There is no evidence at Slippery Rock University of the commonly accepted folklore that summers on a college campus are times of rest and relaxation. Building a great university compels an aggressive agenda and I am pleased to report updates on a number of significant initiatives.

The most important issue we are addressing this summer is to assure a workable budget for the 2009-2010 year. As of this writing, the University can only estimate its budget. Our appropriation from the Pennsylvania State Legislature will not be known until a state budget is passed. Our tuition revenue will not be known until the Board of Governors’ vote on a specific amount. Neither of these decisions will be made prior to the beginning of the fiscal year.

In this environment we have estimated a budget shortfall of more than $5 million. To address that shortfall, we have implemented specific operating budget cuts of more than $1 million; delayed hiring faculty and staff positions totaling $1.2 million; deferred planned maintenance of $350,000; shifted to bond payments an anticipated expense of $1.7 million (increased debt load), and balanced the remainder from reserves. Final adjustments of these decisions will be made once the votes are finalized for our appropriation and tuition revenues.

We are providing for the anticipated deficit with a series of short-term strategies. These strategies work only if we believe that the current economic and political environments are short-term. Conversely, we believe that these circumstances are neither short term nor incremental variances resulting from a momentary difficult economy. We believe we are facing structural problems in the way our institutions are financed and, therefore, these problems are likely to persist for a long time if not addressed from a structural perspective.

Consequently, we are already looking to how we will balance a similar deficit in the 2010-2011 budget and beyond. Our general philosophy is that we will have to reinvent ourselves for the long run and that now is a time to make those structural changes to better suit our future financial security. Our mantra for action is, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” Our goal is to emerge from the current economic downturn in a stronger position and not allow ourselves to be weakened by a lack of courage to now address these important issues.

We are not waiting for events to dictate our future. Within the past month, we have begun an examination of some of these issues related to our organizational effectiveness and operational efficiency. We expected by this time next year to have restructured or consolidated some units, eliminated costly programs including some degree offerings, and enhanced our reliability on generating revenue that is within our own control.

This summer’s second most important issue is our continuing progress with our self study in preparation for the Middle States Commission accreditation visit. That progress was helped considerably by the May 6, 2009 on-campus visit by Ms. Linda Suskie, Vice President for the Middle
States Commission. Ms. Suskie reviewed our draft self-study design and other preparations and met with key campus leaders including representatives from the Council of Trustees and representatives of the PASSHE Board of Governors. She has since delivered her assessment of our progress. Her invaluable advice is being incorporated into the next version of our self-study design and will be submitted at the end of this month.

Also, moving at a swift pace over the summer is the implementation of the new Student Information System Project. Since approval by the Council of Trustees to proceed, the University has reviewed proposals from competing vendors and selected the SunGuard Banner student information system as the base program. The University’s SIS Core Implementation Team has been activated and implementation will begin as soon as possible to retain the aggressive time line for implementing this system. SRU is collaborating with other PASSHE universities that have selected the same software to implementation strategies and budgeting that ensure that the universities are working together.

In addition, the University has begun a complete transformation of its web presence with an expectation of a new design and more sophisticated database system as the foundation to be in place by November 2009. The project is under the supervision of the Web Advisory Committee with much of the actual development work conducted by Daniel Neal, Sherry Carlson, and Aaron Moore with the collaborative support of a number of people.

The design and development of the new Student Union are also moving along successfully with groundbreaking anticipated for January 2010. As part of this project, the University signed an agreement with PNC to provide basic retail banking services to University students and employees. The agreement included PNC operating a branch facility within the new student union upon completion of construction, joining other retail partners, Starbucks and Quaker Steak and Lube. PNC will provide a vast range of services including basic banking plans that allow for free checking with direct deposit, savings and money market accounts, web banking, investment services, and interest rate discounts on loans. In addition, PNC will collaborate with the University to provide extensive educational products designed to enhance the financial literacy of our students (i.e., debt management, identification protection, budgeting). As part of the agreement, PNC is making a significant investment in the cost of construction of the new union.

As announced at the last Council of Trustees meeting, the University launched the Rock Opportunity Scholarship program to provide need-based assistance to in-state students facing financial hardship because of the current economy. The University and Slippery Rock University Foundation Inc. committed $250,000 to the program to provide $1,000 to $1,250 a year to approximately 240 students. The need for this program was made clear when 1,900 applications were received by the deadline. The applications are being reviewed now with final awards expected to be made within the next week. The challenge now is to find the resources to reach a larger percentage of those with serious financial needs. The SRU Foundation has launched the Scholarship Challenge to help close this gap.

Summer is also a very busy construction time for our campus. Major construction projects are evident across the campus.

- A new connector road is being constructed from Rock Pride Drive to the lower parking lots behind Boozel Dining Hall. This will allow for a completed loop through the new residence.
halls during the construction of the new Student Union.

- Both Rhoads and North Hall are being renovated including installation of air conditioning and elevators. This will complete the final renovation and replacement of every residence hall on campus with the exception of Kraus Hall, which is now scheduled for demolition sometime this fall.
- Construction has begun for a redesign and improvement of the parking lot in front of the Alumni Center and North Hall to result in better traffic flow and more parking spaces.
- The intramural fields are in the final stages of construction with expectations that games will be played at the facility this fall.
- The new sculpture studio is rapidly going up with hope that it will be fully operational in the fall and ready for scheduled classes by the second semester.
- The Vincent Science Building renovation project is under the supervision of the Department of General Services. The building has been vacant for more than a year waiting for D.G.S. to begin their work. Contracts have been issued with work now expected to begin in July and no firm completion date known.

One very successful construction project from last year was recently honored: The American School and University Magazine's Educational Interiors Showcase announced that Slippery Rock University's Boozel Dining Hall received an Outstanding Design Award in the Cafeteria/Food Service Areas category.

Finally, this report would not be complete without mentioning the Commencement ceremonies of last month. For many months we thought that our plans for splitting the traditional outdoor ceremony into two events to be conducted indoors was historical enough. However, in the days just before Commencement we were faced with the return of twenty-two students from Mexico City following their student-teaching experience. Because their return coincided with Mexico deemed the epicenter for an outbreak of swine flu, there was sudden international interest in the possible exposure of our Commencement attendees to the swine flu virus. In a very short period of time, the University received hundreds of calls from students and parents who were worried about being exposed at the Commencement ceremonies. However, the returning students and their families strongly believed they were safe and that denying them graduation with their fellow students was wrong. We now had a controversy that was being fed by considerable media attention.

The eventual decision was to hold a separate but special graduation ceremony for these students between the times scheduled for the two planned ceremonies. All in all, the event and the subsequent reports generated a great deal of positive press and good will.

Our Public Relations staff, notably Executive Director Rita Abent, deserves accolades for their management of this incident (which was not the only crisis of that week) and for the way they helped sustain a message across the nation that this campus was both a safe and caring place. Many others on our staff were also instrumental in helping us turn a possible ugly confrontation into a meaningful and positive experience. It is moments like these that prove Slippery Rock University truly is a very special place with incredible people: a place about which we can all be very proud.