

Maryville Daily Forum column
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Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University President

The academic year is nearing its end and there will be much to celebrate at Northwest Missouri State University in coming weeks, from our annual ceremonies recognizing achievements in leadership, student employment and academics, not to mention six retiring faculty members who have racked up a combined 155 years of service, to our spring commencement ceremony May 4, at which more than 700 students will receive degrees.

This time of year is especially illustrative of Northwest's continued focus on student success – every student, every day.

But as I've discussed in this space in recent months, the higher education sector, it seems, is under attack. Popular media portray us as being out of touch academically, out of reach financially, driving up unwarranted student debt and not taking care of taxpayer dollars. I'm here to tell you again: Northwest does not fit those portrayals.

In January, a report published by Moody's Investors Service revised the agency's outlook for the entire U.S. higher education sector to negative. That move marked a shift from a stable outlook for even the sector's market-leading diversified colleges and universities. Meanwhile, the outlook for the majority of the higher education sector remains negative, as it has been since 2009.

Through November of last year, Moody's downgraded 91 percent of higher education and not-for-profit organizations it rated, and overall 80 percent of the organizations Moody's rated received downgrades.

Moody's based its negative outlook of higher education on mounting pressure for key university revenue sources and challenged university leaders to reduce costs and increase operating efficiency. Higher education institutions also are being impacted by the growth of online learning technology initiatives such as Massive Online Open Courses, rising student debt and defaults, a greater government focus on cost and value of college education degrees, and increased activity by accrediting agencies.

Northwest, however, is again bucking the trend and setting itself apart from other institutions. In fact, Northwest has retained the stable rating it received from Moody's in 2010, and we continue to focus on strengthening our financial position while remaining affordable with quality.

In its report on Northwest's financial stability, Moody's said "Northwest Missouri State University's practice of careful budgeting and proven record of cutting expenses is a key credit strength given past pressure on state funding as well as current enrollment pressures."

Indeed, in recent months, through the refunding of revenue bonds Northwest has realized nearly \$10 million in savings, and the university was named on municipalbonds.com's list of "25 Universities With Attractive Municipal Bonds" because of the strength of our bonds.

Additionally, through our reorganization of academic departments and increasing operational efficiencies, Northwest will save an estimated \$2 million during 2013. Northwest has managed a more balanced and composite approach that takes a holistic look at revenues, expenses, investment and savings. We have strengthened our financial standing and positioned the institution to invest strategically in our programs, our people, our facilities and our services.

Keeping those strategic investments at the forefront, Northwest received \$1.7 million in grant funding during 2012, with 45 percent of our requests being funded in comparison to the national average of 25 percent. Northwest also was the benefactor of about \$3.1 million in gifts during the 2012 fiscal year, and the university already has raised about \$1.9 million during the 2013 fiscal year. Now we are in the readiness assessment phase of a comprehensive campaign that also will focus on key strategic initiatives.

Our efficiencies extend beyond budgets, however, and we are strengthening Northwest in other areas as well. In August, Northwest received a reaffirmation of its accreditation with no follow-ups through 2018-2019. In November, Northwest completed its AQIP Systems Portfolio, an institutional self-assessment that addresses key processes and results among other organizational items. And last month, the university's AQIP Quality Checkup was successful with no follow-ups necessary.

Furthermore, we are actively addressing the findings of a state audit released in fall 2011, and our annual audit conducted in October by accounting firm BKD resulted in an unqualified opinion with no management letter comments and the designation of a strong financial position; it was a strong and positive audit.

Northwest's mission of focusing on student success ties into all of this, and our diligence on that front was celebrated in February when Gov. Jay Nixon visited the campus to tout Northwest's achievement of all five benchmarks within the state's performance-based funding model. Northwest was one of only four four-year institutions to meet all five measures.

The arena of higher education is changing dramatically, but Northwest's extensive history of innovative thinking and putting students first continues to ensure the university's ability to serve northwest Missouri and beyond.

Dr. John Jasinski is the 10th president of Northwest Missouri State University. For news and events at Northwest visit www.nwmissouri.edu.