3-2015

President's Perspective (March 2015)

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Dear Colleagues:

For those of you who, like me, were able to get away for a few days over spring recess, welcome back. The weather is much better than when we left. For those of you who stayed on campus and made tracks getting to some of those back-burner projects, thank you. I know it's sometimes helpful to have that kind of space to get things done, and I'm sure you made real progress.

I had the opportunity over break to meet with our alumni in three different areas of Florida. They are passionate about their University and full of enthusiasm and questions about campus life and WMU's accomplishments. Our alumni are always quick to tell me how being a Bronco made them well prepared for the professional and personal challenges and opportunities they faced. In short, it was a non-stop affirmation of just how great an impact the University and its faculty and staff have on the lives of those who pass through our classrooms, laboratories and performance venues.

Countdown to commencement

I hope you are all refreshed and ready for a final seven weeks of the spring semester. They are already shaping up to be among the busiest in recent memory. However, nothing is quite as enjoyable as having the opportunity to celebrate the conclusion of an academic year and the success of our students.

Appropriations, budget and tuition discussions

On Feb. 25, I traveled to Lansing to testify before a joint meeting of the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Higher Education. It was an important but brief opportunity to speak about our accomplishments and funding concerns with legislators. Later that day, I had an
opportunity to do the same in a meeting with Gov. Rick Snyder and several of the other Michigan university presidents.

In both instances, my message was simple. While I am certainly grateful that the governor has recommended a 2 percent increase in higher education funding in what is yet another tough budget year for the state, such an increase will still not make us whole from the 15 percent appropriations cut we sustained in 2011. At the time, the governor assured us the funding would be restored, but we're still a significant ways from that happening. And tuition caps (this year's recommendation is 2.8 percent) have limited our options as well. I urged that, at the very least, tuition restraints should be structured in such a way that those of us who have kept our tuition low would not be disadvantaged.

**Enrollment for fall trending in positive direction**

As always, we're closely tracking the way enrollment is shaping up for fall 2015. We're seeing two very strong elements. The first is the percentage of new students retained from last fall to the current spring semester. That retention rate was 93 percent, our highest in 16 years. Our entire campus can take credit for empowering students to succeed. Thank you. Now we need to keep the good work in place so we see a strong return rate for the fall—that critical first- to second-year retention rate.

It's a bit too early to make any predictions about transfer students, but our beginning freshman numbers have been consistently strong all year, and that trend seems to be holding. Our graduate enrollment numbers look strong as well, so we are looking for a solid fall enrollment. That bodes well, because as you know, enrollment plays an even more important role in our budgeting process than appropriations.

**Our postgraduate success rate is attracting attention**

Throughout the spring semester, in publications and public presentations, we've been pointing to some strong data we've gathered about the postgraduate success of our students. For the past five years, Dr. Ewa Urban in Career and Student Employment Service has been tracking what our students are doing after graduation. The most recently completed survey covers 2013-14 and includes data on a remarkable 68 percent of the more than 5,200 students who graduated in that year. We believe this is the most comprehensive level of such information available to prospective students and their families at any Michigan university.

Here's the takeaway: within three months of graduation, **89 percent of our graduates are "actively engaged,"** which is defined as employed full time (62.5 percent), continuing their education (15 percent), employed part time (11 percent) or in the military (1 percent). Please don't be shy about using that information the next time you hear someone question the value of higher education. That 89 percent is our average for all WMU colleges, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. You can find the detail for your specific college or department. You will be pleased and surprised with some data that easily counteracts some of those popular myths about which degrees lead to the highest postgraduate levels of success.

**New staff compensation project moving quickly to conclusion**

The topic of staff compensation has been in the forefront of campus discussion over the past few months. Fortunately, it's a topic that we decided, as an institution, needed attention when we
launched the Staff Compensation Project many months ago. Throughout this year’s conversation, a campuswide group of employees, working with a national consultant, has been steadfast in its commitment to being thorough, thoughtful and inclusive in gathering the information needed to develop a new pay structure.

More than 84 percent of affected employees and some 800 supervisors took advantage of the invitation to provide feedback on the topic they know best—just what their jobs entail. Those job descriptions have been matched to appropriate market surveys (more than 30) to arrive at a new pay structure with fewer but broader pay categories. Over the next few weeks, the task of slotting nearly 1,300 jobs into those categories will be completed. We will then do our budget analysis and make decisions about the best path to implementation. In May, all employees in the Staff Compensation System will learn of their new classification and the salary ranges created for the new structure. To learn more, be sure to visit the project website.

**Graduate programs lauded**

In case you missed the news last week, the annual U.S. News & World Report list of best graduate programs was released. Seven of our programs were among the top 100 programs of their kind in the nation, and three earned best-in-Michigan honors. The rankings don’t come close to touching all the disciplines in which our graduate programs excel, but it’s always nice to see those that are measured recognized.

A new law school assessment in the rankings this year also listed our affiliate, the WMU Thomas M. Cooley Law School, as among the nation’s most diverse law schools. That's something we've known for a while, but it's nice to see that quality acknowledged.

**Food marketing event celebrates 50 years today and tomorrow**

Today, food marketing professionals from around the nation will gather in Kalamazoo for the 50th Food Marketing Conference organized by our food and consumer package goods program in the Haworth College of Business. This highly respected event annually attracts some 600 industry professionals, and this year's meeting, say our campus organizers, will rival any in the history of the event. Be sure to watch local coverage of some industry giants tackling current topics and trends in the commercial food sector.

**Faculty and student accomplishments continue to set us apart**

I always like to single out a few faculty and student accomplishments whenever I have the opportunity to communicate with a broad audience—either on campus or off. The difficulty is always in narrowing it down to “just a few,” but here are some that certainly have piqued my interest.

- Dr. James Springstead, an assistant professor of chemical and paper engineering, has been awarded a grant of $416,816 from the National Institutes of Health to continue his research on the underlying biological mechanisms that lead to heart disease.

  Dr. Springstead has been studying the science behind what leads to blockage inside arterial walls since he was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California at Los Angeles. It's an important research direction and one not normally associated with chemical and paper engineering.

- Two members of our Department of Mathematics, along with a colleague from Harvey Mudd College, have just published a new book through Princeton University Press that celebrates a topic long considered a core strength of WMU’s mathematics department.
Dr. Gary Chartrand, professor emeritus, and Dr. Ping Zhang, professor, had their new book, "The Fascinating World of Graph Theory," introduced at a meeting of the American Mathematical Society in San Antonio. The book has drawn praise as a work that will attract a general audience because it clearly explains the classic puzzles and problems of the field.

Emma Powell, a graduate student in the WMU School of Public Affairs and Administration was one of three members of the Midwest championship team in a daylong simulation event—the 2015 Inaugural Student Simulation Competition organized by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration and held at five locations around the nation. The event challenged teams of students to analyze a current health-policy problem and present their solutions to a panel of judges. Emma shared Midwest team honors with students from Ohio State University and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

And finally, I’m happy to add my congratulations to WMU's NPR station, WMUK-FM. The staff there took home an amazing eight awards for broadcast excellence from the Michigan Association of Broadcasters. The news, arts and feature programming we all enjoy received some much-deserved recognition.

Thank you for all you do every day to make our students successful and make this the kind of University community in which we can all take great pride. Enjoy the plethora of events and year-end celebrations that will occur in the coming weeks.

Best regards,

John M. Dunn
President