Building a University

By Richard R. Rush

Over the past 30 years, I have had the distinct pleasure, honor and responsibility of serving at the executive level of universities. I have assisted in the opening of two new universities for the California State University system, and I have served as a president at both Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU) and California State University Channel Islands (CI). Over this past year, I have been continuously asked what I am most proud of as it relates to my career in higher education. Without hesitation, I respond that I am incredibly proud of the people I have hired and am inspired by their herculean efforts to increase access, by their enduring commitment to student learning, and by their productive mentoring through research participation, encouraging students in classrooms and laboratories as well as in their personal lives. Beyond hiring and supporting talented and ambitious staff, I offer you the following principles, which have served me well in leading within the higher education setting:

- **Place the student at the center** of all important decisions that impact their educational journey and future.

- **Be laser focused with your organization’s values and mission.** Ensure that your future faculty and staff know the foundational values from the moment they begin the interview process. Allow the mission to focus all efforts, including academic programming, co-curricular support, facilities, and budget development.

- **Be a servant leader.** In so far as you are able, provide the resources that your faculty and staff need to be successful. This could come in the form of access to information, availability of lab space or professional development funds. These types of resources represent potential success and your efforts in providing for these needs empowers your employees to excel in their professions.

- **Focus on the future and prepare the way.** Be an avid reader and highly engaged in the regional community, as this will enable you to have a strong understanding of both the current and future issues facing students, your constituents, higher education, the nation, and our global society. Higher education executives are responsible for preparing our next generation of leaders, thus underpinning the advancement of democratic engagement.

- **Acknowledge the contributions of others.** No one is alone in this educational endeavor. It is important to acknowledge publicly the important roles that all employees play and to celebrate their achievements rather than subsuming them in general comments.

- **Understand that you are president for a certain period of time** and you are a link to both your campus’ history and future. Try to expand on what has been entrusted to you and work to prepare for those who follow when they build upon the collective success of your university.

- **Play some every day!** The responsibilities of being a president are significant, however, life is meant to be enjoyed and cherished. Take the role of presidency very seriously, but never take yourself too seriously. Surround yourself with good people who are talented, smart and driven and who have a sense of play. You will benefit—and, most importantly, the university will as well.

Richard R. Rush is president of California State University Channel Islands.