Reflecting on the challenges facing higher education today, it is clear that transformational change can be initiated by either challenge or opportunity. In rare instances, it is both challenge and opportunity that bring about the most innovative transformation.

Against the backdrop of the recent $250 million state budget reduction, changes in tenure and shared governance, and declining demographics, the University of Wisconsin System is undergoing a huge transition as it attempts to re-envision higher education. While striving to maintain our traditional educational strengths, we must also embrace change in order to meet the needs of the state and demonstrate that we are worthy of taxpayer investment. At the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, we have risen to the challenge by using these new realities to catalyze unprecedented change—academically, fiscally and culturally.

One of the great advantages I have in managing this unprecedented change is that I am a new chancellor within the UW System and new to the state. As I began my time at UW Oshkosh just months before the announcement of the fiscal challenges, many suggested I came at the worst time. I faced an internal climate of distrust of our legislative partners and an external perception that higher education is losing its value. Facing that, I found that having a fresh perspective has been one of my most important attributes during these challenging times. In taking the time to listen and understand, and by ensuring that faculty, staff and students are part of the process, we have built a community ready to engage in real change.

Over the past year, UW Oshkosh has embraced our needed transformation. We have looked inward to find the innovation necessary to manage the funding reductions and leveraged the expertise we have on our own campus to solve real problems. The focus is and always will be on our students, many of whom are first-generation students, holding down jobs, both on and off campus, to pay their way through college. They are working for a high-quality education—an education we need to keep affordable.

We have invested in enrollment management enhancements, both to recruit more students to our region and to realize more graduates. We’ve also launched a new talent development initiative to bring more out-of-state scholars to UW Oshkosh, knowing that almost 40 percent of those graduates will remain in our region to live and work.

Growth is only one aspect of our plan to manage the budget shortfall, as we also need new, innovative, entrepreneurial and cost-cutting solutions. Initially, UW Oshkosh reallocated fund balances and used financial reserves to allow for more time to absorb the reduction in funding. Long-term initiatives include a phased-in workforce reduction of an estimated 120 positions over a two-year period.

We also need to ensure that we have information when and where we need it—and in a timely manner—while allowing decision-making to be transparent, fair and collaborative. With that, I introduced the concept of Chancellor Study Groups. These small groups are comprised of individuals who were selected based on their expertise in the subject matter and their ability to draw upon the academic culture of this institution. These groups study a problem, take input from across campus, present their findings widely, and make recommendations on how to implement change. Two completed study groups have recommended centralization of key university functions—marketing and information technology—while another group is studying institutional budget models.

The UW Oshkosh community has turned its challenges into an opportunity to transform itself, and now we must tell that story. The national narrative over time has become too much about higher education’s need for state support and not enough about our positive impact on the region and the state. We must continue to innovate and allow the message to return to what it once was: higher education is a worthy investment.

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