

Leading in Difficult Times

By George E. Ross

In the best of times, balancing interests across a university can be challenging. In difficult times, leaders must redouble their efforts to involve and communicate with stakeholders, while making decisions that advance student success and the university as a whole.

As Central Michigan University (CMU) has adjusted to a new normal in state support and declining high school classes, we, like many others, deal with the constant pressure of budget gaps, competing priorities and sometimes conflicting short- and long-term objectives.

Friction is inevitable. We've made missteps, and we'll make more. We've learned, and we'll continue to do so.

What's significant is that we talk often as a leadership team—and as a campus community—about communication. In fact, it's a critical pillar in the shared pursuit of CMU's vision and mission.

Lean Times and the Need for Investment

Located in the heart of Michigan, CMU is the 76th largest university in the United States. Most of its 28,000 students are on site at a beautiful campus with a northern-Michigan feel. About 7,000 take courses online or at one of our 50 Global

Campus centers in 16 states, Mexico and Canada.

CMU's 1,000-plus faculty members develop student leaders adept in their areas of study, with well-honed critical-thinking skills and a work ethic applauded by employers. The emphasis is on teaching, with research that serves graduate and undergraduate students alike. Importantly, faculty and students often form bonds that last a lifetime.

That said, the national recession and Michigan's once-eroding automotive base have caused state funding of the 15 public universities to plummet. In the late 1980s, state appropriations supplied 75 percent of CMU's annual revenue. Today, state funding stands at 16 percent of CMU's budget. It's at the 1998 funding level, when gasoline was \$1.40 a gallon.

Balancing the budget has required prioritization of academic programs to fit today's job market and the channeling of funds accordingly. CMU has avoided \$11 million in health care costs the last five years thanks in part to self-insured health plans that provide notably robust coverage, and an active wellness and prevention program. We've also benefited from energy conservation initiatives and procurement improvements.

Even with such economic challenges, the university's future must remain a

steady focus. While we reduce costs and spend conservatively, we still invest in facilities and programs needed by students, employers and the state.

In CMU's case, this means a College of Medicine that was created to meet the burgeoning need for primary care physicians in medically underserved Michigan communities; it also means a new Biosciences Building that will be our largest capital project ever.

New Programs Require Communication

America's 137th medical school has been in discussion at CMU since 2008. The inaugural class of 64 students was seated in May and begins classes in August. Fifty-four faculty members already are on the team.

This was and is a great investment in students, communities and the state. Yet not all agreed on it, and the new college was a flash point of contention during the 2011 negotiation of a faculty contract.

Bad feelings simmered long after a three-year agreement was reached. Looking back, we could and should have communicated more often and with more detail. No one can say for certain, yet I believe much of the strife could have been avoided had our communications been better.

A Path to Unity

University presidents cannot control the economic climate, nor can they prevent all conflicts. They can, however, bring the community together.

In the spring of 2012, as president of CMU, it was my responsibility to do just that. We needed to heal. We needed to work toward a unity that many—but not all—were eager to resume.

The board of trustees, cabinet, senior leadership team and I joined with faculty, staff and students to develop concrete steps to improve our governance, communications and accessibility. A few highlights follow:

- **Shared Governance.** Shared governance committees had been charged at CMU several times in decades past. This time, a 15-member Shared Governance and Communications Committee linked representatives from across the university. Its work seals a commitment by administrators, faculty, staff, students and trustees to engage in deeper communication.

Key outcomes included:

- “CMU definition of shared governance” was written and agreed upon by administrators and faculty.
- For the first time, a standing committee was created to annually evaluate progress.
- A faculty-led Budget Priorities Committee was appointed to become experts in and advise the university on financial matters.
- A University Community Advisory Panel, with leadership from bargaining units, two nonunionized employee groups and the Student Government Association now meets regularly to share input.

- **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate.** It’s a regular agenda item these days at our cabinet and senior leadership team meetings. We did learn. And we’re taking action. A positive, engaged, unified campus requires leaders to communicate openly, repeatedly and with substantive information.

Efforts at the presidential level alone include:

- An initial, third-party review of the campus climate with recommendations for moving forward.
- Multiple meetings each month with leaders of the Faculty Association.
- Written reports to the Academic Senate.
- Informal meetings and lunches with faculty and staff from across campus.
- Annual meetings with as many individual academic departments as possible.
- Meetings with student leaders, including the editorial board of the student newspaper.
- Regular communications with the local community and business leaders.

Today at CMU

Communications and shared governance have helped CMU find greater common ground, build greater momentum, and nurture a culture of greater respect.

While some individuals still harbor anger and distrust, there’s once again a prevailing sense that Central Michigan University is an extraordinary institution.

The campus community again sees a promising future, despite ongoing economic challenges, fueled by the collective energies of faculty, staff and students.

This past April, CMU achieved a milestone when the chair of the Academic Senate, the provost and I signed the

final draft of the *Shared Governance and Communications* report.

What’s more, the education of our future doctors begins this summer, and construction of the \$89 million Biosciences Building begins next year. Signed biology majors have more than doubled in just four years, nearly reaching 1,000.

CMU is building on its 120-year legacy of teacher and business education, as well as its strong reputation for liberal arts education, to become an innovative leader in health-related careers.

Stay Focused on the Mission

There’s no doubt the 2011 academic year was challenging. It was a season of leadership that reinforced the need for a daily commitment to communication.

As university leaders, we must continuously seek the counsel of faculty, staff, students, community leaders, and even administrators at other institutions. We must spend time discussing rationale, consequences, decisions and outcomes.

We must not dwell on personal attacks, but rather must stay focused on priorities, communicate from the heart, and take time to address the questions we know others have—whether they ask them or not.

As famous Michigan business leader, Henry Ford, once said, “Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goals.”

Stay focused on students. Stay focused on the long-term viability of your institution. **P**

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