

MUW: Where do we go from here?

I ended a recent letter, stating MUW needs to look to the future and be proactive (*Voice of the people, Feb. 5*). The issues of changing our name or merging with another university appear to be behind us for now, and no matter what our positions have been, we must face the reality that we remain Mississippi University for Women. We are capable of facing the tough challenges ahead, so the question that will determine our future is: How? I believe we must stick to our mission and capitalize on our strengths.

Clearly, the budget is our most pressing issue. We must work diligently to assure fair and adequate funding from IHL, including a funding formula that does not discriminate against small teaching universities. MUW and any other university in this category must receive the small school supplement because we do not

have access to as many grants, we do not have graduate students to teach our classes and we do not have the economies of scale of the larger research oriented institutions. Yet the small schools serve a segment of the population that would not succeed in a large university environment. MUW has the smallest enrollment in the state, yet we are currently denied the small school supplement. This situation must be rectified.

We must also join alums in a capital campaign to raise private funds to offset some of the losses in state revenues due to the current budget crisis. Donations to our general fund will help us meet our immediate needs, and donations to scholarships will help offset increases in tuition, which MUW has requested along with the other IHL institutions. Higher tuition will not hurt our students, if we can help them find more financial aid to help cover the costs.

Best value

Maintaining access to higher education must remain one of MUW's primary goals. Despite tuition increases, MUW remains the best value in public or private colleges in the state. In order to improve in this area, we also must find new ways to reach segments of the population who haven't had access to higher education, while maintaining our unique mission.

Online education has been promoted as one way to "save the 'W,'" yet it seems unlikely that MUW will become the next



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University of Phoenix. One of our strengths is our small campus environment, which does not fit with a large online presence. Yet students are more likely to have full-time jobs and families. They are used to online classes and they demand some online options. Yet MUW must be careful how we implement them. Rushing into a major online presence would be detrimental to our image and our mission, and we may not be able to compete with other institutions who have a head start in this area. We must continue to develop the highest quality online or hybrid programs and classes that offer flexibility and a personal approach.

Number of male students is growing

To maintain and polish our reputation, MUW must reaffirm its mission as a small, liberal arts and professional university with a woman's emphasis. It is easy to claim a woman's mission, but it is another thing to define what that is and to show that it is still valuable. Many of our alumnae have extolled the benefits they received from attending MUW. In comparison to other women in their graduate programs and professions, they report they are more empowered to take part in discussions and participate in their fields. They do not even consider taking a back seat to their male colleagues, while many of their female colleagues do. Women students at MUW have not been coddled or protected. On the contrary, they have been challenged to succeed in ways that are not as available in traditional coed institutions.

It is true that MUW admits men, and the number of male students has steadily grown. Clearly these men find value in a university with a woman's emphasis. As we reaffirm our woman's mission, we must also evaluate how we can best serve this part of our demographic. Men as well as women benefit from small class sizes and personal attention from faculty and advisors. Beyond the small college experience, our male students benefit from a woman's emphasis where issues of gender are at the forefront, and men benefit from learning in a collaborative teaching environment. The men at MUW learn valuable skills for working with women in leadership positions, which are skills they will need in a modern work environment where more

women are becoming managers and executives.

MUW also offers leadership opportunities to men. We have had male Student Government Association presidents and officers. We have fraternities, and our male students are active in other student groups. Men at MUW do not take a back seat to women, but they also do not assume they will take the front seat. In many ways, men at MUW learn to compete and cooperate better than they would in an environment where they still have an advantage because of their gender.

Let the world know ...

MUW must market itself as the right choice for both men and women because of its woman's mission, not despite it. To do so, MUW must tout its successes. We must let the world know about our alumnae and alumni who have gone on to successful careers. We must also promote our many successful programs, from art exhibits and auctions, to music concerts, theatre productions, and literature conferences such as the Eudora Welty Writers Symposium and Tennessee Williams festival, and to our excellent programs in Education, Nursing, Culinary Arts, and Business (to name but a few and leave out too many). MUW is a vibrant campus serving the needs of its students and benefiting the community at large, and too often we are too humble about our accomplishments.

Finally, MUW reaffirm our woman's emphasis by engaging in a dialogue about how we define it and why it is vital to the MUW experience. This must not be a topdown process, but must come from our three main constituent groups: faculty and staff, students, and alums. These three groups, more than any others, must define our future. Our alums are our link with the past and tradition, but they are also our first line of support and they are committed to our future. Our faculty and staff, including administrators, represent continuity. Many of us have been here a decade or more. We are engaged with students every day, and we all participate in the governance of the university. Our students are our present and our future. They can best tell us why they chose MUW, how it meets their needs, where we need to improve, and what our prospective students want and need. Only a process that truly engages the university community as a whole and from the ground up will have a chance of uniting that community and renewing the strength we need to face the challenges that lie ahead.

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