MSU sets example in how to lead

East Lansing

When Michigan State University officially opens its Detroit Center on Thursday, there won’t be a showy ceremony or a block “S” looming over Woodward.

Instead, there will be something more subtle — a lesson in leadership and smart management, how to decide what’s important and do it, how to move forward amid terrible financial times because looking backward and guarding the status quo is not a path to emerging on the other side.

“If you’re going to go through all this pain and anguish” of recession and budget cutting, Michigan State President Lou Anna K. Simon said in an interview, “you better decide on what you’re going to do. You have to sort out to move forward. The crisis doesn’t define who you are or where you’re going.”

Opening the Detroit Center, a 22,000-square-foot facility, is a bricks-and-mortar symbol of MSU’s deepening commitment to Detroit despite difficult times for both. It also exemplifies a leadership style sorely lacking elsewhere in Lansing — understanding what you are and want to be before making politically charged decisions to dismantle parts of what you have.

“I’ve still got to do things,” Simon said. “Once you’ve slashed the budget without a vision of where you’re going ... you’re not sure you have the building blocks to move forward.”

She’s got that right, because it’s getting worse. Michigan ranks last among the 50 states for government appropriations to public colleges and universities, according to data from the State Higher Education Executive Officers association. Between 2003 and 2008, inflation-adjusted spending for higher ed in Michigan dropped 22.7 percent while Alabama led the nation with an increase of 57 percent.

Also near the top of the pack are Tennessee and Louisiana, yet more evidence that Southern right-to-work states are adding higher education to theirlengthening list of value-added industries (like auto and auto-parts making) they aim to expand to boost per-capita incomes, improve quality of life and attract talent.

Which is why Michigan State is approaching the most serious financial crisis in decades in a refreshingly different way — comprehensively, collaboratively, publicly and head-on.

There’s a Web site: www.shoppingthefuture.msu.edu. There are meetings and unambiguous statements of harsh financial reality. There are evaluations of business practices, academic programs, compensation, health care options for faculty and staff, even printing and how much bread to bake on campus.

“We think it’s a value to be ... cost-efficient,” Simon said, offering that Michigan State already claims the lowest energy costs within the Big Ten. “What we’re doing right now is going through and analyzing all our sub-functions of administration.

“People know we’re going to look at everything. Everybody’s got to be part of the solution. It’s going to be really messy and the noise levels are going to go up for awhile. We can use this to restructure the way we work on the administrative side that will serve us well no matter what happens.”

Because the competition isn’t standing still, Michigan State (and other state-supported institutions, if they’re smart) is re-engineering the way it operates lest it fall too far behind. Rival state universities outside Michigan are wooing top academic talent with promises of new programs and new facilities, she says, often a condition of employment.

Still, there’s something happening in East Lansing. It’s responsible. Innovative and forward-looking. It sets an example. In the spirit of a public university, it is teaching reality, no matter how contentious cutting the equivalent of 600 full-time positions from a work force of 9,000 will be.
Simon's right. It'll be messy. The professors will complain. The unions will complain. Everyone, to the extent you can use that word, will want someone else to make sacrifices so they don't have to. And the politicians, pushing this week to avoid the second shutdown of state government in three years, probably will ignore the leadership lesson playing out on the banks of the Red Cedar.

But it's there.

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