



Tuesday, February 24, 2004

President Russi addresses state senators

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

Oakland University President Gary Russi addressed members of the Michigan Senate Higher Education Subcommittee about the impact of recent reductions in state appropriations to higher education when OU hosted the first of four fiscal year 2004-05 budget hearings. The public hearing was held Feb. 20 in the Oakland Center Banquet Rooms.

In addition to Russi's address, members of the **Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan**, and the presidents of Wayne State, Western Michigan and the University of Michigan-Dearborn also delivered remarks. Senators who attended included OU alumna Deborah Cherry (D-Burton), Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood) and committee chair Mike Goschka (R-Brant).

In his address, Russi stressed that, though the recent cuts in state appropriations have impacted Oakland University and created challenges for Michigan's public universities, OU will continue to partner with the state to resolve the budget crisis.

"Our ultimate goal and desire is to leave a lasting legacy that will have positive implications for the state and its residents today and well into the future," Russi said. "I realize that the ongoing state budget crisis and term limits present enormous challenges and fewer opportunities. Even so, I believe university presidents and chancellors are willing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you, your legislative colleagues and the governor to do our best to assess and address long-term solutions as they relate to higher education and its impact on the state's overall quality of life."

Representative of this partnership, Russi cited OU's Board of Trustees unanimous approval to accept the pledge to limit its 2004-05 resident undergraduate tuition and fee increase to 2.4 percent. The pledge is contingent upon the passage of Governor Jennifer Granholm's recent proposal to protect universities from further cuts.

"As stewards of the public trust, we believe the decision to take the pledge, especially after the governor's promise to hold those institutions that do so 'harmless' in fiscal year 2005, is in the best interest of our current and future students and the institution," Russi said.

Russi cautioned that, even if the proposal is passed by the state Legislature, OU will have a budget shortfall of nearly \$2.5 million for fiscal year 2004-05, in part caused by non-discretionary cost increases in such areas as health insurance, utilities and enrollment growth.

"Add to this the cumulative impact of four cuts in two years and five years of consecutive enrollment growth, and it quickly becomes apparent that our options are limited, especially considering our priority to protect and restore our core academic mission," Russi said. "Student enrollment cannot outstrip our ability to deliver quality education and support services. Therefore, it is important to add as much resources as possible to critical areas to preserve quality in times of budget stress."

Russi supplemented his address with several charts depicting OU's enrollment growth, fiscal year 2004 budget balancing and state appropriations for higher education per OU full-time-equivalent student, which is at a level approximating that received in the early 1990s.

"Dr. Russi clearly made the point that he recognizes the governor and legislators had hard choices to make and appreciates that, but Oakland University has pared really close to the bone," said Vice President for Student Affairs Mary Beth Snyder. "He spoke of what the cuts have meant in terms of real dollars. We want to continue to work with the state to figure out a long-term strategy that maintains and assures the quality of our state institutions, especially Oakland."

"I think it was great that we hosted the senators. It's very helpful and instructive for them to visit different campuses. They were impressed by our facilities and people, and they came away from Oakland with a feeling of vitality."

Subsequent subcommittee budget hearings will take place on the following Fridays: Feb. 27 at the University of Michigan-Flint, March 5 at Cornerstone University and March 12 at Lake Superior State University.

The **Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan**, based in Lansing, is a nonprofit, higher education association serving Michigan's 15 state universities. The council provides the chief executive officers an opportunity to deliberate on a wide range of topics that have potential implications for higher education.

SUMMARY

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