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Success in challenging times

More than surviving, we must focus on thriving during a deep recession

By Stephen J. Kopp

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HUNTINGTON –Recently, we received the annual report on the state of West Virginia from Governor Joe Manchin, III. In his sixth State of the State address, he assured us that the Mountain State is prepared to overcome the worst recession our nation has faced in 80 years. He extolled that prudent planning and responsible spending have enabled our state government to take a proactive approach to this prolonged economic crisis.

While other states have instituted government shutdowns, disruptions in vital government services, layoffs and other draconian measures to balance their budgets, West Virginia finds itself in an enviable fiscal position. I sincerely thank Governor Manchin and our Legislature for their foresight and hard work on behalf of the citizens of West Virginia. Their leadership and fiscal discretion have prevented the disastrous economic consequences experienced by other states. We have weathered the financial strains of the past fifteen or so months, but those of us who have been monitoring this severe economic recession knew that it would eventually impact West Virginia.

Since the Governor's address and his Executive Order instituting a mid-year 3.4 percent reduction in State appropriations, I find myself being asked whether Marshall University is positioned to weather the most recent repercussions of this deep economic recession. The simple answer is, yes – the University will survive with work, and a healthy degree of sacrifice. However, the more complicated answer is that simply surviving will not be enough. We must emerge from this financial maelstrom stronger, more focused and fully prepared to better serve the needs of our community, our state, our region and, ultimately, our nation.

At a time when public universities across the country are battening down the hatches, capping enrollments and struggling to stay afloat, we have been working to accelerate growth, improve productivity and gain efficiencies at Marshall University. To accomplish what needs to be done, we are examining every aspect of the University – from top to bottom – to actualize opportunities and leverage resources that will help us serve our students and our constituents

better. We simply cannot expect to continue doing what we have always done the same ways we've always done them and expect to overcome the unprecedented budgetary challenges we face now and will continue to confront over the next three fiscal years. To this end, we are engaging the entire Marshall University Community in crucial conversations about restructuring and rethinking how we perform our work to fulfill our mission. I have no doubt that together we will engineer the kind of institution that Marshall needs to be to emerge stronger from this crisis.

You may ask, "How do we move forward in light of everything that is happening right now?" I ask. "How do we not? – We simply must!" The adverse circumstances we are confronting compel us to discover new and creative ways to move our university forward. One example of our proactive approach is the pursuit of two new important programs at Marshall University – physical therapy and pharmacy. The time is right. Demand in the healthcare industry for both of these professions is high and will remain high. Because of the strength of the Marshall University School of Medicine, we are well-positioned to produce outstanding graduates who will not have to look far to find opportunity – from the Advantage Valley Corridor to the Tri-State Region, we have thriving healthcare centers and service providers in close proximity eager to work with us.

Bringing these high demand programs to our University will help us with our goal of attracting more students, retaining them and graduating them at much higher rates. Significantly higher enrollments achieved through these efforts will help us meet the serious budget challenges facing us today and into the future. Yes, we will need to invest in the development of these programs; however, after the initial start-up phase, each program will produce a significant return on investment.

The endowment-based research program we have begun developing is yet another example of proactive planning in the face of increasing budgetary constraints. The endowment is being created from a combination of private gifts matched dollar-for-dollar by the West Virginia Research Trust Fund. Unlike research programs at most universities, once the endowment is fully funded, Marshall University's Institute for Interdisciplinary Research will be completely self-sustaining through the proceeds earned on the endowment. There will be no requirement for annual base funding from the state or university budget. In this way, vital research initiatives will continue to flourish, yielding positive economic impacts on the University and in our community for years to come.

When I say we are combing the University from top to bottom for efficiencies, I mean from my office to our boilers and light bulbs. In September, our new Sustainability Department began the task of monitoring everything from our power usage to the food we waste in our dining halls. These efforts have rapidly produced significant monetary savings in University operations, while benefiting our environment. Interestingly, the creation of the department was brought about by our students. It should interest you that the University is on track to save approximately \$600,000 because of all the changes instituted on campus in the wake of the student-initiated Green Fee, the hiring of a sustainability manager and continued energy savings consistently incorporated by our Physical Plant. Consider that we:

- Conserved more than 17 million gallons of water during the past year.

- Held natural gas costs steady and decreased power usage from 73.5 million kilowatt hours to 71.3 million kilowatt hours and a project like the new reflective roofing on Smith Hall is anticipated to reduce energy costs in that building by up to 30 percent.
- Launched a campus-wide recycling program funded by a Statewide Recycling Grant from the Department of Environmental Protection and are diverting several tons of waste from our local landfill and reducing our waste costs.
- Led the charge in the Demand Response Program, a regional energy curtailment system adopted to reduce electrical usage in five campus academic buildings during peak demand periods. We are the first West Virginia higher education institution to participate in the program that reduces the demand on the national power grid.
- Promoted dining without trays to reduce food waste and water and energy usage.
- Continue to give our students a voice in the process of being sustainable through the Greening Marshall Committee, a process unique to our University.

As noted herein, we are asking the difficult questions with an open mind in terms of possibilities. We are looking at what we need to keep doing and what we need to do differently. We are contemplating what might need to be eliminated, while exploring what might need to be expanded. We are investigating what we need to initiate to prosper. We are doing all of these things while remaining committed to serving our students and our constituents.

I am confident that Marshall University will achieve success and even growth in these challenging times. We have been laying the foundation for some time through our strategic initiatives and we have been willing to adapt our plans as needed. Our approach of advancing progress during a financial drought, I believe, will be the key to our long-term success. Adapting and adjusting to new realities – quite literally retooling our organization as we move forward – is what you can expect to see at Marshall University as we continue the important work of fulfilling the promise of a better future. Throughout, we will remain a community steadfast in our enduring commitment to serving, educating and inspiring future generations of students, advancing knowledge, discovery and innovation, and catalyzing greater economic development and opportunity. I invite your ideas, participation and commitment to this endeavor.

To share your ideas with me, please go to our suggestion page at <http://www.marshall.edu/president/costsavingsform.asp> or send an e-mail to president@marshall.edu.