the administration. The UMN has joined other public and private universities in lawsuits to overturn these unprecedented attacks.

**(I note that the UMRA Board wrote to President Cunningham in April urging that the University join with others in confronting the Trump administration's baseless attack on higher education. I expect that further Board discussions with recommendations on continuing UMN challenges would be welcome by the Regents and administration).**

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