

Thursday, November 5, 2009

OU trustees encouraged by strong university leadership in difficult times

With concerns about the state of the economy and negative impacts it is having on academic opportunities for students, members of the Oakland University Board of Trustees on Wednesday expressed appreciation for sound leadership that OU President Gary Russi and his administrative cabinet have demonstrated.

Board members pointed to a solid track record of protecting the university's academic core – a slate of more than 250 undergraduate and graduate programs. Through prudent financial management, administrators also have avoided implementing layoffs and furloughs, and have gone to great lengths to keep a high-quality college education accessible to a broad base of students. In fact, Oakland saw an overall student enrollment increase of 4.1 percent this fall and had the largest increase in enrollment of first-time college students among Michigan's 15 state universities.

"Here in Michigan and across the country we've seen a lot of very discouraging stories about how this recession has forced universities to cut back, and in ways that have really hurt students," said Board of Trustees Chair Jackie Long. "For as long as I can remember, President Russi has made it a top priority to protect our core academic mission. We're continuing to do this despite the challenges, and for that, I give President Russi a lot of credit."

Board of Trustees Vice Chair Henry Baskin elaborated.

"I think the president and the vice presidents have done a phenomenal job of maintaining the quality of this university," he said. "They've managed to take the limited resources we have and protect the integrity of this university by continuing to offer exceptional quality at a competitive price."

The state's economic climate has been far from ideal to support expansion of the university's mission, but Oakland has moved forward with a number of crucial initiatives nonetheless. Administrators are working to open the state's first new medical school in decades; build a 160,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Human Health Building; expand academic programs both on its main campus and on the newly established satellite campus in Macomb; and garner growing support for scientific research likely to benefit Michigan's economy and the quality of life in the state and beyond.

Board of Trustees Finance Committee Chair Michael Kramer said the success of these initiatives indicates that the administration has performed beyond expectations.

"Oakland University has seen tremendous growth for more than a decade, and it has been growth across the board rather than in one particular program or initiative," he explained. "That this growth continues in the face of our troubling financial situation is nothing short of remarkable."

Lingering effects of the recession are expected to present additional and perhaps even more daunting financial challenges. Conscious that the most difficult times may yet be ahead, Board of Trustees members voiced confidence that Russi and his team will continue to minimize adverse effects to the greatest extent possible.

"Dr. Russi and his cabinet have already demonstrated extraordinary leadership in an economic climate that has not been this bleak since the Great Depression," said former Board of Trustees Chair Dennis Pawley. "We have every reason to believe they will successfully guide the university through whatever challenges lie ahead."

Russi, who began his tenure as Oakland University president in 1996, is presently under contract to serve through 2014.

SUMMARY

With concerns about negative impacts the economy is having on academic opportunities for students, trustees appreciate that the university's academic core has been protected.

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