UA professor on Romney advisory team

Costrell held positions in presidential candidate’s Massachusetts cabinet

BRENDA BERNET ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

When he was governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney loved to review his advisers' data, said Robert Costrell, a University of Arkansas professor who was an adviser to Romney at the time.

"That's how he made decisions," Costrell said. "He would come down to our office and want to see the spreadsheets."

Costrell was Romney's chief economist from 2003-06 and top education adviser from 2005-06. When Romney’s term was nearing an end, he supported Costrell in his decision to leave for UA in 2006. A chair in Costrell's office on the Fayetteville campus was a gift from Romney.

Costrell, a professor of education reform and economics at UA, resumed his duties in advising Romney, the Republican presidential challenger, on education policy about a year ago, except this time on a national level as a member of an education advisory team for the former governor's presidential campaign.

UA announced Costrell's appointment May 31.

Advising on national education policy is different than with state policy, Costrell said. "I don't have one-on-ones with him," Costrell said. "He's a busy guy. The role that I have now is part of a team."

The team convened over teleconferences to brainstorm and develop ideas that became part of Romney's platform, Costrell said.

The team also includes Rod Paige, former education secretary; Russ Whitehurst, senior fellow and director of the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy; Tom Luna, president of the Council of Chief State School Officers; Phil Handy, former chairman of the Florida State Board of Education; and Martin R. West, executive editor of Education Next.

Faculty within UA's department of education reform regularly contribute to the development of education policy within the state and at the national level, though not commonly through a political campaign, said Jay Greene, head of the department and holder of the 21st Century Chair in Education Reform.

"It's actually central to our mission," he said.

The department, part of the College of Education and Health Professions, includes Patrick Wolf, one of the nation's leading researchers on school choice, who was selected as the evaluator of a school choice program in Washington, D.C., Greene said. Gary Ritter, who holds the Chair in Education Policy, is a leading researcher on issues of merit pay, has conducted evaluations, testified before Congress and published articles related to his research.

Costrell holds the 21st-Century Chair in Education Accountability. He is one of a handful of researchers on the role of teacher pension plans in the quality of the teaching workforce, Greene said. He also has expertise in school finance and accountability systems.

Costrell is famous among elite policy makers, said Andrew Rotherham, co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., that works to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. Rotherham also writes the weekly "School of Thought" column for Time magazine and his blog Eduwonk.com.

"You can disagree with him on policy issues," Rotherham said. "His analysis is solid."

The education advisory team for Romney's campaign worked in collaboration with the campaign staff to develop Romney's education platform, Costrell said. Their work preceded a speech given May 23 at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Romney was a guest speaker for an economic meeting for the Latino Coalition, a nonprofit small business organization founded in 1995.

In that speech, Romney went over highlights of his education plan, which includes giving parents of low-income and special needs children the ability to choose any public, charter or private school for their children; to push for simple-to-read public report cards to help parents judge how their children's schools are performing; and to reward states for regularly evaluating teachers and compensating the best ones.
“If America is going to continue to lead the world in how much we build, create and invent, then we must transform how we teach, train and educate,” Romney said. “We already have good teachers, engaged parents and big ideas. What we need now is strong leadership and political will.”

Romney and President Barack Obama differ on the federal government’s role in improving schools, Rotherham said. Obama’s administration created federal programs that provide incentives to states, such as for adopting the Common Core State Standards or for turning around low-performing schools, Rotherham said.

“Romney is talking much more about leaving it to the states,” he said.

Both candidates support school choice, but they differ on what type of school choice, Rotherham said. Obama has supported public charter schools as a school choice option, but Romney has indicated he would support extending federal dollars to parochial and other private schools.

The current education policies of the Democratic president and Republican presidential candidate reflect the views of their parties, and the two are putting forth proposals that appeal to their parties, Rotherham said.

“Education is not going to matter in this election,” Rotherham said. “You’re going to see a policy of ‘first do no political harm.’”

Costrell said Romney’s persona is sometimes distorted. Costrell knows Romney as a man of integrity, who is thoughtful and interested in the pros and cons of policies.

During Romney’s administration in Massachusetts, the state Legislature passed a moratorium on charter schools because of complaints that funding for charter schools was improper, Costrell said. Costrell described the moratorium as an attempt by the teachers’ union to shut down charter schools.

The solution involved applying the same principle of funding school districts to charter schools, Costrell said. Prior to the change, the state paid charter schools based on an average of the per-student funding of the sending school district. If a charter school had a lower percentage of low-income students than the sending district, the argument was that the charter would receive more money than it should.

“We called the bluff, fixed the funding formula, vetoed the moratorium and got that veto upheld,” Costrell said. “It was one of our big victories.”

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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/MICHAEL WOODS Robert Costrell sits in the chair that was given to him by Mitt Romney while Costrell was education adviser to the former Massachusetts governor from 2005-06. Costrell, endowed chair in education accountability at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, is part of an education advisory team for Romney’s presidential campaign.