Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin by congratulating you and the members of the Board of Regents for your leadership and your openness in considering what is necessary now to move our State and its research universities forward in a rapidly changing world marketplace.

I had the privilege of serving 16 years in the General Assembly, and chaired the higher education budget subcommittee for six of those years, and I have served on the College Park foundation board for the last fifteen years. In all those years, I cannot recall a board that has brought as much focus as you have to the critical issues that bring us here today.

The question before you is both important and urgent. And it is not a question of merger versus collaboration. Or College Park versus Baltimore. It is something far more important.

The real issue is how to best organize the research assets of the State to compete effectively in a rapidly changing global marketplace.

There is much controversy about this issue. But no one would dispute its urgency or importance.

And there is one other thing we can all agree on. No one would deliberately design a system that looks like our research configuration today —— one that separates medicine from bioengineering —— one that separates pharmacy from chemistry— one that separates the law school from the schools of business and public policy —— one that separates the school of public health from the medical school, the school of social work and the school of nursing. This is our configuration, and this configuration is our State’s burden. Indeed, it has been said by one prominent faculty member that it is easier to work with Stanford University than it is to work with the other campus.

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1 This is the full text of abbreviated remarks delivered to the Regents’ public hearing on October 28, 2011.
In point of fact, no one ever did design a system like this. Historically, the two institutions were one. On April 9, 1920, College Park and the Baltimore professional schools merged into a single institution – and remained that way successfully for the next fifty years.

In the early 1970s, UMB became a separate institution as part of an internal reorganization in a process known as administrative disaggregation. There was little serious reflection about this reorganization by the Regents or the General Assembly, who were much more focused on Vietnam War protests, civil rights and the establishment of UMBC. So what is proposed here is really a reunification, a re-alignment to the historical status quo.

If you search the archives, you will find almost no news coverage of the disaggregation of UMB and virtually no public debate. In contrast to what occurred in the early 1970s, there has been a vigorous debate about this proposal now, and this is healthy. We need this discussion.

Although the world has changed dramatically in the 23 year since the Maryland Charter for Higher Education was enacted, the basic organization of our higher education system has hardly changed at all. Aside from the re-aggregation of MBI2, an inevitable decision, Maryland has done little since 1988 to realign its institutional structures to compete in the modern world or to adapt to the extraordinary economic and demographic trends right here in our own state.

Tom Friedman observes in his new book, “That Used To Be Us,” that our nation’s competitors are outpacing us because of their ability to quickly adapt their institutions to the breathtaking changes in our world. But here in Maryland, amidst the revolutionary changes in the world around us, our higher education institutions are organized pretty much the way they were 23 years ago.

Indeed, this debate today is not just about higher education. It really is a test of our State’s capacity to change and adapt—or to be left behind. It is a test of whether we as a people have the capacity to put economic development and competitiveness first – or whether we will continue to be constrained by ancient geographical and institutional boundaries, and old political wars that most people have forgotten or never knew. It is also a test of whether we recognize that most of our competitors are just not as politically incapacitated as we have been.

It has been said that higher education is the third rail of Maryland politics. We need to put that in our past. Higher education infighting is a luxury we can no longer afford in today’s world. We cannot let our fear of controversy paralyze us. And we cannot let controversy stop us from organizing our research assets in the one way we know will make

22 The former Maryland Biotechnology Institute.
us most competitive against institutions that are larger, bolder, and less politically constrained than we are.

You already know, of course, that a combined institution would make the University of Maryland the sixth largest public research institution in the country, the eighth largest in terms of federal research and eleventh in terms of doctoral degrees granted. The combined institution would immediately enjoy the size, funding and stature of the nation’s very top public research universities.

Yet, the reaction in some quarters to this powerful vision is quite telling. We have all heard – both public and privately – the complaints from other system campuses that a combined institution would be too strong, too powerful, too influential.

But at its heart, what does this reaction really say about our State and its willingness to compete in the global marketplace? Is our State unable to assemble the most competitive research institution possible because other institutions resist the very concept? Is our policy really being shaped by a fear that two research institutions, once combined, might actually become too successful?

From a competitive standpoint, we would be quite pleased if we heard that our aspirational peers at the University of North Carolina, or Michigan or UCLA were facing political constraints at home because they might become too big or too powerful. Or to put it right in perspective, what would we think of the State of Michigan’s higher education strategy if we learned that the University of Michigan was being held back by Saginaw Valley State University? Conversely, how would a competitor following this debate critically assess Maryland’s flexibility, our capacity to adapt our institutions, and our ability to overcome longstanding political obstacles to success?

The global academic research community is, of course, way ahead of our state’s political system. Academic disciplines continue to merge and the lines continue to blur. Ultimately, the distinctions between many of the disciplines found on both campuses may be indistinguishable, even as our political boundaries remain stagnant. There are, of course, many researchers on both campuses would love to be part of the same institution. But as one retired university president from out of state told me, “these things always cause the assistant vice presidents to riot.”

None of our competitors face the kind of artificial political barriers we have erected between these two campuses. And nearly all of our aspirational peers have significantly more joint appointments, especially in medicine, engineering, public health, business, and the liberal arts. As one aspirational peer, the University of Michigan states, “we have a formal commitment to help faculty move across disciplinary boundaries to undertake innovative intellectual, scientific, and artistic endeavors and to create new knowledge.”
Despite the very best efforts of many of our researchers, we cannot honestly say this is the reality between our two campuses.

These two campuses do not belong to any one city, county or zip code. They belong to the citizens of the State. They have statewide missions. This is not about benefitting College Park or benefitting Baltimore. And frankly, if any institution has more to gain, it is UMB, which can not only gain more bioengineering, public health and other research faculty seeking alignment with its medical school, but it would also continue to expand its sphere statewide on an even broader platform.

For example, on July 21 of this year, the University of Maryland System signed an historic letter of intent to study the potential construction of not just a new hospital here in Prince George’s County, but a new health science campus. This is an enormous opportunity for the schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry, as well as the schools of public health, public policy, bioengineering, education and others.

The administrative challenges to this project and the identity confusion will obviously be significant. It is hard enough to get departments within the same institution to work together. Any outsider will be left to wonder why these institutions were separated in the first place. As a state, we have no good answer to that question.

UMB has now undertaken a new identity campaign. The identity confusion UMB has historically faced is understandable, not just because of the similarity of the names, but mostly because both institutions are really the missing half of the other. These institutions share a common history, a common identity, a common mission to serve the state, and a complementary set of academic disciplines. The undeniable reality is that, together, their research disciplines make up the natural components of a single comprehensive research university—even if the political system hasn’t quite recognized it yet.

I believe that in the not too distant future, as the world continues to change rapidly, we will look back and wonder what this debate was all about, and perhaps even see it as a bit quaint. Reunification or realignment is not only inevitable, it is essential. The only question is whether we will respond to the urgent call of the changing world now, or whether we will delay tearing down these artificial political barriers to our State’s ability to compete globally.

You are right to study this issue carefully. But at the end of the day, this is not about a study. It is about whether we as a State have the vision, the determination, and the will to make it happen.