

Strengthening Iowa's higher education legacy

By Bruce Rastetter and Larry McKibben



If you want to prepare for the future, you should take a good look at the past. A glance to where you have been and what you have done provides insight, perspective and focus — lending confidence and comfort to situations ahead that might be uncertain or unknown.

Iowa's three public institutions of higher education, among the most respected in the country, have 461 years of combined experience, expertise and achievement. The establishment of our system of three universities — the University of Iowa in 1847, Iowa State University in 1858 and the University of Northern Iowa in 1876 — has brought opportunity and success to countless Iowans over multiple generations.

Over the years, Iowa's public universities have instilled knowledge in our young people and pride throughout our state. Education became an Iowa identity — a distinction forged over time by strong Midwestern sensibilities and our unwavering commitment to academic excellence. But for this treasured legacy to survive and thrive, our three institutions need to build on the past and take transformative and decisive steps to chart a prosperous future.

It begins this week when we host the first of three town hall meetings to exchange ideas and gather input from students, faculty and staff about improving the efficiency of Iowa's state universities. This is the most ambitious cost-saving review in a quarter century, and we pledge to you that it will be open, transparent and inclusive. We need creative ideas from everyone on campus and throughout the state to ensure that public dollars are well-spent and that our universities thrive long into the future.

In the months ahead, interviews and audits will be conducted in each department at each university — objectively assessing what our institutions, faculty and staff are doing well and how they can improve, where there is a need for savings and where we should invest. This is an independent review of academic and administrative expenses across all three universities and the system as a whole. Nothing is off the table.

The significance of this transformative review cannot be overstated — it is critical to our universities, critical to our state and critical to our future. Here in Iowa and throughout the United States, higher education is facing severe economic constraints that require our universities to transform their organizations. We cannot state it more clearly: The status quo is

unsustainable and therefore unacceptable if we are to maintain our high standard of academic excellence.

It is important to note that the cost savings resulting from the efficiency study will be invested back into the universities to ensure that they grow and thrive while anticipating the changing needs of future students. This is more than a cost-cutting exercise. It is about strengthening and reinventing our universities.

We will use the study's findings to judiciously strengthen academics and research. By capitalizing on technology and innovations, we will increase productivity so that we are more efficient, able to do more with less and effectively building toward our future.

That begins with our most valuable asset, our students. Undergraduates at Iowa's public and private institutions have some of the highest student debt in the country. The Board of Regents and leaders at our three universities have a responsibility to students and their parents to reduce staggering loan debt and ensure an affordable, high-quality public education for any Iowan who wants to pursue it.

As regents and university presidents, we also have a responsibility to Cedar Falls, Ames and Iowa City to create vibrant, competitive universities that maximize resources, generate new revenue and maintain the quality of life in these communities.

And as prudent stewards of public money, we have a responsibility to taxpayers and the state Legislature to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible — being mindful of our costs and open-minded about change. We cannot be timid about making difficult decisions over challenging circumstances.

Our universities can no longer avoid what individuals, businesses and farmers in Iowa do every day — embrace change and seek ways to be more viable, productive and sustainable. This efficiency review will usher in a new era of accountability and educational excellence — while subsequent scheduled reviews will build on previous recommendations.

Our venerable universities are strong — built on solid foundations more than a century ago. As we look ahead to the future, we are confident this comprehensive review will enable our institutions to grow in a manner that keeps them true to their academic missions and strengthens Iowa for many years to come.