

Fall Kickoff Luncheon

August 11, 2008 ~ 11:30 a.m.
Pope Banquet Room

For the faculty who have been away during the summer, welcome back to campus. We hope that you had a good summer and are rested and ready for the classroom again as well as having completed any research that needed a concentrated time span. For those of you—especially our staff members who have been here all summer—it’s always good to see you again.

This year we decided to combine our usual fall update with a luncheon. Please join me in thanking both the Staff Council and the Faculty Senate for co-sponsoring this event.

During the summer, a great many positive things have happened:

- The Art and Design Building will actually be ready for spring occupancy and will better than ever. We are looking forward to a grand opening celebration.
- Recently, the library staff and others saw preliminary drawings for the renovated and expanded Fant Library. This will definitely be the best and most modern library facility in Mississippi, if not the southeast, featuring a rapid, robotic book retrieval system, more classroom and meeting spaces, more comfortable seating areas, the archives space, and the cyber café. We look forward to seeing this project move toward completion.
- A new program, the Masters in Educational Leadership, was successfully launched this summer. New programs in other areas are soon to follow.
- I hope you heard about the \$3.2M Harriett Piper Brenneman endowed scholarship gift that can be tailored to our needs.
- And Senator Cochran helped secure another \$300,000 grant for the Wicker Center for Creative Learning.
- For our 125th Anniversary Celebration, one committee decided on some exciting activities for the coming year and another committee is being formed to implement them. As plans are made, we will keep you up-to-date.

Many more good things are happening but, today, I want to focus on three topics:

- Unification of the Alumnae and the Alumni Associations,
- The new IHL Board’s funding formula, also called “Rebalancing,” and
- Our progress with “MUW 20/20.”

UNIFICATION OF ALUMNI AND ALUMNAE ASSOCIATIONS

The unification of the Alumnae Association and the Alumni Association began on the day after Judge Colom issued her second opinion in late February 2008. At that time, I asked the two association presidents to talk about unifying the two groups, and they agreed to do so.

The Alumnae Association team—the older group—included three past presidents and one of their board members. The Alumni Association group—the newer group—includes its current president and three board members, one of whom is also a past president of the older Association. Dr. Gary Bouse, MUW’s Vice President for Institutional Advancement, has attended all of their meetings except one.

So what has happened since the two groups agreed to talk about unifying?

On two separate occasions in April, both unification teams agreed to a common set of bylaws and an affiliation agreement. The University said it would likely approve both documents. The Alumni Association's Board agreed both times, but, both times, the Alumnae Association's Executive Committee said "no" to unification.

At the request of the Alumnae Association president, I met with the two groups on May 20, to see if the logjam on the part of the Alumnae Association could be broken. I listened to their concerns and expressed hope that the disagreements could be quickly resolved.

At that meeting, the spokesperson for the Alumnae team told me that there would be no unification if MUW moved forward with a name change.

No other meetings have been held. This is disappointing but I refuse to give up hope. The University is indeed working hard on this.

REBALANCING FUNDING FORMULA

Earlier this summer, our Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and our Vice President for Finance and Administration made a presentation to faculty and staff about the IHL Board's new funding formula, also known as "Rebalancing." This presentation will be repeated next month for all faculty and staff who are interested. Here is a brief overview of a complex matter.

For the most part, two steps form the process for funding higher education in Mississippi. First, the state legislature appropriates funds for higher education essentially in one lump sum. Second, the IHL Board allocates these funds to each IHL institution through the funding formula.

The formula includes components to cover the costs of operating a university. The formula also allows a "small school supplement" to be made to the four smaller institutions. At this time, we, as well as Delta State, do not qualify for this supplement because, in comparison to IHL selected benchmark universities, our enrollment is too low and our per-student funding from the state is too high.

The formula focuses on "full-time equivalent" student enrollment (FTE), which presents the truest measure of a university's enrollment. The formula is not based on "headcount" enrollment, which is often reported by the media.

20/20 PROCESS

Now, I want to spend the majority of this time talking about the "MUW 20/20" process and the most recent work of one of its committees.

At the outset, I want to thank all of you who participated in this year long process. If you attended the all-day meeting in October 2007, please stand and remain standing. If you attended any of the focus groups please stand. If you served on the Task Force or the Identity Committee, please stand. Please join me in thanking all of you for taking part in this important process.

The suggestion by some who oppose this process that those of you who just stood up cannot think for

yourself is insulting and unfair. I am sorry that you have been subjected to this kind of criticism.

Last October, we began a journey together to consider our university's future as we prepare to celebrate its history with our 125th anniversary in 2009 as well as our need to renew our campus strategic plan. For our journey, which we called "MUW 20/20: Envisioning Our Future; Fulfilling Our Promise," we enlisted the help and advice of people who are part of our immediate campus family as well as our alumni and those who are part of our greater community, both locally and across the state. It was heartwarming to see these fellow travelers give their personal time to consider what is best for our university.

That all-day meeting in October included about 60 people and was professionally facilitated. The next day, facilitated by the same group, another all-day meeting was held with many of the first day's participants, in order to look at the first day's ideas in more detail. Many suggestions came out of both efforts. All results from those two meetings as well as all other documents concerning MUW 20/20 have been posted on our website so that the process would be transparent and easily accessible.

The consensus from both days was that MUW needs to consider its future health, particularly as it faces enormous budget cuts over the next few years. Those budget cuts will impact what we will be able to offer and how we offer it.

To get additional on-campus input, twelve focus groups were formed using trained facilitators. Those results were posted on our website too.

Alumni were included. Besides the many faculty and staff alumni who were in on-campus focus groups, the Alumnae Association had its own focus group that lasted almost four hours. The members of that focus group were selected by the President of the Alumnae Association. Their views and ideas were also posted on the website. In addition, several informal discussions with small groups of alumni were held around the state.

Finally, it was time to gather all the various threads together. A Task Force developed a White Paper to review our major challenges and suggest some possible responses. The Task Force's paper concentrates on four major challenges: "lack of unification [which they identify as internal communication, community involvement and alumni relations], a poorly defined identity, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining students, and financial concerns." In addition, they pointed out "communication, collaboration, community involvement, morale, name of the university and resistance to change" as other challenges facing the university.

Various committees were created to examine each area more thoroughly and to present potential solutions. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, a committee has been established to plan our 125th anniversary celebration. In June, a new Communications Committee had its first meeting to address our communication efforts, and to offer specific recommendations on how the campus can improve its internal communications. The committee is now working in sub-groups and hopes to have its work completed by the end of the semester. Committee work on several of the other initiatives is either well underway already or, with the return of the faculty, will soon be underway.

MUW'S CURRENT IDENTITY

The Task Force reported that there is significant confusion about both our identity or brand and our name, not only on our campus but also in our greater community, across the state, and beyond our state's borders.

They recommended deciding who we are (including examining whether our current name still fits) and then engaging a professional marketing firm to guide us as we recruit and retain more students, including better prepared students.

Most of us have encountered questions about our name. Some assume that we are a private school. Others wonder how a university with a public mission could continue using our name. Admissions directors and recruiters talk about the extra effort necessary to explain who we are and who we are not.

After arriving here in 2002, I traveled the state, talking with media, civic clubs, alumni groups, and others, and I listened to what people thought about our name. Most recommended changing our name with the exception of some of our alumni, who believed that more and better marketing was the answer.

Let's look at the facts. Here are some examples of how we have engaged in more and better marketing since 2002:

- From 2002 to 2005, contacts with prospective students have increased by more than 200%.
- The increase from 2005 to 2006—just one year—was another 200%.
- From 2004 to 2007, the University's recruiting efforts led to a six-fold increase in the response rate from prospective students.

MUW has focused significant resources toward student recruitment. In fact, as evidence of our commitment to recruiting students, the University strategically added more than \$662,000 to its enrollment management budget during the past five years. This amount is in addition to the annual increases made each year in this budget.

MUW's enrollment management budget is currently 13% of the University's overall general budget. MUW ranks first (with USM) among the eight public universities in the percentage of the general budget allocated to student recruitment.

But even with more resources and more effective marketing, our enrollment growth is still inadequate.

And our name, often coupled to the term "identity," has continued to arise again and again, because of the perception that we are a women's only university.

IDENTITY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force recommended forming an Identity Committee, which included individuals from the campus and the community. Among others, the Identity Committee made two recommendations.

First, the Committee recommended that we brand ourselves as offering leadership training and opportunities. This reinforces our heritage of empowerment, and we will embrace "leadership" as our brand. The University will explore using the \$3.2M Brenneman endowed scholarship to target students who demonstrate leadership potential.

Additionally, our Provost and our Vice President for Student Services will explore ways to incorporate our leadership brand both in and out of the classroom.

Second, the Identity Committee report said:

A clear majority of the Identity Committee members believed the name—Mississippi University for Women—impedes the success of communicating the true identity of the University and, therefore, future student recruitment efforts The Identity Committee agreed that a name change is warranted

Based on all the information available to me, I will recommend to the IHL Board that the name of the University be changed.

Here is why: Growth. Competition. Relevance.

GROWTH

First, growth. We absolutely must grow to survive. The IHL Board's funding formula focuses on "full-time equivalent" not "headcount" enrollment.

Growth is not just a "suggestion." Growth is not just a "good goal to have." Growth is our only option to maintain excellence in our current programs and offerings to our students. New programs and offerings require growth as well. Just holding steady at our current enrollment could result in deep cuts—as much as one-fourth of our current state allocation—occurring over the next four years.

We face a perilous trend as we try to grow. Only 3% of graduating high school women in the United States say they will consider a women's only institution. The perception of MUW as a women's only university means that 97% of women, nationwide, will not even consider us. It stands to reason that an even higher percentage of men will not consider attending a university that labels itself as a university for women.

The comments of a female sociology professor at a formerly all female college, who wrote a book on this topic, apply with equal force to us: "The percentage of women who will even consider women's colleges has dwindled not to zero but very, very low." She said she has "a whole file of articles about the advantages of women's colleges, but getting that message through to 17- and 18-year-old girls just doesn't work, and it hasn't worked. It's not something that's changing."¹

In a 2007 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a professor at St. John's University School of Law argued that although "women's colleges seem less necessary and appealing to most young women today does not mean that they have become irrelevant." She continues:

There is no doubt that women's colleges have lost their appeal for the vast majority of today's students. The old argument that women's colleges are a necessary safe haven for women to achieve academically and develop their leadership skills now rings hollow, as do many of the outdated statistics commonly cited by proponents. Although it is true, for example, that one-third of the female board members of the Fortune 1000 companies and 20 percent of the female members of Congress are graduates of women's colleges, many of those women were undergraduates at a time when women's colleges were their only choice, with few exceptions, for an elite liberal-arts education.²

In short, there may be benefits to single-sex institutions, but there is virtually no market for them.

During Judge Lenore Prather's tenure as Interim President, she commissioned a study by one of the country's premier higher education marketing firms. The findings of that study, which surveyed traditional-age students and their parents, confirm the significant obstacle posed by our name:

- "Positioning based on the Women-Centered College would not be advantageous for student recruitment."
- "Perceptions of MUW are split, and its identity is not firmly established."
- "The implication is that being known as a women's college is turning off far more of MUW's prospective student population than it is influencing positively."

But, against all odds, we continue to market aggressively; however, what happens when prospective students receive our marketing materials? Too often prospective students do not read our emails or open our brochures, because of the perception of MUW as a women's university. As a result, we never have the chance to introduce them to this wonderful place. And our own alumni leaders, many of whom strongly oppose a name change, have been unable to recruit their own children to attend the University.

It is my belief that the heart and soul of MUW is not our name. Rather, it is our faculty, our staff, our programs, our engaged classes, our high-touch environment, and the prospect of success following our students' experience with us.

COMPETITION

Now, let's talk about competition. Here in our own backyard, here in Mississippi, of all the students taking the ACT, only 4% listed MUW among their top college choices. Based on the ACT data, despite our best efforts, we are not getting our share of high school seniors in Mississippi. We are fighting for our share of the 4% who are even open to the idea of coming to Mississippi University for Women—and we will only get some of those.

No longer are high school seniors or adult learners choosing which actual campus to go to as many are selecting a campus by just "clicking" onto it from home, using on-line courses. Additionally, colleges and universities across the country are aggressively recruiting the best and brightest young men and woman and adult learners.

Today, individuals have more choices than ever before for higher education including more on-line education. In this day and time, every institution must seek out any competitive advantage that it has. Unfortunately, our name places us at a competitive disadvantage.

RELEVANCE

Finally, let's talk about relevance. Our relevance is in leadership development for all students . . . regardless of race or gender. Our relevance is in embracing the equality for which the founders of this University fought for so long and so hard. Our relevance is in celebrating the diversity that is evident on this campus today.

It has often been said that perception is reality. Our current name—Mississippi University for Women—creates a perception that is no longer based in reality.

Our name is no longer right.

Our name is no longer appropriate.

Our name no longer represents who we are.

It is not right for the men on our campus to leave here with a diploma that they are embarrassed to display on a wall because of the name, Mississippi University for Women, even though they are proud of their education.

It is also no longer appropriate that, as our community, our State, and our country strive to be inclusive, we continue to use a name that alienates a clear majority of our population – women and men.

More importantly, the name, “Mississippi University for Women,” no longer represents who we are today. After 26 years as a co-ed institution, it is time for a change.

It is with those three main points in mind—growth, competition, and relevance--that I am announcing the formation of a committee to recommend a new name for the University.

The task before that committee is great and, so today, we will truly begin “Honoring the Past and Embracing the Future.”

MUW’S MISSION

One more important point needs to be emphasized: The overall mission of our institution has not changed and will not change. Let me repeat: The overall mission of our institution has not changed and will not change. Indeed, it would be foolish to ignore our illustrious history—it is a valuable asset. This University will always empower women and our environment must continue to support and foster leadership among women. We must also look beyond that sole focus and embrace all of our students as we serve all of the people of the State of Mississippi.

Our mission is timeless. Our duty is to make it timely.

CONCLUSION

The challenge for those of us in higher education in Mississippi is to produce more college graduates to lift our state. Our challenge is not very different from other states.

In addressing the future of higher education in America, Larry Isaak, the current president of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact and chancellor emeritus of the North Dakota University System, recently made these observations that apply with special force to Mississippi and to our University:

The challenge is to focus on colleges becoming more productive by growing revenues through increased enrollments at the same time they become more efficient in offering their services. Thus, the first requirement is for campus leaders to understand and accept the reality However, if campus leaders resist the challenge and choose to not accept reality, policy makers will likely force external

solutions that may not be the most desirable and long lasting. Instead, actions will likely be centered on legislated actions not necessarily related to real campus solutions.³

And so, the committee will be formed immediately and begin its work. There is much to do. We must find a new and appropriate name, and frankly we must build the case with our University family, our community and, indeed, the people of the State of Mississippi who provide the resources that are the engine of our University.

We will move too quickly for some; too slowly for others. But, rest assured, we are indeed moving forward.

We also need to stop fighting. We should listen to the words of a former governor, Paul B. Johnson, Jr., spoken at a time in the state's history when our citizens were fighting one another. He said, "If we must fight, it will not be a rearguard defense of yesterday but an all out assault on our share of tomorrow."

¹ "When Wells Run Dry", Ms. Magazine, Spring 2005.
(www.msmagazine.com/spring2005/wellscollege.asp (accessed 8/4/08)).

² Rosemary Salomone, "A Place for Women's Colleges", The Chronicle Review, Feb. 16, 2007.
(<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i24/24b02001.htm>) (accessed 6/12/08).

³ Larry Isaak, "Wanted: Leaders that Produce", Advancing Education through Cooperation.
(Copy in MUW President's Office).