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NH Business: UNH president's 'Embrace NH' tour touts Manchester connections

By Mike Cote New Hampshire Union Leader
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University of New Hampshire President James Dean, left, senior provost of research, economic engagement and outreach Marian McCord, and Ken La Valley, vice provost of outreach and engagement get ready to leave the Durham campus Wednesday for a tour in Manchester where they visited a school, a nonprofit and two business operations that have UNH connections.

Jeremy Gasowski/UNH

THE FINAL STOP of UNH President James Dean's Embrace NH visit to Manchester last week was a prime location to publicize the kind of connections he's trying to promote.

After a tour of the Advanced Regenerative Manufacturing Institute – the Millyard nonprofit developing the mass production of human cells – Dean noted the University of New Hampshire's long association with the 6-year-old project.

"There's been a tremendous collaboration between UNH Manchester and ARMI from the beginning," Dean said by phone Wednesday afternoon. "Mike Decelle, our dean here, was part of the group that actually wrote the original grant application."

While Dean has met with ARMI founder Dean Kamen, who serves on a UNH advisory board, the UNH president had yet to tour the ARMI campus.

"To actually walk through it and see what they're doing ... it made it quite a bit more real for me than it has been before," Dean said.

Now Dean wants to arrange for ARMI leaders to visit the Durham campus and meet with the school's biotech researchers.

"We're trying to increase the collaboration that we have," he said. "We're certainly not starting from zero. We have lots of collaborations around the state."

Through the Embrace NH tours, which have included visits to Rochester, Franklin and the North Country, the university aims to increase awareness of the school's business, education and community connections.

"There's always a danger of universities being perceived as being out of touch with what's going on in the day-to-day lives of people in New Hampshire," said Dean, who was appointed the school's 20th president in June 2018.

Wednesday's tour began with a stop at Gossler Park Elementary School, where Dean and UNH Vice Provost Ken La Valley joined a group of children in wheelchairs for a game of tag to demonstrate the power of adaptive sports promoted by Northeast Passage, a formerly freestanding organization that became part of UNH a few years ago.

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“At the end of it, the kids were really excited and basically said, ‘We get it,’ that people in wheelchairs can have the same kind of fun, do the same kind of competition as other people,” Dean said.

He also met with Gossler staff and Manchester schools superintendent Jennifer Gillis.

“(There are) a lot of socioeconomic challenges for the families that live in that area,” Dean said. “And to be able to provide a place where the kids can get educated, and they can feel safe and get fed ... It seemed like the people there were doing an amazing job.”

At XMA Corp., a manufacturer of thin-film chips located by the Manchester-Boston Regional Airport, Dean got to visit the employer of a UNH student who just graduated this month.

“We got to see some people who are doing really cutting edge research and development around chip fabrication, and the idea of doing this for quantum computing using temperatures so low that I don’t even know how to describe it,” Dean said. “But it was great to see that – and great to see they’ve literally hired a young man whose hand I shook this weekend when he graduated from UNH.”

The tour also included a stop at Waypoint, a Manchester-based nonprofit that provides social services to families and youth. Dean noted the collaboration between the nonprofit and UNH’s social work and nursing departments.

“In all of the places that we visited there were alumni from UNH at each one of them, which is always gratifying to me to see that we’re placing people and that people are doing important things,” he said.

Dean didn’t mention state funding for the university system during our conversation, but tours like these are at the heart of a long-term mission to increase awareness – and support – for the state’s educational institutions.

The Business and Industry Association has been among the school’s advocates, lobbying the Legislature to increase funding.

“New Hampshire is last among the 50 states in per capita support of higher education, but our university and community college systems are critical to the education and training of workers needed to grow our economy,” BIA President Michael Skelton noted in an April column in the Union Leader.

Meanwhile, Dean and his colleagues are reminding people in the Granite State that the school's connections extend far beyond Durham.

"We're trying to frequently get out and have conversations and learn how we can help," he said. "It's something I'm really proud that the university is doing."

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