



Office of the President

## **2022 State of the University Address**

*Our Tradition is Change*

October 19, 2022

Good afternoon, everyone. It is a thrill and honor that I can stand here today and address the campus community once again in person.

Over the past 18 months, as we have dealt with the ramifications of a pandemic, we have learned a lot about ourselves as a university, as a community and as individuals. I want to thank everyone for their hard work and dedication during this difficult period.

Despite the challenges, we have emerged stronger, smarter and better prepared than ever to provide the kind of higher education experience and lifelong commitment that our students expect and deserve.

Today, I'd like to talk with you about what Central Michigan University has accomplished in the past year and, equally important, what we look to accomplish moving forward.

Before I begin my remarks, I wish to honor and recognize the Anishinaabe people, whose beautiful ancestral lands we gather upon today.

It is important to understand the long-standing history that brought us to this moment, where our university now stands on land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. We strive to understand our place in that history; and we express our deep gratitude and appreciation to the Indigenous people who have been living and working upon this land since time immemorial.

We recognize and thank the members of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, who have stewarded this land for centuries, and we offer our respect to its Tribal elders, past, present and future.

Chi Miigwech.

It is hard to believe that I am beginning my fifth year as president of this outstanding university. This time together has been exciting and challenging; frustrating and rewarding; demanding and emotional; confusing and enlightening. Above all, for the last four years, I have not wanted to be anywhere but here, in this community, with you, at Central Michigan University.

I remember vividly the feel of the introductory ice cream social, where students, faculty and staff came together to welcome my family to CMU and our community. We learned quickly what makes this university so special, and it is no cliché. It truly *is* a community.

It was not only a welcome for my wife Cindy and me, there also was the profound experience of being parents watching our daughter start her own journey as a new CMU student. It was with great joy that we witnessed how she was welcomed and supported by her faculty, staff and fellow students – even when most of them did not know who she was. Many still do not. Like *every* student, she was embraced, guided and encouraged by this university community.

Through these past years, in good times and difficult times, CMU remained a community in every sense of the word.

Many of you know about my campus “walkabouts.” These opportunities are the best way to learn about, and connect with, a university community and those who make it their academic home.

Those walkabouts let me experience this community first-hand. They led to many impromptu, casual meetings with students, faculty and staff who helped me learn our culture and provided immeasurable insights into our university.

It was immediately clear that there was, and remains, a wide-ranging excitement to learn about our history and engage in our campus traditions. It was also clear to see that this community had embraced the call to rigor, relevance and excellence across our university.

I learned about, and quickly embraced, CMU's Leadership Standards. I felt deeply moved by the university's commitment to values such as being courageous and candid...proactive and accountable — to being honest, open communicators who are **passionately** committed to students and the institution.

And, when the COVID-19 pandemic descended, those values saw us through and allowed CMU to Fire Up — to not only rise in the face of those challenges, but to continue to excel and move our university forward.

Above all, we saw a community come together and lift each other. We demonstrated and lived our values. We exhibited our tremendous commitment to students and to each other.

Throughout the pandemic, university leaders had to make decisions to protect and maintain the health, safety and quality of the university. Some of those decisions sparked candid feedback from students, faculty and staff at every level of the organization. Some agreed with the decisions, and some did not. Their feedback was honest and heartfelt.

To me, it was an important sign of a healthy culture — of a community where **every** individual feels empowered to approach leadership to share their thoughts and frustrations.

COVID thrust innovation upon us, and we responded with a Fired Up attitude and remarkable creativity. That creativity manifested itself in several forms, including the way we came together virtually when we could not come together in person.

It was evident in the ways every member of the community adapted their habits, pedagogy, work flows and more to accommodate the new reality. And it showed up in the ways we were physically distant yet socially connected. It spoke volumes to the kind of community we have here at CMU.

And now, we are together again. Over the past year, we have slowly returned to a more fully-engaged campus life. This year, it finally feels as though we have returned to something like pre-pandemic Life at Central. Students are back. Classes are in full swing. And, after a long hiatus, my walkabouts are back.

As I make my way around campus, I can feel it: There is an energy on campus. There is a buzz, a vibe that suggests CMU is in a very good place and it is just the beginning. I hope you can feel it, too.

Now, we are able to once again focus on the future of our institution and our place in the rapidly changing field of higher education. We must ask: How do we meet the needs of a world that is constantly, rapidly evolving?

We can begin by relying on our history and tradition as an institution that adapts to meet whatever confronts us.

CMU was established in 1892 to meet Michigan's need for teachers and business leaders. 130 years ago, and today, our state desperately needs qualified, compassionate and well-trained teachers. And so today, just as we have done for more than a century, we are investing in our nation's future educators. We are creating new pathways for teachers in high-need areas, like special education. And we are partnering with veteran teachers to support and engage new teachers in the classroom and beyond.

130 years ago, and still today, there are needs for competent, ethical business leaders. Over the years, we have added programs to provide those leaders in areas ranging from accounting to business information systems and from professional sales to logistics.

In the years since our founding, we have added, expanded and strengthened programs based on the needs of our students, communities and partners — all with a commitment to rigor, relevance and excellence.

For example, more than a decade ago when our state experienced a critical shortage of health care professionals, we established the Central Michigan University College of Medicine to meet the need of rural and underserved communities. Health care needs have accelerated and grown, and so today, we are expanding our offerings in health professions programs, including physician assistant, physical therapy and nursing.

To keep up with rapidly changing technology, we strengthened our business information systems programs, and added new cybersecurity and data science programs, among others. To meet the demands of our students, communities and employer partners, we created programs in neuroscience, environmental

engineering, and entrepreneurship. We expanded partnerships to strengthen programs such as Fashion Merchandising and Design, and we are in the process of launching an innovative drone program that will have applications in every college.

In all we do, we remain grounded in the vital liberal arts programs that develop leadership, communication, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. Now, more than ever, that broad-based educational foundation is needed for personal and professional success.

With the speed, and degree, of change in nearly every field of work, the ability to think broadly, to see and analyze far-reaching trends, and to understand the interconnectivity of issues is essential. We must cultivate minds that can see multiple options and pathways, instead of simple “yes or no” ...“either/or” solutions. A foundation in the liberal arts is essential to understanding that most solutions are based on the multiplicity of ideas.

We have proven that as student and community needs change, so do we. We have shown that we are flexible and adaptable — and proud of it. We demonstrate, year after year, that we are leaders and team builders who are proactive and accountable. And, in all we do, we remain focused on making sure students know they are welcome and a vital part of our university.

This year, we celebrated our 130th anniversary as an institution committed to meeting the needs of the Great Lakes Bay Area and surrounding communities.

It has been a dynamic year for CMU, full of reasons to celebrate and take pride.

Noticeably, we have turned around a decade-plus enrollment decline. This did not occur by accident nor by chance. This was accomplished through focused implementation of strategies and investments of resources and time. It required the dedication of a revamped admissions team, a committed marketing and communications team, and the participation of many faculty and staff members serving as important ambassadors for our university community.

We also have revitalized our leadership team with the addition of Provost Nancy Mathews and Vice President for Student Affairs Renee’ Watson. Both have added new energy and enthusiasm to our campus as they embrace our core values and put them into action. We are also thankful for the work of Interim Vice President

for Advancement Jennifer Cotter and Interim Vice President for Finance and Administrative Services Mary Moran Hill, who provide exemplary leadership in these critical areas.

We have lived up to our promise for rigor, relevance and excellence, with record-setting numbers in fundraising and funding for grants and research.

For the fourth year in a row, we ranked fourth among state public universities in the latest US News & World Report survey, with special recognition for excellence in programs like engineering and computer science. We are hosting accrediting teams to review our outstanding programs, and we are confident in their overall rigor and quality. We expect positive results.

In terms of our place as a research institution, we are determined to be the best R2 university.

We will embrace the teacher-scholar model, encouraging research, creative endeavors and scholarly activity. We recognize the benefit this model brings to classroom teaching and learning and especially to our students. It is important to understand that this research, with real-world applications, improves lives and communities here in Michigan and beyond. I applaud our faculty for engaging students in this important work.

While we are proud and excited about what we have accomplished in the last year, **we are not complacent**. There is always more work to do and always improvements to be made in the ever-changing landscape of higher education.

Many say that we are at a watershed moment — that we are in an era that will forever change the trajectory of higher education.

In recent years, public opinion regarding higher education has changed several times. At present, the debate centers on value and who benefits. Is it a public good or a private benefit? Is it worth investment by the state, or should it be confined to those who make the personal investment?

In addition, every day we see news articles addressing the rising cost of higher education, which moves degree attainment further out of reach for many students. As our nation discusses student loan forgiveness and expanding Pell

Grants, we, too, must ask what more we can do to remain accessible and affordable for all learners while still providing high quality programs.

Demographic shifts also continue. That includes the decline in the overall number of traditional college students, the racial and ethnic makeup of the student body, and the increased number of nontraditional students. These shifts present tremendous opportunities, and we must be ready to meet them.

Student expectations and demands have increased. They need — and deserve — greater flexibility and choice as they pursue their educational goals. And now, in addition to competing with other public universities in Michigan, we also are competing with community colleges and certificate-granting organizations outside of the traditional higher education field. We must position our programs to meet student needs to remain an attractive option in an ever-more crowded field of competitors.

And we know we can. **Our tradition is change:** We have done this for 130 years and we will do it for hundreds more.

This year, and in the years ahead, that change will include flipping the narrative on degree attainment. We must embrace the view that universities do not **give** degrees, students **earn** them. We provide the pathway for them to do so.

We know that students and their curiosity drive their educational journey, and it is our role to provide the resources to empower their progress in their personal and professional lives. We believe that we are partners in a lifelong journey – one that begins before students arrive at CMU and one that continues long after commencement. Together, we are changing the conversation about what a college degree can and should provide.

Through it all, our mission is to ensure the success of our students, no matter where they come from, no matter where they are in their life journey, and no matter what their needs may be when they come to CMU. Our goal is to increase and equalize graduation rates among our student body, and to do so, we must meet their changing needs.

We can help them rethink what it means to be a student not only “at” CMU but “of” CMU, whether they are traditional students, transfer students, international students or lifelong learners. Consider this shift in thinking: Currently, we foster a

sense of pride of **ownership** when a student earns their degree. Going forward, we need to extend that to create a sense of **authorship** as well.

We must acknowledge that, through their relationships and involvements at CMU, our students have created their own unique experiences. They have been the authors of their degree “story” which will guide their life journeys long after their careers begin.

This sense of authorship should belong to our students whether they attend classes on campus or from a distance. Our aim must be to serve and support every CMU Chippewa according to their individual needs.

And, as we carry out this educational mission, we will also rethink CMU’s role in the community. We must show that we exist for our students and to benefit our community, our state and the world around us. We are a driver of economic growth and development in our region. We are one of our area’s largest employers, and we are graduating leaders who will shape the future of our surrounding communities.

We are investing in the future of our economy, equipping and empowering small business leaders — realizing that some may not major in nor come from backgrounds in business. This includes support for entrepreneurship in the form of the Central Michigan University Research Corporation and the New Venture Challenge. It is our responsibility to help entrepreneurs build on their passions and develop skills and support structures to launch new businesses in the area and keep them here.

We are also helping Michigan prepare for the jobs of the future. The fastest growing and largest career fields increasingly require college degrees. To help Michigan attract and keep new businesses, we must invest in the workforce that will draw them here. We will continue to advocate for the importance of higher education and the immense value CMU brings to our state and our region.

Part of CMU’s history involves innovation and being a leader in distance and online learning. This, too, is evolving to meet current needs of students and communities. Through our new unit, Innovation and Online, we are creating lifelong and alternative learning opportunities for individuals that remove barriers and provide flexible options. CMU will continually engage with learners to provide opportunities to learn new skills and remain abreast of the latest advances.



CMU also will continue to be a catalyst for cultural engagement. Each year, we provide a doorway for students and our surrounding neighbors to experience the world through new perspectives. We will continue to host speakers, events and activities to engage and educate audiences beyond the borders of our campus to expand knowledge, build new bridges of understanding, and foster a sense of inclusivity and belonging.

This will include additional work with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe on new opportunities for educational programs, cultural engagement and other partnerships.

Central Michigan University understands and embraces its role in the greater world, and we are taking steps to become even more involved and engaged as it rapidly changes. This means inspiring civic engagement and preparing students to be responsible citizens in a global society.

I applaud groups such as Central Votes, the Central Voter Coalition and the Mary Ellen Brandell Volunteer Center for their work to educate and engage student voters. I admire the noble efforts of Dr. Norma Bailey and Dr. Jodi Brookins-Fisher, who regularly meet with me to keep me apprised of, and to advocate for, this critical work. As a result, CMU is becoming a national leader: Over the past two years, student voter participation has surged, surpassing the national average.

As we promote civic engagement, we also are encouraging the open, respectful exchange of ideas. One example is the recent creation of the Central Michigan Civil Discourse Club, formed by economics Professor Jason Taylor and student Owen Westbrook. It is an opportunity for students from the entire range of the political spectrum to talk and engage and, just maybe, understand each other.

This important dialogue also is fostered in programs such as Soup and Substance, the Critical Engagements series, Conversations that Matter, and the Institute for Transformative Dialogue. These are all vital to the conversations we can and must have to create an atmosphere of inclusion.

We will strive to foster opportunities for intense, yet civil, discussion on the issues facing our communities, nation, and world. And, as we do so, perhaps we will

begin to see that our differences do not separate us, but in fact unite us in our efforts to create positive change.

One of the next important steps moving forward as a university is the creation of a new Strategic Plan. Our current plan, Advancing Excellence, expires this year. It has served us well as we made necessary gains and improvements in our student retention and graduation rates. It led us to increase our scholarly and creative outputs, and helped us forge new and beneficial community partnerships. And now, as we navigate significant external forces and competitors, we must be deliberate, intentional and focused with our next strategic plan.

We are not starting from scratch. Three years ago, we began a Strategic Envisioning Process that challenged us to think from the perspective of our stakeholders: our students, the businesses who employ our graduates, community members who rely on our services, the citizens of Michigan who support us, and many others. We will build upon what we learned in that process as we formulate a new strategic plan.

We are at a critical time in our 130 year history — the challenges are steeper and expectations have never been higher. It is essential that we do this **now** and that we do this **well**. We must clearly define what differentiates CMU from our peers and the other 5,000 plus universities and colleges nationwide.

It starts with our vision and mission statements. I challenge you to consider our current statements and ask: Do these truly distinguish CMU? Do they exemplify our unique and powerful traits? Do they say, “this is CMU” to you?

I have previously asked those questions of many individuals. Nearly every one said no. And I agree.

It is time to identify and proudly showcase what we offer that is unique and adds immense value to our students. It is time to demonstrate the impact of our research and creative endeavors, and to spotlight the positive outcomes of our partnerships with the communities we serve.

Together, we will reimagine and rewrite these important guiding statements. They will provide clarity of purpose and set an aspirational tone for our strategic planning work. The development of this new plan will be an inclusive process and engage our entire community.

This is not a box-checking exercise to simply increase key data points by a certain percentile. Instead this must be a thoughtful discussion of how we will make a significant and positive difference in the lives of our students; how our programs will improve our communities; and how we will advance knowledge and its impact on the world.

It needs to be ambitious and stretch us in our efforts. It will force us to be creative and to be bold. And, in the end, it will move us forward and make us continually proud to be part of Central Michigan University.

Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

As we embark on the next 130 years of CMU, our new strategic plan will set the path for our efforts to change the world in a positive way. To spark that change, we are investing in our university and in our learners on a financial, philosophical and academic level. We will remain committed to equity and equality in education. We believe in lifting up EVERY individual and empowering their true potential.

For the past 130 years, we have embraced change, rising to the challenges of our times. We provide the tools, the dedication and the support necessary for students and communities to change the world in ways large and small.

We have been, and still are, creating change — meaningful change — to serve students and communities. I think it is clear to say, that at CMU, our tradition *is* change.

Many difficult questions await us in the future, and CMU is ready, willing and Fired Up to provide answers. We are ready to embrace and to lead that change.

Thank you for joining me here today. I invite you to join me in Powers Ballroom for a reception and to continue the discussion.