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Office of the President

## **The 2021 State of the University Address**

March 3, 2021

Good afternoon.

I would prefer to spend this afternoon as we have traditionally done — gathered in Plachta Auditorium for an update on the state of our university. Instead, for the health and safety of our community, I am speaking to you today from the fourth floor of Park Library, safely distanced from a small livestreaming team.

Thank you for joining me virtually.

As Board Chair Studley mentioned, State of the University addresses often spend a great deal of time looking backward and celebrating the successes of the past year. While I will spend some time today reflecting on all we have achieved and accomplished, the majority of our time together will focus on the future of Central Michigan University. After all, we will never again return to life as we knew it before this pandemic.

COVID-19 has forever changed the future of higher education. The arrival of the virus forced rapid changes that are here to stay. Now, we find ourselves in a crucible moment.

Along with the global pandemic, we are experiencing the alignment of several other highly charged issues including political discord, financial uncertainty and a renewed national conversation about race, equality and justice. We face additional disruptive forces, such as new technology, demographic shifts, globalization, increasing critique of the value of higher education and competition from nontraditional entities.

There is no question that higher education has been forever altered. And so, to achieve our three-fold mission of teaching, research and service, we must adapt to the changing needs of higher education, and, more importantly, those of our stakeholders. **We must rethink what our university can be and should be.**

It does not mean changing everything. After all, we are doing some things extremely well.

We are leaders in leadership. You can see it in the Leadership Standards we set for faculty and staff, and in the wide range of leadership development programming we offer our students. At CMU, we believe that leadership isn't simply a character trait; it is a practice. It is a willingness to examine the current state of things — to assess policies and practices, to look for inequity and inequality, and, importantly, to commit to finding solutions.

When the pandemic forced a shift to online learning for school-aged children, some students were left behind. Our College of Education and Human Services

led a statewide partnership to address the digital learning gap present in Michigan and beyond. Working with educators, administrators and other stakeholders, our faculty assisted in the development of recommendations to make online learning more accessible and equitable for students everywhere.

CMU leaders see a problem and look for solutions – it is simply what We Do.

We focus on the real-world impact of what we do in our classrooms, labs, registered student organizations and more. Consider the Paragalatic flight simulator developed by computer science students and faculty. Developing the simulator's software package enabled students to work with industry tools and add concrete examples of their skills to their portfolios. They can tell potential employers that their work is helping people take flight in an “edu-tainment” setting and that they played a key role in research that will improve pilot training.

I had the opportunity to try my own piloting skills in the simulator — it was an exciting experience. More importantly, in addition to being a highly entertaining ride, the program meets science education standards for middle schoolers. Paragalatic is a great example of how CMU focuses on the real-world research and projects that benefit both our students and the communities we serve.

Kindness and caring are other things We Do well. We are a community that lifts each other up. We embrace and exhibit our core values of integrity, respect, social responsibility and, above all, compassion in all We Do.

You see this in faculty members like Holly Hoffman. Dr. Hoffman was honored by the Mid-American Conference with an Outstanding Faculty Award for Student Success for her commitment to mentoring and supporting students both inside and outside the classroom. You see it in staff members like CMU Police Officer Josh Chapman, who hosts weekly video game tournaments with students to build a sense of safety and community. And you see it in our students, like the members of CMU's Sexual Aggression Peer Advocates, who continue to provide a listening ear and confidential support for survivors.

At CMU, we value collaboration over competition, and we actively seek opportunities to positively impact our friends, neighbors and colleagues.

We lead. We focus on student success and solutions. We support each other. And we do it all with a Fired-Up attitude. When I think of all we have achieved together in the face of extraordinary challenges, the same words come to mind again and again: Passion. Determination. Resilience. Grit.

From the beginning of the pandemic, CMU Chippewas have been on the front line of making a difference — here on our campus and in communities around the state and nation. Students and faculty produced cloth face coverings for vulnerable communities. Using the MakerBot Innovation Center, they printed reusable versions of N95 respiratory masks that could be fitted with replaceable filters.

Teams from health professions programs and the College of Medicine have offered -provided hands-on help in communities around our region. They have assisted with contact tracing and COVID-19 testing, and they are now also administering vaccinations.

Even as I speak, CMU students, faculty and staff are assisting with a vaccination clinic in Finch Fieldhouse. Our successful COVID-19 response has truly been a university-wide effort, requiring the efforts of all our students, faculty and staff.

We remain **Fired Up** to stop the spread of the virus.

We are a community known for our ability to overcome obstacles and to face adversity with hope and purpose. We achieved all of this during a global pandemic. Now imagine what we can accomplish together in the years ahead as the pandemic draws to a close.

As England suffered through almost a year of Nazi Blitz bombing attacks, Winston Churchill delivered a powerful message of hope to the British Parliament in 1941. He said:

“When I look back on the perils that have been overcome, upon the great mountain waves in which the gallant ship has driven, when I remember all that has gone wrong, and remember also all that has gone right, I feel sure we have no need to fear the tempest. Let it roar, and let it rage. We shall come through.”

We are coming through this pandemic because we are facing it as a community and because we have embraced a shift in thinking.

Like so many things in education and research, coping with a crisis is an iterative process. It requires a flexible, adaptable, design-thinking mindset. It requires planning, testing, assessing, modifying and then trying again. Instead of giving up, we choose to test new models of teaching and learning. We attempt new ways to build relationships and create community. Not everything we tried worked as well as we hoped, and we sometimes experienced failures. When we did not succeed, we learned. We adapted — and we tried again.

That willingness to try new things — to test theories and assess our results — is what we must embrace as we plan for the future of our university. With this mindset, we need not fear the tempest of change raging in higher education.

We have taken the necessary first steps toward true innovation. We are now moving forward quickly with a Strategic Design Thinking model that encourages big ideas and transformational change. In 2019, we launched a Strategic Envisioning Process designed to plan for, and implement, the changes necessary to position CMU for success in 2030 and beyond.

With the disruptions of COVID-19 and increased pressure from a variety of external challenges, we have accelerated our efforts and our timeline. The changes we anticipated would come in 2030 have instead arrived today in 2021. Therefore, we are now focused on adapting for success this year and every year moving forward.

Over the past year, working groups have discussed the five strategic pathways we identified in 2019. As a result, the strategic pathways have been modified slightly. The updated pathways are:

1. We will enhance the overall academic quality and environment of CMU. This will include a renewed commitment to rigor, relevance and excellence in all we do.
2. We will distinguish CMU as a place that fosters the dynamic exchange of ideas and thoughts which lead to action. We will do this as we continue to uphold our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.
3. We will build and foster a reciprocal ecosystem that promotes innovation, economic development and cultural enrichment. We will achieve this by engaging with communities throughout Michigan and beyond.

4. We must understand and proactively address the dynamic nature of the college student, both current and future.
5. We will redefine and expand our business model. We will increase our partnerships with organizations. We will help individuals advance lifelong learning and achieve their career development goals.

It is important to note that these pathways are not distinct or separate from one another — they overlap and intersect often. Initiatives launched by one group will necessarily and intentionally impact others.

From the discussions and recommendations of these working groups, we have identified several areas of focus to pursue in the year ahead. I would like to share them with you now. I will begin with our biggest, boldest and most exciting goals: our moonshot goals.

In 1961, while outlining his goal to land a man on the moon and safely return to Earth, President John F. Kennedy coined the term “moonshot goals” for ambitious, challenging objectives that, when achieved, could create significant, positive change in a wide array of areas.

The lunar landing and those famous first steps for mankind were a single, visual example of a much larger and longer-lasting achievement. With a single goal, the president engaged the entire country in excitement about the limitless possibilities for advancement in science, engineering and technology. This led to a significant increase in federal investment in higher education, propelling American universities to prominence in research, scholarship and teaching. It led to advances not only in the sciences and engineering, but also in health care, communication and business. It also paved the way for a revived interest in the social sciences and many other pursuits. Kennedy’s moonshot goal transformed our national mindset in powerful ways, and we still feel its impact today.

Moonshot goals are intended to be inspirational and aspirational. They do not ask us to picture who we will be if we continue to make incremental changes year after year based on existing measures. Instead, they push us to imagine what our university **could be and should be**. Achieving these goals will separate us from our competitors and peers, and truly distinguish CMU as a university known for rigor, relevance and excellence in both teaching and research.

Our first moonshot goal is to establish and embrace our identity.

CMU is not a Big 10 university. However, in the increasingly competitive market of higher education, it is tempting to measure ourselves against, for example, the large institutions to our south. We cannot match them for overall size. We do not possess their endowments. We do not share the same research classification.

Yet the very things that make our university community special are attributes those schools cannot claim. We are student-centered. We offer personalized attention and support. We provide creative, hands-on learning and research experiences for students at every level. We foster a collaborative and caring environment.

Some also compare us to regional comprehensive universities; yet, again, we have attributes that make us distinct. We offer a richness from our national and international reach. We offer our students opportunities to engage in a breadth and depth of research and creative endeavors. And we are not limited to a single campus location — we offer robust online programs and centers across the state and nation.

We have created our own market space and we must capitalize on this advantage. Instead of comparing ourselves to those other universities, let us clearly differentiate ourselves from them.

Let us focus on fulfilling the promise of CMU. We say to our students: you will learn to lead in life — and they do. We see it in our current students and we see it in the more than 236,000 alumni living, working and leading around the world. We are not like our competitors. We offer something unique and special, and it is time to tell our story.

COVID-19 and the contentious political exchanges of the past year highlighted, and often exacerbated, examples of inequality and injustice in our nation. Racism and inequities have been exposed in our country, our state, our region and within our campus community. We have the opportunity and the responsibility to address it.

As an institution committed to education and the improvement of society, CMU has an important perspective to contribute to the ongoing national conversation. We also have a mission to inspire and educate leaders who will pursue social justice beyond the boundaries of our university. We are beginning this important work internally, focusing on achieving equality and equity on our own campus first.

Part of this work includes a moonshot goal to significantly increase and equalize degree attainment.

First, we must examine the entire student experience to identify and remove obstacles that impede success. We must invest in ways to encourage students to persist to graduation and to reduce stop-outs and drop-outs. This year, our investment included:

- an increase in the value of our Multicultural Advancement and Lloyd M. Cofer scholarships;
- expansion of need-based aid to include all four years a student may spend on our campus;
- and the introduction of the Finish Up Chips! scholarship, which provides financial assistance to students at risk for stopping out due to financial hardship.

As we pursue growth in degree attainment rates, we must also ensure that all students are empowered to succeed. Michigan has one of the nation's largest gaps between white and Black student graduation rates. Among the state's public universities, Black students graduated on average at a rate 22 percentage points lower than their white peers.

While CMU's graduation gap is lower than the state average, it still points to a significant problem. If some of our most talented and hardest-working students are unable to persist to commencement, we are not meeting our most fundamental mission: to educate future leaders. To begin our work toward this important goal, we have initiated a close review of our policies and procedures with a 360-degree Student Equity Audit, led by educational consulting firm EAB.

It is not enough, however, to look only at graduation rates and the student experience. We must also examine practices across our entire institution. Last year, CMU's Board of Trustees passed an important resolution reaffirming our

commitment to our core values. The language of the resolution is clear and very intentional. It reads:

“We endorse the continued development and implementation of policies and practices that foster and promote an inclusive, welcoming and supportive environment for **every member** of the university community.”

To pursue this mandate, we must increase diversity among our faculty and staff and examine policies and practices related to recruitment, hiring, advancement, tenure and promotion. We must engage our university community in the excellent programming offered by academic areas, student service units and registered student organizations. And we have to clearly communicate action steps and outcomes in CMU’s ongoing efforts.

We know that diversity strengthens our university and leads to greater innovation and creativity. We must foster an environment that encourages, embraces and promotes diversity in all its many forms.

Our third moonshot goal is to extend the reach of our university. As technology and the needs of our students change, we must rethink what it means to be a student “at” CMU.

We are approaching our 50th anniversary of leadership in distance education. Now, with innovations such as HyFlex and established amenities like our satellite centers, we have an opportunity to rethink the ways we serve students — including those who may never visit our Mount Pleasant campus.

Every student, regardless of their location, should have access to the support and services that will empower their educational journey. We will continue to help them build meaningful connections with faculty, staff, and their fellow students. We will engage deeply in every community we touch, and infuse every space we occupy with our culture and atmosphere.

With our existing partnerships around the state, CMU is uniquely positioned to reach into communities that have often been overlooked by other institutions of higher education. Through our centers and community-based programs, we can connect with students in rural and urban areas, as well as into communities of color that have been historically underserved by colleges and universities.

We have the opportunity to position CMU as THE state leader in service to students from every community and region of our state and beyond. And, as we extend our reach, we will honor our commitment to rigor, relevance and excellence everywhere there is a CMU presence.

Achieving these moonshot goals will rely on an iterative process of identifying strategies and tactics, testing and assessing methods, and adjusting and revising techniques along the way. We have identified several key strategies that will empower us to pursue these moonshot goals. These strategies are based on the recommendations of the Strategic Envisioning Process workgroups, and they will guide our efforts moving forward.

We will focus on developing greater university-wide interdisciplinarity. We know the most pressing issues of our time cannot be solved with the knowledge, talent or tools of any single discipline. We have seen that clearly demonstrated in the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccinations. Consider what we have witnessed:

- the triumph of science in developing the vaccines;
- successes and failures by political leaders in developing rollout plans;

- the valuable role of public health officials in educating various stakeholders;
- the importance of the social sciences in understanding individual and community responses to vaccination campaigns;
- and the value of culturally-competent health care workers who can safely administer the shots.

It takes many people, from many areas of expertise, to address this global challenge. This interdisciplinary approach to problem solving is a model for higher education.

We must help our students build connections between what they learn in the classroom, what they experience in their student activities, and what they see in their communities. We need to demonstrate the value of knowledge and also its practical application to real-world challenges. Achieving this will involve an assessment of our approach to general education, academic minors and majors, and extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

It also will involve a shift in the ways we engage our community. We want to be known as a collaborative partner, willing and able to participate in the improvement of communities in Michigan and beyond. We will leverage the full might of our institution, including faculty expertise, student passion and staff resources, to pursue the greater good for the stakeholders we serve.

We must identify and spotlight our programs of excellence, and we must be aware of the needs of our many stakeholders.

Students have access to an unprecedented number of options for education. We are now competing for their attention in a field that includes colleges, universities, Massive Open Online Course providers and even companies like Google. To capture their interest and to raise the profile of CMU, we must promote our programs of excellence.

These are programs with significant faculty expertise, growing student interest and high market demand. They also may represent niche programs that make CMU distinct in the marketplace. Identifying these programs of excellence is a key piece of the academic program prioritization process, and will also include an assessment of our approach to research.

These programs of excellence must also be valuable to employers. We know the number one reason that students and families pursue education is to secure a good job after graduation and to prepare for a lifetime of career opportunities. We must involve employers as we review the relevancy of our offerings. We should engage alumni in advisory boards, and redouble our efforts to encourage internships and other forms of experiential learning. We must also improve our ability to adapt programs quickly to meet rapidly changing market needs.

We must foster a culture of lifelong learning. Education is not a one-time event; it is a journey, and learning does not stop on the day of graduation. Our students

may want or need to increase their skills or build their knowledge at multiple points in their lives. We must be ready to support them when they do.

This means ensuring that we provide a learning environment that is supportive and inclusive of all students. It also requires an acknowledgement that every student's needs are different. An undergraduate or graduate degree may not be the appropriate or desired outcome for every student. Therefore, we must increase

our offerings to include badges, certificates and micro-credentials. We must also expand our partnerships with employers to offer professional development opportunities.

We also know that, for a variety of reasons, not every student will choose to — or even be able to — attend classes in Mount Pleasant during typical work hours. We need to increase the flexibility of our offerings so we can meet students where they are, geographically and in their life journey. This effort will include expanding programs in our sites and centers throughout Michigan and beyond, as well as growing our offerings online.

There is tremendous opportunity for CMU in lifelong learning, and it will require a shift in thinking about our business model. We must focus on funding our educational enterprise not only through the traditional delivery of undergraduate and graduate education, but ALSO through lifelong learning, professional development and more.

By opening CMU to new audiences of potential students, we can recapture market share among traditional first-year students and transfers, and grow our population of working adults and non-traditional students. If we embrace this opportunity, we can achieve stable, steady and predictable growth in our enrollment. Now is the time to seize our chance.

As we prepare to take the next steps in the Strategic Envisioning Process, we must reallocate and align resources to achieve our goals. This means we must first address our challenging fiscal realities.

Institutions of higher education everywhere are struggling right now. CMU is experiencing the same decreases in revenue and increases in costs that many other colleges and universities face. Some challenges are beyond our control, but there are many steps we can take to ensure our financial future.

We have already initiated some short-term and immediate measures. We are allocating resources to efforts aimed at increasing enrollment and retention. We are developing a new budget model more appropriate for our current financial situation. We continue our prudent approach to resource allocation and will seek cost-saving opportunities whenever and wherever possible. And, finally, we continue to build CMU's culture of philanthropy and engage our alumni and friends in supporting our vital work.

In everything we do, our commitment must be, first and foremost, to the success of our students. Our mission statement is a promise to deliver a “student-centered education.” We must be willing to closely examine every policy and every practice to see if they are truly student-centered. We must be willing to make changes if and when we discover they are not.

As we implement our strategies and strive for our goals, I believe CMU will:

- Be nationally recognized for excellence in both teaching and research.
- Continue to provide rigorous, relevant and excellent programs that meet the needs of our many stakeholders.
- Stabilize enrollment and achieve steady, predictable growth.
- And secure a sound and sustainable financial future.

This is work that cannot be undertaken by a single group of individuals or any one department. It will take the commitment and effort of every member of the CMU community. Achieving this sort of transformational change will be a masterclass in shared governance; we will truly set the leadership standard for

colleges and universities everywhere.

We have our work cut out for us. This will not be an easy venture, but I believe it will be an exciting journey. The last year has tested us and challenged us repeatedly, and at times, we struggled. We will be presented with new challenges and struggles in the years ahead, but I do not fear them.

Again, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, together we have overcome great perils and come through great tempests. With you, I know that no matter what the future holds, “we shall come through.”

Thank you.