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PSSO Membership Meeting

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(Vision questions--What is the vision for WMU? Where have we been, where are we going and what is our goal?)

• You know, I spoke a bit about "the vision thing" last fall. During my first year here, people kept asking for my vision. That puzzled me and I kept wondering if this campus community truly understands what it is and how special a place this is.

Quite simply, we are a research university, one of fewer than 200 in the United States so designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. We are one of only 100 public universities in the United States authorized to shelter a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

And we are home to a wealth of outstanding program offerings, many of which are among the nation's best in their disciplines. We are known nationally and internationally, and it is the alma mater of 165,000 alumni who have gone on to have incredibly successful and rewarding lives.

We've been through a period of declining enrollment, but we've stopped and reversed that troubling trend and are on the ascension again.

• Where are we headed can be summed up with one word--growth. But our growth will be managed and thoughtfully carried out. I'm talking about growth in the really important measures--the measures that demonstrate our values.

  • Growth in the number of students we serve

  • Growth in our commitment to speak with pride about our University
• Growth in our reputation as an institution that serves as a model of shared governance, civil discourse and inclusive behavior

• Growth in our output and support for research and scholarship

• And, most important, growth in our commitment to make the success of our students the center of each and every action we take.

Budget. Will there be layoffs, hiring freeze or program cuts. (Related question: "We know how you feel about student retention. What is your feeling about retention of non-union staff members?")

Budget. First, let's remember the basics. We have just two main sources for operating funds--the money it takes to run this university on a daily basis. They are tuition (2/3 or our budget) and state appropriations (1/3).

• Tomorrow, the governor will unveil her budget recommendations for 2009-10. We don't know what she will recommend for higher education. Her spokesperson has indicated no part of the state budget will be exempt from cuts, but education is likely to see smaller cuts then other areas. She has also asked that all of Michigan's universities and community colleges freeze tuition for the coming year.

• You may have read in the Gazette my initial response to the tuition freeze proposal. It was simply this. If we--WMU-- were to freeze tuition and have no increase in appropriations and if our budget called for meeting only our contractual obligations and projected cost increases for items like utilities and health care, we would have a budget deficit of $10 to $11 million.

• Clearly the situation would be even worse if our appropriation was reduced. The Gov., in turn, has said she will help offset the problem with anticipated federal stimulus funding.
• I can't emphasize strongly enough that this is all very speculative at this point. No one knows what the final stimulus package will look like, so no one, including the governor, knows whether there will be funding that can be funneled into high ed. We're at the start of a long conversation about the state budget and our University budget.

I share these numbers because I want everyone to be aware of the issues before us, not because I want to trigger any fears in you or your colleagues across campus. The situation is what it is, and it is what it always is at this time of year--unclear and still to be negotiated. When I respond to questions from the media like the one I answered last week, I am always mindful of how worrisome such statements from me can be, so I appreciate the opportunity to talk a bit more fully about this.

• No, we are not contemplating layoffs or program cuts or even a hiring freeze. We all need to take a deep breath and wait and see how things evolve.

• The budget, however, is not an issue entirely out of our control. Remember, our two major sources of revenue are state appropriations (about 1/3) and tuition (the other 2/3). I remind you, as I do every other faculty and staff group I speak with that our focus needs to be on recruiting and welcoming new students and retaining our existing students.

Everyone of us plays a part in those important roles. Every time we welcome and assist a prospective student visiting our campus, we are helping ourselves as well as that student. Every current student we nurture and help to be successful is more likely to stay with us and earn a degree.

• I do know how leanly staffed we are, and I rarely miss an opportunity to point that out when talking to legislators. I want each of you to know how much I value your work and all the extra responsibilities many of you have taken on over the
past few years. You are critical to our mission. We cannot serve our students without the work you do.

• When I first arrived on campus, I noted that here, as is the case on most college campuses, the faculty, rightly, lays claim to being the heart of the University. But just as correct is the notion that the staff is the university's soul. That gives you an idea of my perspective on how much I value what you do everyday. That is my basic operating premise and will remain so as we move forward through the next difficult months.

I would like to leave some time for your questions. My staff let me know about one very specific question submitted, so let's start with that one.

• Q. "Why must a long-term staff member take a pay cut when transferring to another position on campus that is the same grade level?"

Felicia Crawford tells me this is fairly unusual, but it can happen. She says, "It isn't a regular occurrence. There may be an occasion where an employee is at the upper edge of their pay grade and applies for another job in the same grade. The hiring department may only have a budget to hire at the minimum or lower end of the pay grade. In fact, Academic Affairs has an informal protocol where they will only post jobs at the pay grade minimum."

And now let's open the floor for more questions.