

Michigan State University poised for change

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Media attention during the final weeks of the just-completed presidential search focused primarily on people – most notably on the five finalists and the eight members of the Board of Trustees.

By contrast, very little media coverage dealt with the mission, structure or strategic direction of the University. Yet, many significant messages regarding these core issues were conveyed by board members during the public interviews of the candidates.

The significance of these messages was validated when the board selected M. Peter McPherson – a person whose strengths lie in the areas of business, finance, law and government, rather than academe – as the 19th president of MSU.

At the open interview with McPherson on Aug. 17, Trustee Bob Traxler identified the central problem confronting the University when he stated:

“We are distributing an insufficient amount of money into too many areas, and this leads to a weakened institution. We must focus! We must target resources! We cannot do all things for all people!”

For years – too many years perhaps – we have articulated the problem from a different perspective. While recognizing our financial plight, we waited patiently for increases in state appropriations and increases in tuition to solve our problems.

But the realities are as follows:

- First, the state's higher education budget will most likely continue to rise at a lower rate than inflation, with MSU's percentage of the state's higher education budget remaining constant at around 22 to 23 percent as it has for many years.
- Second, increased tuition can't solve the problem because the required increases will make the University more inaccessible to the very people it needs to serve the most.

Thus, we are poised for change. But what process should be used to effect these changes and how should the administration interact with the faculty, staff, students, alumni and other constituent groups to bring about these changes?

The Executive Committee of Academic Council met with four presidential candidates – Dale W. Lick, McPherson, Lou Anna K. Simon and Henry T. Yang – and in each of these

FORUM

meetings the committee stressed the importance of the *Bylaws for Academic Governance* and the necessity for the next president to work within the academic governance system.

But what are some of the specific academic governance issues and what process should be utilized?

The University's current mission statement was approved by the Board of Trustees in June 1982. It was a good mission statement in its day; however, it needs to be reviewed and updated. The president should consult with the faculty and students on this mission statement.

Next, University leaders must craft and communicate a vision for this institution. This vision must be articulated in terms of clearly stated goals and objectives that are consistent with the institution's mission.

Accompanying this vision, University leaders must have a strategic plan, which they share in an understandable manner with everyone affiliated with the University. But this strategic plan is doomed if it assumes explicitly or implicitly that increased state funding or increased tuition are central to achieving a new operating state for this institution.

Instead, we must make significant changes in our institutional strategies related to research, instruction and service.

Research: What fraction of the institution's resources should be committed to research and what fraction of this research should be externally vs. internally funded? Will investments in research be targeted for strategic thrust areas or will decisions regarding these investments be left to the individual researchers?

Instruction: What fraction of the institution's resources should be committed to instruction and how should this commitment be divided among graduate (including graduate professional) instruction, undergraduate instruction and non-degree instruction? What should be our commitments to offering classroom opportunities – including support services – to those individuals who cannot be full-time students or who cannot come to our main campus between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday?

Service: Service has become a very amorphous entity at this institution. It's as though service is defined as “everything else that is not research or instruction.” Yet, market-driven

research always has – by definition – the objective of serving the needs of a specific client base. The same can be said for market-driven instruction – graduate and undergraduate, as well as non-degree.

Consequently, the institution needs to define its specific service mission as it relates to activities that are outside the set of activities already categorized as being research or instruction. More specifically, if we define outreach as that portion of service that is neither a part of research nor a part of instruction, then the institution must clearly define its outreach mission and then incorporate this mission into its strategic plan.

What fraction of the institution's resources should be committed to outreach and what fraction of this outreach should be externally vs. internally funded? Should it be focused? If so, how?

The president should seek advice as institutional strategies are formulated to move our research, instruction and outreach from where they are today to where we want them to be 10 years from now? These strategies should involve evaluating existing University programs, departments and support services against well-conceived criteria that are congruent with our vision for the University.

Priorities must be established. Then, after consultation with academic governance, the president should propose the necessary changes to the Board of Trustees. Finally, in parallel with evaluating the University's organizational structure and the setting of priorities, the president should consult with academic governance on a full range of issues related to faculty and staff productivity and compensation and then implement a plan to bring about the necessary changes.

This blueprint for change represents a logical and necessary continuation of the self-examination process that began in the John DiBiaggio era with R-Cubed, CRUE, CORRAGE, MSU IDEA and SPARC.

The McPherson era promises to take this process forward so that, as we move into the 21st century, MSU is fiscally sound, accessible and responsive to the higher education needs of society.

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