



Office of the President

Testimony of Central Michigan University President Neil MacKinnon to the Michigan House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education and Community Colleges

April 30, 2025

Thank you, Chair Markkanen and members of the subcommittee for inviting me to speak with you today. And thank you for your support of higher education in Michigan.

Central Michigan University was created to meet the needs of 1892 Michigan, when the state faced a shortage of teachers and business leaders. Over time, as the needs in Michigan changed, so did CMU. We expanded our degrees and programs and continued to meet the demands of Michigan industries with students prepared to succeed.

Today, CMU prepares our students for the careers of today and tomorrow. We know that to have a strong economy, we need a career-ready workforce. This is why our state needs institutions of higher education like CMU more than ever; we are laser-focused on preparing students for in-demand careers.

We still educate future teachers and business leaders – and also doctors, engineers, physical therapists, social workers, accountants and more. Our graduates are marketers, musicians, and meteorologists. All of them have enormous potential to lead highly successful lives and careers here in Michigan. After all, the majority of our students come from right here in Michigan, representing all 83 counties.

Our mission *is* the success of our students and alumni and our collective impact on the communities we serve, and our communities need healthcare workers. 74 of Michigan's 83 counties have at least partial designation as health professional shortage areas. CMU's School of Medicine trains medical professionals to serve in these Michigan communities. In fact, just last month, U.S. News and World Report ranked our medical program among the top 20 schools in the nation for placing graduates in rural areas and in health professional shortage areas. These communities are in the districts you serve and call home – and those patients and their families need our highly qualified, educated and trained doctors.

The CMU School of Medicine also established a Rural Health Excellence Institute to focus on rural health priorities. By centering on the unique aspects of rural health, the Institute works closely with communities to improve access to health care, expand telehealth capacity with broadband expansion, and deliver medical education and training that responds to local needs.

Our commitment to meeting health care needs continues with programs within CMU's Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow College of Health Professions – including our new four-year nursing degree program. These programs are designed to meet the needs of Michigan communities, and students graduate ready to start successful careers as nurses, audiologists, nutritionists, physical therapists, physician assistants and health care administrators.

While attending classes, CMU medical and health professions students also get hands-on experience serving communities. The Carls Center for Clinical Care and Education – a premier specialty rehabilitation center for the Mid-Michigan community offers care in areas including audiology, psychology and autism assessment while providing real-world experience for CMU students.

Mobile Health Central, a mobile health vehicle for preventative health education, partners with community groups in underserved areas to bridge gaps in services, offering health assessments, screenings and referrals. Working with Mobile Health Central provides unique hands-on career training for CMU students.

CMU has always been known for its teacher education programs. As the state continues to face a shortage of certified teachers, CMU is stepping up to meet growing demand.

In addition to existing undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs, CMU with the support of the Michigan Department of Education, created an innovative teacher credentialing program. The Michigan Consortium for Addressing Rural Education Expansion and Retention – or MiCAREER – resource hub offers teacher certification and ongoing professional learning opportunities at no cost to future educators. Rural school districts comprise 65% of the state's school districts and CMU's MiCAREER hub will have far-reaching impact throughout Michigan.

For students with a desire to forge their own path, we provide opportunities to explore entrepreneurship. Students from all majors can participate in the New Venture Challenge organized by CMU's Isabella Bank Entrepreneurship Institute. For 15 years, students have worked with industry professionals, entrepreneurs and venture capitalist mentors to develop business plans and vie for thousands of dollars in start-up capital. Winners have gone on to start companies and create jobs with a focus on everything from donuts to drones.

This type of entrepreneurial development doesn't stop there. For New Venture winners and regional small businesses, the Central Michigan University Research Corporation offers space, support and connections to funding opportunities. As both an incubator and accelerator, CMURC provides entrepreneurs with the resources they need to build, launch, and scale. With locations in Mt. Pleasant, Midland, Bay City and Saginaw, CMURC and its Great Lakes Bay Business Hub are championing small business growth for lasting regional impact.

Programs like New Venture Challenge help students gain knowledge and skills that prepare them to pursue multiple career paths and a lifetime of career changes. They graduate from CMU ready for what's now AND what's next – for roles in fields that may not yet exist.

For instance, this fall we will offer a program in Applied Artificial Intelligence. Students will learn the skills needed to develop, evaluate, and integrate artificial intelligence into software applications. Learning how AI can be trained and evaluated helps students understand the strengths and limitations of this emerging technology, and will be applicable in many career paths. It is one of several new programs and credentials that reflect CMU's commitment to applied learning and meaningful career preparation.

This includes preparing for careers that support our national defense. CMU is designated as a National Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense Education, a distinction from the National Security Agency and Department of Homeland Security. This recognition highlights CMU's commitment to equipping students with the knowledge and skills to combat ever-evolving cyber threats.

Our students and faculty are conducting research into alternative battery technology to power the vehicles of tomorrow. With support of the U.S. Department of Defense, CMU is working with the Ground Vehicle Systems Center in Warren to find a way to power the Army's vehicles without relying on fuel or battery parts from places with geopolitical difficulties. Current research is looking into ways to develop aluminum-sulfur batteries.

At CMU, we're pursuing research and designing programs that benefit our students and our state. And we don't do it alone.

Our colleges rely on the guidance of advisory boards – comprised of working professionals – to align our offerings with industry best practices and needs. Many of our advisory boards include proud CMU alumni who give back to their alma mater with their time and talent, while also strengthening the workforce pipeline for their organizations.

We know that CMU's focus on hands-on learning, guided by the industries that hire our graduates, is working. Our latest Career Outcomes Rate stands at nearly 95%, meaning that our most recent graduates are starting their careers or continuing their education within six months of graduation. Since the number one reason students pursue a college degree is to improve their employment outlook, this represents an outstanding return on investment.

Just last week, Carnegie classified CMU as one of just four Opportunity Universities in the state. That means we are both providing tremendous access to an education AND providing students with a pathway to a well-paying career.

And more than two-thirds of CMU graduates stay and work in Michigan after they graduate. In fact, there are over 150,000 CMU alumni living in the state of Michigan today.

CMU is working with community partners throughout Michigan to help communities thrive through research and educational programs that benefit both students and the local economy.

In northern Michigan, we recently expanded our presence in Traverse City by opening a hub at TC Connect. CMU has had a presence in Traverse City since 1995, and we continue to enhance access to higher education and professional development for people across the region. We are proud to offer residents quality education for in-demand skills where they already have roots.

CMU Innovation and Online is expanding access to higher education by partnering with Michigan companies to offer courses for employees in areas they may need to tool up. As employees gain new skills that help companies compete in the marketplace, they also create new pathways for their own career growth.

We are committed to offering these high-quality, transformational learning experiences at a price that keeps education within reach for Michigan students and their families.

For years, CMU has made strategic budget decisions to keep tuition affordable, even in the face of inflation. As a result, CMU's rates are among the lowest in the state. Out of the 15 Michigan public universities, CMU ranks 13th in undergraduate tuition costs — making us one of the most affordable degree programs in the state. When coupled with our Career Outcomes Rate, the return on investment for CMU graduates is tremendous.

Your support of the Michigan Achievement Scholarship also helps us keep degrees within reach for Michiganders.

And we are ready to serve more students. Although CMU experienced significant enrollment declines over the past decade, we have grown new student enrollments and increased retention rates in each of the past two years. This year, we are developing a strategic enrollment management plan and creating new pathways for education.

For example, CMU is simplifying the transfer process and making it easier to understand course transferability. We are fostering strong partnerships with community colleges to ensure seamless student transitions through 63 agreements with partner institutions in every corner of the state.

This year, we launched an initiative called Central Bound in partnership with Lansing Community College. This cohesive program allows for dual admission and dual enrollment at both institutions, providing a seamless academic experience for degree completion. Based on the pilot's success, we plan to expand this to other community colleges.

In addition to providing options for community college students, CMU also offers high school students opportunities to earn credit toward a college degree. Our dual-enrollment programs help high school students explore academic interests early, make more informed choices, and stay on track to graduate in less time.

For 133 years, CMU has been meeting Michigan's career preparation and education needs, and we need your help to keep that legacy alive. Today, I ask you to continue to generously support the important work of higher education through investment in our base funding. It truly is an investment in Michigan's future; a future where residents are prepared for careers to help Michigan industries grow and to *Fire Up* Michigan's economy.