

On being named University of Montana president last December, I was clear about my intentions to address four important challenges: enrollment, budget shortfalls, organizational renewal and student success. Every decision and strategy for the year of my presidency has been made with these priorities in mind.

UM enrolled nearly 12,000 students this fall, above fall budget targets. We completed fiscal year 2017 under budget. We hosted a national Complete College America summit to enhance student retention. A video summary of our terrific efforts to accelerate students through gateway math and writing courses is on the CCA national website.

Our most ambitious effort for organizational renewal is known as APASP: Academic Programs and Administrative Services Prioritization. Think of it as looking closely at your whole household or business, examining what's in every room, what treasure is on every shelf. Can you still keep everything? In the case of UM, are there more student-friendly or cost-effective ways to deliver our programs or services? It's as simple, and complex, as that.

To set priorities among an array of worthy programs in a process led by admirable faculty, staff and students is challenging. It has created extra work and anxiety for many. Dozens of employees have worked diligently to present data-informed analyses – quantitatively and qualitatively – of each University function to the APASP task force.

The task force has held many forums, open meetings and trainings for report authors throughout. The members have my utmost admiration and appreciation.

The process is heading toward conclusion. The volume of our conversations is getting louder. You have seen this around your conference rooms and dinner tables when you are making hard decisions. Don't be surprised by our lively internal debate and, at times, consternation. That is part of who we are as a University.

I extend deep thanks to the APASP task force and to a committee of the Board of Regents who recently met with them on campus. I applaud the task force members and their straightforward approach. They admit the process is not perfect and worry that the timeline I gave them was tight.

As with most important decisions anywhere, not just at the University, we cannot always wait for a perfect process.

In the coming days, APASP task force members will release the first draft of their recommendations. They will assign programs and services to four categories for action. In one of my final duties as UM president, I will focus on selected programs and present implementation outlines to incoming President Seth Bodnar. I will step down as president, but UM's leaders will carry on.

UM has the opportunity to tighten its focus and serve students and its historic mission wisely. The proposed changes may be disruptive and controversial. The university family will raise our voices through shared governance groups in the next few weeks. Count on it. I welcome collegial dialogue from within and from outside the University.

As I said last January in my first address to the campus, I believe the best days at UM are ahead of us. In February we will celebrate 125 years of historic service to the people of our state and beyond. We are Montana, all of us, and we can look forward to the future with confidence.

Sheila M. Stearns

University of Montana president