

Making Steps to a Brighter Future

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By Lori Brandsted

How can two small institutions such as Mayville State University and Valley City State University remain viable in a tight financial situation?

That is the question and main focus for six members of a consulting team hired by MSU and WCSU. Each member of the team has their own area of expertise.

Dan Keating of KMAV interviewed two of the consultants, Tom Triplett and Catherine Cook, on Wednesday to discuss the purpose of the consultation. Keating's interview will be aired on KMAV during the MSU Notebook segment on Tuesday, April 2, at 9:05 a.m.

Triplett's field of expertise is finance. He is a former college president (three other consultants are also either current or former college presidents) and is a private attorney in St. Paul.

Cook is the CEO of Miller/Cook Associates in Marco Island, Fla., and is one of the nation's leading experts in enrollment development.

"We know what it's like to run small institutions in tight economic times," Triplett said, and he just wants to help out others in similar situations. "Mayville State and Valley City State are two quality institutions that are facing tough economic times."

Many of the factors are uncontrollable, such as population and decreasing numbers of high school students. Therefore, one of

the major concerns is financial strength and how it can continue.

"The campuses of Mayville and Valley City requested the review to proactively respond to the future," Cook explained.

One of the areas the consultants are evaluating is the effectiveness of having one president for both colleges. "MSU and VCSU are the only public universities in the nation that share a president," Triplett said and also stated that it is time to determine whether or not it is still in the best interest of both institutions or if it's time to dissolve the partnership.

As far as the enrollment is concerned, Cook said that it is time to "look outside of the box" and to think differently on how to attract not only teenagers graduating from high school but nontraditional students such as older than average students and foreign students. "There are no classroom wall limitations."

A Web site promotes not only the education available at the college, but its district and region as well.

"Location is key and it's important to promote your county, region and state," Cook explained.

People used to pick an institution based on their field of study, Triplett said. Today, "people go to a place versus going to an institution."

Cook agreed and added, "Students want the benefits of a small community."

According to Cook, "Everyone is your competition." Over 900 colleges buy the names of average students based on their ACT scores and GPA and mail promotional materials to entice students to their college.

"It's not just local competition anymore," Triplett said. "It's a difficult and competitive market."

With the decrease in graduating high school students, every college is in essence in competition to get that student to their campus. Cook also stated that due to this decline in student availability, universities must be realistic in estimating enrollment goals.

Through the assessment of the two campuses, the consulting team critically looks at areas that are doing well and at the things that are not working well.

"People issues are definitely not the problem," Triplett said. "They are the strength."

Both Triplett and Cook have been very impressed with the people at Valley City State and Mayville State for their professionalism and creativity.

Preliminary reports and suggestions will be available in mid-April. These findings will be reported to Dr. Ellen Chaffee, the state board and possibly the legislature. A final report will be available in June.