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Robert L. Caret (left, shaking hands with Governor Patrick) was inaugurated as the 26th president of UMass in 2011.

By Peter Schworm, Frank Phillips and Matt Rocheleau

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University of Massachusetts president Robert Caret, who earned praise for his aggressive lobbying for education spending, will be leaving his job after four years to become the next chancellor of the University of Maryland system, officials said Wednesday.

Caret, who became president of the five-campus UMass system in July 2011, begins his new position in July. Before coming to Massachusetts, Caret had spent much of his career at Towson University, near Baltimore, where he worked as a faculty member, dean, executive vice president, president, and provost.

“I could not say no to an offer to return to my home state, where I will be closer to my family,” Caret wrote in a statement.

Caret will succeed chancellor William “Brit” Kirwan, who has led the 12-institution Maryland system for the past dozen years.

While not entirely unexpected, Caret’s decision comes as a blow to a university system that has achieved greater prominence and financial stability during his tenure.

After receiving a strong performance review, Caret recently signed a three-year extension to his contract. Officials said Caret has been considered a likely candidate to replace Kirwan, who announced in May he would be stepping down.

Caret said it was a “great privilege” to lead UMass and he was saddened to leave. University officials said he would stay on for three to six months.

In a statement, Kirwan lauded Caret’s selection.

“I’ve known Bob Caret for several years,” Kirwan wrote. “He has had significant positive impact on each institution he has led. The University System of Maryland and the state will benefit greatly from his leadership in the years ahead.”

Caret, who will be formally introduced to the University of Maryland community at a news conference Friday, will earn \$600,000 a year, officials said. His contract will run for five years.

At UMass, he was paid about \$500,000 a year.

In Maryland, Caret, 67, will take the helm of a much larger system, with 162,000 students and an operating budget of \$4.9 billion. UMass has half as many students and a budget of \$2.9 billion.

“I am disappointed to be losing Bob as a leader but think we have all realized that this was a possibility since Brit Kirwan announced his decision to step down,” said Henry Thomas III, chairman of the UMass Board of Trustees.

“While it is disappointing to lose a leader of president Caret’s accomplishment and stature, I think we can all understand Bob’s desire to return to the system where his career began and that served as his professional home for most of his career.”

Thomas said he planned to call a special trustees meeting to make plans to begin a search for a new president.

Caret’s predecessor, Jack Wilson, held the job for eight years. Before that, William M. Bulger was president for seven years.

Soon after taking the UMass position, Caret launched a statewide bus tour to listen to students, faculty, and others.

He has since received high marks for lobbying lawmakers to boost funding so that the cost of attending a UMass college is split evenly between students and the state. The funding increases have allowed UMass to freeze tuition and fees for the past two years.

“He saved thousands and thousands of dollars for students while still investing in the quality of the institutions,” said Max Page, an architecture and history professor at UMass Amherst who serves on the faculty senate.

“He really rallied people around reinvestment in higher education and affordability.

Page called Caret’s departure “a huge loss” but said it didn’t come as a surprise.

“From the moment he got here, there was talk that he would be a natural to replace Kirwan,” he said. “As soon as it was announced [Kirwan] was leaving, I assumed he would at least be a top candidate.”

Caret has also led efforts to persuade more alumni and private donors to give to UMass. Caret has taken steps aimed at making the system more transparent and accountable, and he has rolled out cost-saving measures. Both efforts were part of a strategy to build support from lawmakers and benefactors.

A native of Biddeford, Maine, Caret holds degrees from Suffolk University and the University of New Hampshire.

He started his career at Towson State, then became president of San Jose University in California from 1995 to 2003. He returned to Towson as president from 2003 to 2011.

UMass Boston Chancellor J. Keith Motley said Caret had been an “ally and an ardent supporter” of the university, and wished him well. Divina Grossman, chancellor at UMass Dartmouth, called Caret a “wonderful colleague and mentor.”

“President Caret has elevated the profile of the five campus university immensely,” Grossman said.

Before Caret was named UMass president, UMass Lowell Chancellor Martin Meehan was mentioned as a potential candidate for the post, speculation that quickly resumed.

But Meehan said Wednesday that he has had no conversations about the job and is “very happy at UMass Lowell.”

“The transformation of UMass Lowell is underway, and I’m happy to be part of it,” he said. “I’m fully engaged in continuing our growth at UMass Lowell.”

Meehan said he was sad to see Caret leave.

“We’ll miss him, but I certainly understand the decision to go back to his home state and to be closer with his family,” he said.

Clarification: An earlier version of this story said Caret had resigned.

Peter Schworm can be reached at schworm@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@globepete](https://twitter.com/globepete). Frank Phillips can be reached at Frank.Phillips@globe.com. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at Matthew.Rocheleau@globe.com.

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