



Office of the President

2023 State of the University Address

Action to Make an Impact

November 16, 2023

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining me to talk about what Central Michigan University has accomplished in the last year, and the direction we are heading.

Your participation, here in person or watching the live stream, demonstrates your passion for our institution – and your commitment to it – as we take on some very big goals.

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 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.

We are here to talk about the state of the university... of our university. And there are plenty of exciting things to discuss and to think about.

But we cannot talk about CMU in a vacuum. First, we need to talk about the state of universities... the state of higher education in this country.

We have seen the headlines about the growing belief that a college degree is not worth the time and money required to earn one. We have heard that

Americans are losing trust in the institutions of higher education. Institutions that – for decades – were unquestionably seen as the best way to achieve higher economic status, to grow intellectually and to improve social mobility.

A recent Gallup poll found only 36 percent of Americans have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education. That’s down from 57 percent in 2015 — a drop of more than 20 points in just eight years.

They question the cost, the quality and the transparency of universities. They question the idea that universities are a public good.

Why is this happening?

Many issues combined to erode confidence in the value of higher education. The rising cost to attend college and higher student debt, the growing disconnect between education and job prospects, the perceived inability of universities to change quickly, and the perception that universities are not aligned with the values of society.

And we have seen the result. In fact, Michigan saw the fourth largest drop in college enrollment in the nation since 2010 according to The National Center for Education Statistics.

Furthermore, we are expected to be hit hard by the looming enrollment cliff as a result of a dramatic drop in the traditional college-age population starting a few years from now. This threat to college enrollment is directly connected to a drop in U.S. and Michigan birthrates.

It has been difficult for us. It has been catastrophic elsewhere. Other universities responded with major cuts to academic programs, faculty layoffs, and in the most extreme cases, a decision to close their doors.

Let’s take a breath here. I am not here to depress you or scare you away. There is good news.

I am here to tell you the reality: that a college education is as valuable as ever. Valuable to individuals, valuable to our communities and valuable to our society.

Higher education forms a stepping stone – not a barrier – for individuals. Someone with a bachelor’s degree will earn 84% more than a person with just a high school diploma. That is called the college wage premium. Economists expect demand for college graduates to keep rising, which means

the college wage premium is likely to increase.

More than 75% of all Michigan jobs will soon require at least some education beyond high school. Closing the skills gap that challenges the success of businesses and our state's prosperity has become a major priority in Michigan. The state has implemented the 60 by 30 goal, putting resources behind the effort to have at least 60% of our workforce with a degree or certificate by 2030.

As a member of the Michigan Workforce Development Board and the Middle Michigan Development Corporation and working with key business and civic leaders from across the state, I see and hear firsthand how they view higher education as a true economic engine.

They view our universities as critical to the growth of the state economically and socially. At the same time, they know our model must change.

We can no longer just serve traditional aged and college-prepared individuals. And we cannot rely only on customary degree programs. We need to provide life-long learning opportunities. We need to serve adult-learners. We need to be flexible in our offerings by time and by length. We need to provide learning opportunities that meet the immediate needs of skilled and trained individuals. These individuals may already have a degree. Therefore, we must provide relevant and critical new knowledge.

We know those with a college degree are not only well-trained and highly employable... they also are more civically minded. Public universities are a necessity for a well-functioning democracy. A strong democracy is associated with social mobility, civic engagement and a diverse society – all pillars of our higher education system.

87 percent of those who hold a bachelor's degree voted in the most recent federal election. That number goes up with more education.

92 percent of those with a graduate degree said they voted. That is significantly higher than voting rates among those with no post-secondary education.

Those with a college degree are more likely to report that they are in good health, volunteer, give to charity and try to minimize harm to the environment. They also live longer.

We have to overcome the perception that earning a degree is not worth it, because *the perception is not the reality*. The facts prove it. However, this is

the current narrative, and we must counter it. We have to meet the challenge of declining faith in what we do, because we know that what we do is valuable to our students and to our communities.

To accomplish this, CMU needed a new strategic plan. And now – after more than a year of hard work and a tremendous amount of input – we have one.

We needed a plan that was not just a remake, or an update, of previous plans. We could not have a plan similar to other universities. We needed to differentiate ourselves, to set ourselves apart. We needed to think on a transformational level, not a transactional one. We did not focus on simple metrics; rather we thought about what our stakeholders needed and valued... we asked them and we listened to them.

This effort makes us focus on outcomes that create value. It allows us to meet the enrollment cliff head-on. It allows us to prove our value in meeting the needs of society. It provides us with a way to compete in an intensely competitive market.

We have outstanding ideas in our strategic plan... now we will take action. Action that will make an impact.

Author Leon Brown said, “Never underestimate the valuable and important difference you make in every life you touch. For the impact you make today has a powerful rippling effect on every tomorrow.”

When we work to realize the potential of our plan, we will create a tremendous rippling effect.

It all starts with our new mission statement: Central Michigan University is defined by the success of our students and alumni, and by our collective impact with the communities we serve.

This defines who we are, and why we do what we do. Its focus is our positive impact on the lives of our students and graduates, and the wider community.

Our new vision statement looks forward at what we aspire to be, and has an even wider scope: Central Michigan University will be nationally known for preparing innovators, learners, and leaders who positively impact their local and global communities.

Our vision focuses on our commitment to meet the needs and interests of the communities we serve.

How do we live that mission, and realize that vision? By taking action on our priorities. These priorities offer our guide to success.

First, we will inspire student and scholarly success. We need to prepare bold leaders and learners who innovate and adapt in a rapidly changing world. We want to ensure CMU students receive an education that not only imparts knowledge, but also equips them with the skills, mindset and motivation to succeed, lead and thrive.

This means we ensure our students have an immersive learning experience while they are with us. It also means we welcome the world to learn at CMU. International perspectives expand our students' horizons – and international graduates expand the global presence of CMU.

Inspiring scholarly success means we support the important work of our faculty and invest in research and creative endeavors that address society's challenges. Right now, we have research and projects addressing tornado risks, tuberculosis, electric vehicle batteries, suicide prevention, disease detection, epilepsy, and the health and ecology of our Great Lakes. And this is just a sample of the work we are doing to contribute to progress on critical issues.

Grants and contracts for research at CMU are on the rise, with a record number secured in the last year, with record breaking funding as well. We are climbing the ranks of scholarly output and grant funding, raising the reputation of our university and providing exceptional learning experiences for students.

Our second priority is to engage communities. We need to cultivate and enrich our partnerships with university stakeholders. This ensures a lasting impact in the communities we serve.

We know that many communities within our state lack important resources. These include but certainly are not limited to:

- Affordable, accessible health care
- Teachers
- Mental health professionals and counselors
- Access to nutritious food
- Affordable housing
- And more

We can leverage the knowledge, skills, expertise and passion of our university community to help to address these needs.

In our College of Medicine and our College of Health Professions, our students and faculty are reaching into communities in need to deliver educational programming and clinical services. That includes the recent addition of the Rural Health Equity Institute headquartered right here in Mt. Pleasant.

In our College of Education and Human Services, we are collaborating with community colleges and other organizations to create pathway programs for future teachers and school counselors.

And programs university-wide and in every academic college are preparing students to become leaders in fields ranging from nutrition and dietetics to social justice and political science.

We also will strengthen our connection with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. We will seek additional partnerships that provide our university community the opportunity to foster cultural understanding.

When we say we are engaging communities, we mean that we are championing the interests of the people in those areas. Doing so deeply benefits our communities and our students.

Our third priority is to enhance organizational culture. We need to raise our national profile as a vibrant and nurturing university community. This will ensure all members feel valued, empowered to thrive, and experience a strong sense of belonging.

We want to be a university that is held up as a model for having an inclusive campus. We will encourage learning opportunities that facilitate courageous conversations around polarizing topics, without demoralization. This requires the deep thinking and reasoning skills that come from a robust liberal arts education.

Faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences are engaging students in these critical conversations as early as their first year on campus. They foster classroom environments that challenge students to deeply explore the most pressing issues of our time. They encourage the respectful exchange of ideas and perspectives, inviting students to ask questions of others and, importantly, of themselves.

We aspire to make our campus a marketplace of ideas where students, faculty and staff have access to all perspectives on controversial issues, can think critically about them, and then decide for themselves where they stand.

Enhancing our culture improves the internal dynamic and well-being of the university and has far-reaching benefits. It can attract and retain talent, drive innovation, foster community engagement, and promote inclusivity... all of which contribute to CMU's reputation and ultimately to our success.

Our fourth and final priority is to ensure institutional sustainability. We must embrace sustainable campus operations that ensure wise stewardship of our resources.

Yes, this means we will be environmentally friendly by doing things like continuing our investment in the efficient use of energy, reducing waste and ensuring sustainable development.

It also means we will do things that sustain our institution:

- Invest in and rebalance our educational offerings
- Look for new and diversified revenue streams
- And adopt efficient business practices

This is a vital priority for CMU because it aligns with ethical and environmental principles, improves financial stability, attracts students and provides valuable educational opportunities.

We can simultaneously set a good example and position ourselves for greater relevance in a changing world.

This plan is a powerful tool in setting the priorities, objectives and goals that ensure we stay on course to become a tremendous positive force for people and communities.

The focus of this plan is IMPACT — the impact we have on our students, our alumni and the greater community. And the good news is: We are already doing much of this work.

The state of the university is strong, and taking bold action on this plan will make us even stronger.

Look no further than enrollment. It is a challenge that CMU has been facing head-on, and I am happy to tell you that our deliberate efforts in marketing

and recruiting – and our focus on the quality of our academic programs – are clearly paying off.

Again this fall, we increased new undergraduate and graduate enrollment.

We also have our largest international enrollment in a decade, with students joining us from 70 countries. This benefits us in two ways. Having a robust international student population provides a much richer educational experience for everyone, and it helps us eclipse the enrollment cliff by expanding our market.

We are on a course for growth. In an ever-crowded field of competitors, and in the era of declining public support for higher education that I discussed earlier, we are reaching more potential students – and more are deciding to attend CMU. We saw a 23 percent year-over-year increase in the number of students applying to CMU this fall.

Unlike some other public universities in Michigan, CMU is not dropping its academic requirements to boost enrollment. That strategy often leads to lower retention and graduation rates.

At CMU, the retention rate of first-time students is increasing year over year – and our strategic plan aims to bolster that retention rate even more.

We have established that more people are questioning the value of a college degree. However, when students join our community, they find their learning journey and their degree as valuable as ever. The success of students and alumni is the core of our mission statement. It is what makes a CMU degree so valuable.

In the last year, more CMU graduates reported finding employment within six months than those from nearly every other public university in Michigan. Those successful outcomes are a result of our focus on providing students with hands-on experiences that equip them with the real-world skills and knowledge that employers need.

Our alumni tell us this, over and over again. In fact, two weeks ago I heard about it at the CMU Media Hall of Fame induction celebration.

Brett Holey, member of the class of 1982, is the senior director at NBC News. He says he was at CMU with a group of students who challenged themselves and each other. He was supported by faculty who imposed academic rigor while providing valuable practical experience. Brett says that experience

continues to bear fruit in the professional arena for him and his classmates.

THIS is our tradition... our legacy... and it is our future.

My wife Cindy is here today. As the parents of a recent graduate, we can tell you CMU is providing an education and experiences that are as relevant as ever. We watched as our daughter was challenged by our faculty, supported by her fellow classmates, and is now well-prepared for the next journey in her life.

I can proudly say we are equipping graduates with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed while instilling a fired-up attitude motivating them to achieve great things.

Emboldened by our new strategic plan, we are making progress at CMU to overcome the challenges presented by the current state of higher education in America.

I am proud of the work we have done together and continue to do. Because of you, an education at CMU is as valuable as ever. Let's make it even more valuable, together.

We have a plan to strengthen our university. Now is the time for action. We are ready to take action to make an impact on the lives of students, alumni, entire communities... and the world.

Thank you. And as always, FIRE UP CHIPS!