Quarterly Report
To the Slippery Rock University Council of Trustees
April 16, 2010
By Robert M. Smith, President

Let me begin by thanking Jessica Cosme for her service to the Council of Trustees and congratulating her on her pending graduation. Her work this past year on the Council as well as with our students has been exemplary. I’ve had students tell me how much they admire Jessica’s dedication and her insights to what helps make Slippery Rock University a great place to be.

Jessica is an example of the theme of this report. This is the time of the year when we celebrate the accomplishments of the past year and acknowledge the achievements of our students, faculty, and staff. These are reminders that a university is not a group of buildings. What defines a great university are its people and their dedication to a mission and drive to achieve a vision. What defines greatness at Slippery Rock University is seen so clearly by our people.

We have had a busy year and with great leadership across a wide and diverse range of activities that I wish to highlight here:

- Middle States Accreditation Self Study committee members have been hard at work preparing the study. We will be visited in October by the chair of the review committee and then the entire review team will be here in March 20-23, 2011. With more than 100 participants in the self-study, we are fortunate to have Dr. Neil Cosgrove and Ms. Cindi Dillon as our co-chairs.

- Strategic Planning Trends. We are close to completing our new strategic plan with five transformational themes as the centerpiece for how we state we will educate our students and how they will be global leaders in the next twenty-five years. This past month, each theme group presented an update of their work. I am pleased with the strong leadership of
  - Dr. Katrina Quinn, chair, Trend 1 subcommittee
  - Dr. Steve Strain and Dr. Athula Herat, co-chairs, Trend 2 subcommittee
  - Dr. Eva Tsuquiashi-Daddesio, chair, Trend 3 subcommittee
  - Mr. Eliott Baker, chair, Trend 4 subcommittee
  - Dr. Langdon Smith, chair, Trend 5 subcommittee

Presidential Commissions have been reinvigorated this past year by the leadership of Dr. Jessamine Montero, Senior Officer for Diversity and Inclusion. Working collaboratively, the groups are preparing to conduct a campus-wide climate study this coming fall. To enhance our work, we are announcing a new Presidential Commission on Disability whose members will be appointed soon. And, we are currently appointing members to a Presidential Commission on Sustainability in support of our commitment to the American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment that the University signed in November of this past academic year.

The Slippery Rock University Campus Family Campaign was conducted to solicit financial support from the faculty and staff. This was the third year of a campus-wide campaign and the most successful. $142,375 was received or pledged by 504 (52%) of all of our employees. This
represented an 8% increase over the previous year. Notably, 62% of our faculty and 68% of the administration contributed to the campaign.

This has also been the year of change for our technology. In fact, we recognize that this is the greatest massive technology change undertaken in any one time period in our University history. Consider these highlights:

- We are building and installing a new student information system (Banner). This is the first time in our history that we have changed out the entire student information system at one time. Dr. Amanda Yale and Dr. Simeon Annanou have provided the leadership to this task.
- We are changing learning management systems by migrating from BlackBoard to Desire2Learn (D2L). We will make the entire transformation during this summer with the leadership of Brian Danielson, Bill Huber, and Mark Tracey.
- We will have a long-overdue new web presence by August. This transformation of tens of thousands of our existing web pages has been overseen by the Web Advisory Committee.
- We are installing new equipment and upgrading our fiber network to match our needs to provide high speed and responsive network access. These hardware changes are a fundamental necessity to doing business as an academic institution in this high-speed technical environment. This project is primarily done at night and weekends to be completed within the next four months. The leadership for this project is Ms. Linda Passuer.
- We have been selected as Core Node Location for the new Pennsylvania Research and Education Network (PenREN) and its nonprofit operating arm KINBER. This project, a $100 million federal grant, will provide ultra-high speed broadband networking throughout the Commonwealth. SRU will be one of the major off/on ramps to the network and the proposed location will be in the SRU Innovation Center.

With all of this energy and commitment to making this a better place, I hesitate to mention we are also going through one of the most severe budget crises in our recent history. We continue to put in place a budget for 2010-11 that changes the way we do business (You can’t reduce our operation by $9 million and not make serious changes). We are currently at the state of examining the budget reduction recommendations by the Divisions. Each of the Division’s have submitted recommendations and the Budget Committee will begin to consider how this all fits together. Soon, we will post on the web all of the recommended cuts by department and budget office. This is complete transparency of our process and results.

As I’ve thought about how we face this challenge, I was encouraged by our own recent history. Facing challenges is not a new experience for us, nor a distant experience. In 2000, we faced a serious crisis for this campus in that our enrollment was in a virtual free-fall. We have suffered eight years of decline with no successful intervention. We were facing cutbacks, loss of programs, and possible layoffs.

As Provost at the time, I was charged with solving this problem. I promised the campus we could grow ourselves out of this if the entire university got behind an enrollment management plan.
We did grow ourselves out of that problem. Moreover, we changed in ways that we didn’t even imagine in 2000. We now have the most robust, responsive enrollment management plans in the country . . . not just Pennsylvania. We have benefitted in amazing ways from our collective actions.

It would not have been possible without the full commitment of the entire campus. It would not have been possible without the willingness to change. Those changes resulted in avoiding layoffs, introducing new programs, and attracting highly qualified students to Slippery Rock University. Change was clearly for the better.

What also emerged from our enrollment crisis was a three part operational plan that is still in place today. The goals of that plan were (and still are):

1. That we would set a goal to be the premier regional residential university. That goal led to the development of our housing project and a transformation of the campus.
2. That we would increase the value of the SRU degree. That goal led to national rankings and increased accreditations among many other benefits.
3. That we would strive to be in control of our own financial destiny. That goal led to some fiscal policy changes and the creation of the Regional Learning Alliance.

In 2002, we were labeled the worst performing university in the state system. Although we considered that an unfair depiction, we chose not to wallow in self-pity but to engage in a full commitment of the entire campus to become one of the best performing universities in the State System.

Since 2004, we have been among the top three every single year because we were willing to change. We avoided budget crises. We built new programs. We built a stronger faculty. We attracted superior students. Change was clearly for the better.

Now, in 2010, we are facing our next crisis. The absence of state financial support, and the lack of control over how our revenue sources are determined, has created an even more severe challenge than we faced before.

However, this is not a crisis where we can’t grow our way out. But we also can refuse to be victims of circumstances just as we refused to be victims of our enrollment or of our performance circumstances.

It is time that we look more seriously at how we can establish economic independence. I believe we can do that by “Changing the Equation” for how we approach our work.

Because we are a different university as a result of how we addressed our previous two crises, we have earned status and recognition in our region. One benefit of our enrollment and performance success is that others have taken notice of us. Another benefit is that my work over the past seven years to shrink the psychological distance between those in Pittsburgh and Slippery Rock has begun to open doors to the corporate worlds of this region.
We are now poised to take advantage of new partnerships and collaborative opportunities in our region. These enterprises can open up revenue opportunities, student learning experiences, and research and public service consistent with our strengths. We can model after other leading entrepreneurial institutions such as Carnegie-Mellon and Drexel to find allies to invest in our successes and draw from our intellectual capacity.

I will give you three plausible examples but we collectively need to identify many more.

**First example:** The College of Business, Information, and Social Sciences is the academic home for the new Innovation Center to be built just off campus. We know this has great promise to provide help to entrepreneurial ventures as well as small and family-owned businesses. It is the right market for us as close to 70% of all businesses in Western Pennsylvania have less than 20 employees. We know that most of the economic recovery will be from entrepreneurial enterprises. We also believe that the Center will be an incubator for intellectual property development.

To stimulate interest, we convened a group of business and community leaders in October to brainstorm collaborative ideas for launching the Innovation Center. This was a most successful session and we only need now to get the Innovation Center built and operational. All the other pieces are in place.

**Second example:** The College of Health, Environment, and Science could be the home for a new think-tank on energy usage and a resource center for better understanding of intelligent usage of energy sources in this region. The energy economy in Southeast Pennsylvania is a $13.5 billion enterprise. There are now more than 700 companies in the region involved in some dimension of energy supporting 105,000 jobs. More than $1 billion is invested in research by government, universities, and corporations.

To stimulate interest, this next month, I will convene a group of faculty and community and business leaders for dinner to hear ideas for how SRU can take a leadership in this market. I’ve already had interest from several of the major energy players in Western Pennsylvania.

**Third example:** The College of Education could be the home for important research and pedagogical development to help with Autism. Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies, autism is growing at a rate of 10 percent to 17 percent per year. At this rate, it is estimated the prevalence of autism could reach four million Americans in the next decade. We already know there is a bubble of autistic children in the K-12 pipeline that will eventually make it to SRU as our students.

We have a strong faculty in our Special Education program as well as numerous others who have a passion for addressing autism issues. This is a natural place for us to establish a signature center of excellence.
I could go on with numerous other ideas for how we can leverage our intellectual capacity and our own entrepreneurial culture to establish collaborative ventures with new partners to grow our institution. In coming months, I want to work with our deans and our faculty willing to step up to the challenge. I think it is exciting and absolutely possible.

Here is the bottom line: The challenges we face are real. They are the creation of circumstances we can’t control. However, how we choose to attack them is entirely under our control. We could choose to wallow in self-pity (and some will) or engage in blaming others for our plight (and there will be those who will). Or we can rise up and change the equation to our betterment.

I believe we have consistently proven we can do amazing things when we work together. And I believe we have the capacity as well as destiny on our side. It is consistent with a statement I made at the beginning of this year: “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” Now is our moment.