Elizabeth Chilton named 21st President of UNH

The university announced the selection after a months-long search process.

Isabel Dreher, Managing Editor

On the morning of May 7, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) announced Elizabeth Chilton as the next university president.

The search for current President James Dean’s predecessor has been ongoing since Dean announced his retirement in September. Dean will retire in June, at which point Chilton will step into the position.

Chilton will be making the move to New Hampshire from Washington, where she currently serves as the chancellor of Washington State University’s Pullman campus. She also has an academic background in anthropology. However, Chilton says she’s “not new” to New England.

“I spent about 57 years of my life in New York and New England,” she said. “My research is on New England native peoples and ecology. And so I spent some time in New Hampshire... conducting my own research.”

Chilton's view of higher education and the importance of public institutions is, in part, informed by her own experience as a first-generation college student. She shared that her first year of college was at a private liberal arts school.

“I had a very hard time as an 18-year-old and a first-generation college student at an elite private college. In retrospect, I can articulate that I felt like I didn't belong,” Chilton said. “Belonging is really important when you're trying to navigate your life as an adult or even just in a new institution, later in life.”

Chilton ultimately transferred to the University at Albany in Albany, New York, which is a part of New York’s public university system, which she said was a much better experience.

“I really felt more like I belonged, partly because I knew people there but partly just because of the way the services were set up to support a wider range of students from a wider range of backgrounds,” Chilton said. “That's really affected me as I've navigated my career as a leader in higher ed.”

Despite the excitement, Chilton is coming to UNH at a somewhat difficult time. Earlier this semester, UNH experienced significant budget cuts, including significant cuts in the liberal arts departments like the closing of the UNH Museum of Art.
“Here at Washington State University, we have had enrollment declines since the pandemic as well as budget reductions that went along with that because we are tuition-dependent, as well as UNH is and many, many institutions are in that same boat,” she said.

Chilton believes that her experience addressing similar issues at her current university has prepared her well for tackling similarly mammoth tasks at UNH.

“I sometimes like to say that a strategic plan is only fiction unless you can figure out ways to leverage the resources to make good on that strategic plan,” she said. “I know that there’s a desire both to have the next strategic planning process start, as well as take a look at the budget model and resource allocation in order to support it and I’m excited to dig into both of those.”

Chilton says her first order of business as president is to set up an in-depth campus tour.

“[I’ll be] getting out to those physical spaces on day one,” she said. “I want to do that as much as I can because it helps me understand that the culture and the history and the social context of the university.”

Despite the large size of UNH, Chilton says she’s going to do her best to be involved in the community and make personal connections with students.

“Probably my colleagues will have to hold me back from the events...I want to go to everything but of course, there are only so many hours in the day,” she said. “Those casual conversations to me have often been the most fruitful because I can say to our students, ‘what’s going well for you’ and ‘how can we do better,’ and sometimes in the more informal situations, you get more profound information that really helps you do your job better.”