



Michigan House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education Testimony of CMU President Robert O. Davies The Future of Higher Education at CMU

June 3, 2020

Chair VanSingel, Vice-Chairs Bollin and Anthony, and subcommittee members, thank you for making time for me to speak with you today about the future of Central Michigan University.

Our university community has just weathered an incredible season of change and we continue to lead in its aftermath. COVID-19 has impacted our students, faculty, staff, alumni and supporters and altered everything about the way we teach, learn, work and live. I am tremendously proud of our community's response.

Central Michigan University made an almost immediate shift to remote instruction for students and to remote work for nearly all faculty and staff. The essential workers who continued to report to campus each day made it possible for our university to remain open and operational throughout the crisis. We never stopped serving our students and fulfilling our mission.

The unasked-for experiment of COVID-19 proves that higher education can indeed be nimble, flexible and adaptable. We will continue to demonstrate our agility in the months and years ahead.

I recently announced our plan to resume on-campus activities this fall, beginning and ending our semester early. Our cross-campus Emergency Management Team has developed a strategic, phased return-to-campus plan that aligns with guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, our state and local leaders, and health experts from our own College of Medicine.

This plan incorporates social distancing in all areas of campus, including buildings such as our library and student center. It limits density in our residence halls and dining facilities and adds new protocols and practices for cleaning and disinfecting. This plan also requires us to adapt our methods of teaching and learning. Classrooms will be reconfigured to allow more physical distance; and some classes will meet in new, larger venues. We will limit the number of students enrolled in each class section, and we will continue to embrace technology. We are implementing a model called HyFlex this fall. This system enables students and faculty to make daily decisions to attend classes in person or through a synchronous online session.

In all we do, the health and safety of every member of our community are our top priorities. As we proceed into fall, we will closely examine our calendar of events and activities. Where possible, and if it is safe to do so, we will hold events such as homecoming and commencement, though they will likely be very different from previous years.

Many people have asked me if things will get back to normal this year, and the short answer is “no.” Our fall semester will look and feel different than previous semesters. Yet, the things that make Central Michigan University truly special will remain the same. The deep connections we foster between and among students, faculty and staff will continue. Our promise of a personalized path to degree attainment remains at the cornerstone of all we do. And the mission, vision and core values that drive us forward have not, and will not, change.

An important part of our mission is service to communities in Michigan and beyond. In the past weeks, you may have seen examples of this mission in action on television or popping up on social media. Students, faculty and staff from our College of Medicine have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, assisting with health screenings and patient support and working alongside health care providers. During last month’s flooding in the Midland area, another team from CMU was volunteering around the clock in the Midland High School shelter.

Students and faculty from our fashion merchandising and design program have been sewing cloth face coverings for distribution. Another faculty member has been coordinating efforts with Amish and Mennonite communities in Michigan to sew scientifically designed masks by the hundreds for distribution to elderly Michiganders and other heavily impacted populations. We are even using our MakerBot Innovation Center to create 3D-printed mask components for health care providers.

Our successes are not limited to crisis response. Our students continue to be nationally recognized for academic achievement, winning prestigious Fulbright Awards and Goldwater Scholarships. Our faculty continue their important work to protect and preserve the Great Lakes; still others are pursuing critical research in the health sciences, child and family development, and more. And we remain committed to success after graduation.

More than 3,000 students completed their CMU degrees last month and are entering the workforce or continuing their educational journeys. Hundreds more are completing virtual internships with companies and organizations around the state. In spite of enormous change and challenge, we continue to adapt to carry out our vital mission.

Last year, we began a Strategic Envisioning Process – a way to reimagine how we deliver on the promises of our mission. Instead of focusing on a typical three-to-five-year strategic plan with marginal increases, we chose to take a longer view – imagining CMU in 2030 and beyond. The needs of our students and our state are changing, and we must change with them.

While we must continue to serve our typical first-year students, mostly recent high school graduates, their numbers are dwindling due to declining birthrates. Our largest body of future students are transfer students and working adults. These individuals choose CMU because they aspire to further their educational and career journeys. Their needs and expectations are different, and we are adapting to help them achieve their goals.

We also must strengthen our relationships with private businesses and organizations, as well as our public sector partners. Many of the fastest-growing career fields are also experiencing the most rapid and frequent change. They are influenced by new technologies and our increasingly global marketplace. Now, perhaps more than ever before, employers in Michigan need leaders with both technical knowledge and professional skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork and critical thinking. We will continue to build powerful symbiotic relationships with employers that will empower us to fuel innovation, create jobs and bolster the economy at every level. We must do this to ensure the future of our state.

The negative impacts of COVID-19 are broad and deep in our region, and our students and families are struggling. We know education is a vital part of building a bright future, yet it continues to move beyond the financial reach of many families. That is why we are doing everything we can to keep an education at Central Michigan accessible and affordable for every student.

We were the first university to freeze tuition, and we have increased scholarships. We are offering deferred and flexible payment options. And we are the only university guaranteeing on-campus employment for any student who wishes to work while they pursue their academic goals.

We are doing all of this while also preparing for significant losses in revenue in the year ahead. Lower enrollment already had a substantial impact on our finances, and we do not yet know the full extent of the financial damages caused by COVID-19. We are proactively streamlining operations and have also reduced budgets university wide and we are preparing for possible changes in state support.

We are making difficult decisions and will likely make further hard choices in the months ahead; yet we remain passionately committed to our mission to serve students, communities and our state. Institutions of higher education, like Central Michigan University, have an important role to play in equipping leaders – at any and every point in their career journey – for success in the modern workplace.

We are well-positioned to partner with you to develop the highly skilled, well-educated workforce Michigan needs to improve our economic outlook and propel us forward. Thank you for supporting our vital mission. I look forward to working alongside each of you as we build a bright future for our state.