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President’s Perspective (March 2012)

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Dear Colleagues:

It’s hard to believe it’s already time for spring recess. The first half of the spring semester has been incredibly busy and a time of significant progress on a number of important issues and initiatives. Before more time slips by, I want to make sure you are fully aware of some of those recent developments.

Budget 2012 process has begun

Gov. Rick Snyder has recently unveiled his proposed budget for 2012. You may have heard that budget includes a 3 percent funding increase for higher education. I’m pleased to learn the governor is making a commitment to begin restoring the $33 million in state funds this University has lost over the past decade, but I have concerns about the formula the Governor proposes as a way to allocate the increase.

The performance benchmarks used by the governor’s office to determine allocation included:

- the growth in the number of undergraduate degree completions,
- the number of undergraduate completions in critical skill—STEM—areas, and
- the number of undergraduate Pell Grant recipients and compliance with tuition restraint.

That formula would give WMU and the other research universities a lower increase—in the 1.5 percent range for WMU—while other public universities could increase more than 7 percent. Universities may “earn” more state appropriations by adhering to a 4 percent cap on tuition increases for the 2012-13 academic year.

This proposal marks the beginning of discussions on the final budget. We will advocate strongly that funding increase benchmarks also include such items as the number of graduate degrees produced, economic development activities and the efficiency of university operations and keeping administrative costs low. We will make a strong argument that WMU’s budget restraints, staffing efficiencies and low tuition over the years truly deserve recognition as an example of good stewardship of public funds.

The Daily lauds WMU efficiency

Early last month, a national online news organization, The Daily, reported in detail just how efficiently run our University is. The finding was this: Western Michigan University is one of the most efficiently run research
universities in the nation and one that has kept administrative and professional personnel costs at an extraordinarily low level.

Examining the 198 universities categorized by the Carnegie Foundation as "high" or "very high" research universities, the reporter found that while the average number of administrative and professional personnel per 100 students is 9.7, WMU has only 2.7 such employees per 100 students. In fact, WMU has the fourth-leanest staffing level of any research university in the nation.

Each of you deserves a note of thanks for your extraordinary level of service. Our very lean staff works every day to meet a tremendous level of expectations—from our students and their families and from each other. Our faculty does an outstanding job of advising students, guiding curriculum and engaging in the scholarly work expected of a university of this caliber. Together, we simply roll our sleeves up and get the job done.

Private donors respond to campus needs, opportunities

As funding issues and budget constraints have become a constant source of concern, I have to note that private giving to WMU, which is more important than ever, is a growing source of assistance to the University as a whole and to individual students. With a new organizational structure in our development area, we’ve been watching carefully to see how fundraising success is being affected. At the half-way point for the current fiscal year, the results were very promising. Excluding gifts for the new medical school, private support for the University has more than doubled this year compared to the same period last year, and student scholarship funding is up by 88 percent.

We’re now a year out from the amazing $100 million dollar gift for the School of Medicine. The predictions made by fundraising experts last year have proven true. The impact of a leadership gift like that, they said, would elicit interest from other donors who feel that such a gift is a sign that the institution as a whole is worthy of support. Campuswide, we’re feeling the results.

Solar array adjacent to Miller Auditorium

Solar array, EV charging stations come online

Grants continue to help us with the discovery and service parts of our enterprise. Last week, that wonderful new solar array adjacent to Miller Auditorium was activated to provide a significant portion of the energy demand for 15 new electric vehicle charging stations nearby.

The array and charging stations as well as the purchase of five all-electric Ford Transit Connect service vehicles and a large electric hybrid-hydraulic bucket truck were made possible by a $700,000 grant from the Clean Energy Coalition. The new EV charging stations are open to the public. The 15 new units along with another new unit at Welborn Hall, bring our total of on-campus charging stations to 20, making WMU the nation’s leader in providing on-campus EV charging resources.
Medical school logs more milestones

Over the past few months, the new School of Medicine we’re developing as a joint venture with Borgess Health and Bronson Healthcare has been moving rapidly forward. These milestones have been checked off the “to do” list.

- A location for the school was determined, as MPI Research of Mattawan donated a downtown Kalamazoo research facility to be the medical school’s new home.

- The state of Michigan recognized the medical school as a “non-public university” with degree-granting authority.

- The board of the Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies voted to transition that organization into the School of Medicine, effective July 1.

- Dates for a July accreditation visit by a team from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education were set.

- The first formal meeting of the Board of Directors of the School of Medicine was convened.

Slowly, this private medical school we’ve long discussed is coming to fruition. We’ve stood firm on the original commitment to ensure that no public funds designated for WMU would be diverted to this initiative.

The result is that we now have a separate 501 (c) (3) nonprofit corporation with its own articles of incorporation and bylaws. The school is operationally independent from WMU, Borgess and Bronson, has its own governing board and will control its own academic programs, curricula, admissions, student services, personnel decisions and facilities. The structure is unique, and it provides a wonderful opportunity for the three organizations to maximize resources to benefit our University, community, state and nation. We would not have been able to do this separately, but together, we can build something of enormous import.

Faculty/student accolades

We’ve had some outstanding examples of faculty and student success this semester. I’ll share just a few in which we can all take pride and celebrate.

First, I want to tell you about anthropology faculty member Dr. Jacqueline Eng, a bioarchaeologist who joined a team of international archaeologists in an exploration of the Upper Mustang region of Nepal in 2010. The team found a series of ancient burial caves, and Dr. Eng’s work in analyzing the remains became a major part of a Feb. 15 National Geographic television special on PBS.
The last few weeks have brought news of numerous triumphs in Dr. Steve Wolfinbarger’s trombone studio. Three of his students, Eric Bowman of Portage, Mich., Evan Clifton of Howell, Mich., and Kirsten Schaffert of Sanford, Mich., have all been named finalists in recent International Trombone Association solo competitions and will be traveling to Paris this summer to continue competing. Eric Bowman, we believe, is the first person ever to earn a finalist slot in both the classical and jazz categories of these international trombone competitions.

The competitions represent the highest level of student trombone competition in the world. The WMU students will compete against a handful of finalists from such schools as Julliard, the Eastman School of Music, the Paris Conservatory, University of Illinois and the Berklee College of Music.

And finally, I want you to know that members of our acclaimed Gold Company will begin their spring recess with the opportunity to perform at the Lincoln Center as part of the New York City Jazz Festival. They’ll be performing with nine-time Grammy Award winner Paquito D’Rivera who performed with Gold Company last November here in Kalamazoo.

Enjoy your spring recess week and take some time to rest up for the second half of the semester. There’s every sign that it will be even busier than the first half has been. Thank you for all you do to make this a great University.

Best regards,

John M. Dunn, President