



## **Enrollment: Now and in the future**

February 8, 2019

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Let me first apologize for a longer than normal communication. However, given the magnitude of our enrollment challenges and their impact on our university and community, I believe a deep sharing of thoughts, ideas and observations is essential. This is part of my commitment to sharing pertinent information and furthering my philosophy that a university best operates with constant conversations on key items.

My intent is to present ideas and opportunities by embracing the notion that we must change and adapt. Furthermore, I am asking each of you to be an active part of the solution.

Our fall 2018 enrollment report shows a 7 percent decline in total enrollment year over year. While this was not unexpected, our trend line and trajectory are important to understand. We cannot shy away from the fact that we have seen a 10-year decline of nearly 21 percent. Moreover, the trajectory steepened the last five years: Our decline was 5.2 percent from 2009-2014. It was nearly 18 percent from 2014-2018.

The first-year class — or first-time-in-any-college students (FTIACs) — is a leading component of total enrollment. An increase or decrease in the first-year class impacts total enrollment for four to five years. This year, we had 2,732 first-time students, nearly 1,000 less than 10 years ago. Including transfer students, total new students declined by 25.6 percent the past 10 years, from 5,094 to 3,788. Mirroring total enrollment, the trajectory of these declines has steepened in the last five years.

Multiple factors have caused declining enrollments at many universities. High school populations are shrinking and competition for students is increasing. Transfer students are down because community college enrollment has declined. At the same time, the cost of attendance and outcomes such as graduation and employment rates are under a political and social microscope. Parents and students across the nation are questioning their investment in a degree.

These factors are real. They are big. They are not going away.

Some universities have fared better than others and have grown by adapting and changing strategies. Some have maintained ground and are comfortable with the status quo. Others, like CMU, have experienced decreased enrollments. These are facts we must recognize.

## **The choice is ours.**

The decision before us is whether we allow these trends to determine our future, using them as excuses. We have lost market share in Michigan by more than 3 percentage points, especially in metro Detroit and the Grand Rapids area. Do we accept that? Or will we shape our future by identifying solutions and pursuing opportunities with bold, smart strategies?

I choose the second alternative, and I'm confident you do, as well.

To create our pathway, we must: outperform competitors; grow market share; expand into new and emerging markets; and bolster our competitive advantages through programs, services and student experiences that set us apart.

We must be aggressive immediately in:

- Recapturing lost market share, especially in Detroit and Grand Rapids.
- Growing our reach to other states, including Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin, while building on recent progress in Illinois.
- Developing a comprehensive strategy to attract more international students.
- Attracting adult learners, the largest growing market, through a robust online and satellite location strategic agenda.

## **Enrollment is the reflection of the university.**

We must begin by recognizing that enrollment is the job not just of the admissions team but of all of us. Enrollment is generated not only through websites, email, letters and advertisements.

Enrollment is the reflection of the university: how the public perceives our strengths, weaknesses and the value we add to students' lives through academic and co-curricular programs. It reflects how the public distinguishes us from competing universities.

Enrollment requires that we have a common understanding of our university, its potential, direction and vision. It requires that each of us upholds, advances, and proudly and often communicates the value of Central Michigan University.

I have been asked who we are and what our vision is. While the answer is not simple, let me share some insights based on conversations with many of you and numerous shareholders. Most of these come from your responses to the same questions: "Who do you think we are? What do you think our vision is?"

These responses — your responses — are exciting and make me very optimistic that we have many strengths on which to build and will succeed in seizing the opportunities before us.

This is who you told me we are:

- We are a leading, national university.
- We are among 5 percent of U.S. universities in the top two Carnegie research classifications.

- We have nationally recognized programs in health care, business, STEM, education, entrepreneurship, journalism, fashion merchandising and design, broadcasting, integrative public relations, and music, just to name a few.
- We are known for preparing students to lead fulfilling careers and lives — not just to find their first jobs. With individualized support, we help them develop subject matter expertise and the essential skills of communication, teamwork and problem-solving. There's a reason 18,000 employers recruit our students.
- Our students are recognized for valuing community engagement, service and leadership.
- Our externally funded research has exceeded \$15 million each of the last two years.
- Our endowment has surpassed \$130 million, and more than \$20 million was donated each of the past two years.
- We are one of fewer than 150 universities with an accredited medical school.
- We are among fewer than 1 percent of U.S. universities with AACSB International accreditation for both our College of Business Administration and our accounting program.

Students, alumni, faculty, staff, and corporate and civic partners share an ever-present passion for Central Michigan University — to a degree not often seen in academe. Yes, our 200-plus academic programs have proven rigor, relevance and excellence. Yes, we transform lives and prepare students to be leaders, regardless of job title. And yes, we are a community with a deep sense of commitment to each other.

Our shared vision is not to be the biggest university, but to be the best university for our students and the communities we serve, recognized for our:

- Promise of student success.
- Exceptional value, as evidenced by the careers of our graduates.
- Experiential and active learning opportunities that make students career-, not just job-ready.
- Small classes and personal attention from faculty and staff.
- Intersections among learning, teaching and research.
- Success in building character, lifelong intellectual curiosity and technical expertise in our students through our commitment to the liberal arts, STEM, health, business and professional programs.
- Commitment to helping students embrace and excel in a diverse and inclusive world.
- Strong sense of community — one that shuns transactional relationships and instead inspires transformational change in our students and each other.

At CMU, we take pride in a vision that builds on a robust, growing research agenda and our role as an undergraduate teaching university. We value graduate and undergraduate programs. We deliver technical and professional programs and a strong foundation in the liberal arts. We provide leadership skills and technical skills. We embrace strong campus programs and online and educational offerings beyond Mount Pleasant. We value students from Michigan and the world.

## **Knowledge for the right number of students.**

That vision and those intersections differentiate us. They embody the One CMU to which we must commit. We are one university serving many audiences, creating, disseminating and applying knowledge together.

As we move forward, we must uphold excellence. We will not sacrifice quality in pursuit of a quick fix nor lower our academic standards to attract more students. Similarly, we cannot accept mediocrity and never want to compete as a commodity where the only differentiator is price. We will expand high quality among our educational offerings. We must continually analyze our efforts and remain relevant to students, employers and our communities. We must be innovative and adaptable, and we must embrace new paradigms.

Many of you have asked what our "right size" is. Before I answer that, let me say up front: Recovery from a 10-year, escalating decline will not happen overnight. Recruitment of FTIACS starts 18 months or more before their first semester, and current data shows this fall's class may decline yet again.

Ultimately, however, we should focus our actions on returning to a student population of 22,000 to 25,000. This would include 5,000 to 6,000 graduate students and 18,000 to 20,000 undergraduates. We should increase the number of countries represented (now 21) and include students from all 50 states (currently missing Louisiana, Rhode Island and Nevada). We should continue to increase diversity, as we have done so well over the past decade, and achieve a sustainable strategy for our online programs and satellite centers.

To reach those levels, we should have:

- A class of 3,500 freshmen and 1,500 transfer students.
- A first-to-second-year retention rate above 80 percent.
- 6,500 adults and students enrolled in our online programs and at satellite locations.

## **How can each of us assist?**

Our enrollment recovery will require engagement and diligence from each of us. Recruitment, just like academic excellence, is a never-ending process.

From my analysis, much of our problem has been in "closing the deal" with prospective students. The 2018 National Center for Education Statistics IPEDS report shows we receive more applications than our peers. We also receive ACT/SAT test scores from more students. Our struggle — our competitive gap — is in converting applicants to enrollments, which we do at a lower rate than our peers.

Following are actions we will pursue, including opportunities for each of us to support.

- We must concentrate on next year's FTIAC and transfer class.
  - We must attract more applications and improve our yield rate through "high touch" communication.
  - The transfer season is underway; we must be aggressive and visible.
- We must be more personal in our recruiting and admissions processes.
  - We should begin communications as early as the first year of high school.
  - We should use social media and other electronic communication to increase the frequency and customization of messages. We launched text messaging in November to let students know quickly when items such as transcripts are missing and to tell them they are admitted within a couple of days of receiving completed applications.

- Admissions will expand administrator, faculty and staff connection with prospective students. I, for example, have communicated with hundreds of students and families this fall.
- We must recapture Michigan, especially in metro Detroit, which represents a third of our enrollment, and the Grand Rapids area.
- We will invigorate activities in our Detroit office, with strategies and accountability for maximizing its potential.
- We must deploy expanded initiatives beyond Michigan and in international markets, growing out-of-state students from 20 percent to about 30 percent of our enrollment.
- We must launch a thorough review of our recruitment processes and systems and address deficiencies immediately.
- We must fortify our messaging to potential students and families.
  - We must be guided by research regarding factors students and families use in selecting a university. These include:
    - Career and professional prospects
    - Academic quality
    - Campus atmosphere
    - Student engagement, civic activities and leadership
    - Affordability
  - These messages will drive marketing and advertising decisions.
  - In talking with potential students and parents, all of us can emphasize these points based on our own experiences and what we read in CMU News stories and via CMU's official social media.
  - We will continue to analyze tuition, fees and scholarship programs to ensure competitiveness. We should not be the cheapest, nor the most expensive.
- We must continue to evolve academically.
  - A balance of STEM, health care, business and the liberal arts is essential. Employers want subject-matter expertise and students with career-related experiences. They value those who can think critically, communicate, work in teams and find solutions. They seek the leadership abilities of CMU students.
  - We need to foster academic innovation and expand excellence. This means increasing our support of programs that differentiate us, position us as leaders, and address student and employer demand.
  - We must expand high-quality, high-demand online offerings. An enormous market exists online, especially among adults.
  - We must improve student advising through people, technology and processes.
- We will make sustainable gains if we each engage in representing CMU.
  - Every interaction with a student or potential student is a moment to expand our brand. Our actions can and do impact enrollment.
  - Answer calls and emails from prospective students. Say hello, smile and hold doors. Ask visitors if they need help; pause to chat about CMU.
  - Share CMU news, videos and photos via social media. Wear maroon and gold. Brag about our programs, our hands-on approach, student research opportunities, career-related experiences and personalized support.

I appreciate the efforts of the deans who are working in their colleges and partnering with their colleagues to engage with potential students and to increase retention and progression of current students. I appreciate the Faculty Association president's request of professors to assist us in communicating with potential students. I also appreciate the steering committee of university leaders that is meeting to identify and advance strategies, ideas and action steps.

## **Boldness is not only possible, it's essential.**

This is an important conversation for all of us. I am not one to shy away from discussing or tackling challenges, and I thank you for your attention to this issue.

This letter may contain information or statements to which you have a countering view. That is good and to be expected. We must have radical candor in order to change our enrollment trajectory. We must challenge our assumptions and practices. We must pursue new strategies, knowing that we cannot expect different results if we continue to do the same things.

We cannot escape the impact of our enrollment trajectory on our financial resources, and we will need to make difficult, thoughtful, strategic decisions. We cannot be all things to all people and will need to focus utilization of our resources. I pledge to use the hallmarks of shared governance and make decisions in the best interest of our students and university community.

Guided by our Leadership Standards, we will operate as a team and be thoughtful, open communicators. We will be service-oriented, proactive, responsible and accountable. We will be courageous and effective.

Enrollment recovery will happen with an unwavering focus on students and boundless passion for CMU. Together, we can and must make Central Michigan University better than ever.

Thank you for your engagement,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Bob Davies', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bob Davies, Ph.D.  
President  
Central Michigan University