If you’ve heard my elevator speech about Robert Morris University, then you probably know one of our key selling points: 93 percent of our students land a job or are accepted into graduate school within six months of graduation.

Here’s something I bet you didn’t know: RMU is a net importer of young professionals to our area. That’s right -- while 75 percent of RMU students come from the Pittsburgh region, an even greater number, 85 percent, stay in the region after graduation.

In a city with an aging and declining population, young workers are a precious commodity. And in a knowledge-based economy, cities and states can no longer count on the old ways to lure employers, like tax breaks and new highways. Rather, it is a qualified workforce that separates the have from the have-nots.

Pittsburgh learned decades ago that there is no longer any such thing as unskilled labor, as least not for those who want a middle-class life for themselves and their children. According to a recent survey of 400 businesses across the United States, the four most highly valued workplace skills are professionalism, teamwork, oral communication, and ethics and social responsibility. Critical thinking and creativity are increasingly important, and employers plan to hire more college graduates and fewer workers with only a high school diploma.

Back to the elevator speech. RMU draws students from 40 states and 32 countries, and many of them get jobs here in Pittsburgh. That’s because we not only give them the knowledge specific to their profession, but those skills I listed above that are in demand by today’s employers. As a university, RMU has a unique responsibility to help build the local economy, given the premium that companies now place on human capital.

You can read about the impact we’ve had on the Pittsburgh economy on the next page, where RMU trustee and alumnus Richard Harshman discusses our newly accredited School of Business. Then you can learn what we are doing to help two populations of students who might not otherwise have access to higher education: students attending RMU through the Pittsburgh Promise and veterans covered under the new G. I. Bill.

That reminds me of one last thing I want to share with you. Recently, we celebrated commencement, and we invited back alumni who had graduated at least 50 years ago. They told stories, one by one, of attending RMU back when it was an accounting school that leased space in the William Penn Hotel. One man said almost as an afterthought that he was part of the D-Day invasion, and when his voice cracked it was evident that he still considers himself lucky to be alive.

The room burst into applause. Men and women like him helped build the Pittsburgh we know today. Who will build the Pittsburgh of tomorrow?

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
A few weeks ago I was flipping through the newspaper and came across the name of my alma mater staring at me in big, bold letters. Robert Morris University was running advertisements in local papers to announce that its School of Business has been accredited by AACSB International – The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

More on what accreditation means in a moment. First, let me talk a little bit about that ad, which featured the logos of some of the local companies that employ RMU graduates. They also happen to be some of the nation’s leading corporations, including Fortune 500 firms such as PNC, U.S. Steel, H.J. Heinz, and Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI), where I have been the chief financial officer for nine years.

Those 24 companies employ more than 1,800 RMU alumni. Imagine Pittsburgh without Bayer or Federated. Without Dick’s or PPG. Without Eat ‘n’ Park or UPMC. The city just wouldn’t be the same without them, and none of them would be the same without RMU.

Then again, I may be a little biased. Whatever professional success I’ve enjoyed, I attribute largely to two things: the support of my wife and family and the solid, professionally focused education I received at Robert Morris University. I was the first in my family to earn a college degree, and I was lucky to receive such an excellent education at such an affordable institution. As I recently recounted during a talk at RMU, I might not have even finished were it not for the extra $1,000 in scholarship aid the university gave me before my senior year.

When I graduated in 1978 with a degree in accounting, I was hired as an internal auditor at Teledyne, Inc. – a predecessor company of ATI and at the time a Fortune 100 company. The company recruited graduates of some of the top accounting programs in the nation: the University of Illinois; UCLA; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Indiana – and Robert Morris University.

As I worked with these other young accountants and took stock of their knowledge and talents, I realized that my education at RMU was every bit as excellent as theirs. That encouraged me to set a goal -- to become the CFO of a Fortune 500 company by the time I turned 45. And I achieved that goal in no small part because of what I learned at Robert Morris University.

So what does it mean that the business school is now AACSB-accredited? Let me put it into perspective: There are about 15,000 business programs worldwide, and only 4 percent have received AACSB accreditation. Only one-third of business schools in the United States have received this credential, which can only be earned after a rigorous six-year review process. And AACSB singled out RMU for several “best practices” that will serve as a model for other business schools.

As proud as I am of my alma mater for this achievement, it simply tells the rest of the world what Pittsburgh’s corporate community has known for years: When it comes to giving students the tools they need to flourish in the workplace, RMU is a world leader.
Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt has called the Pittsburgh Promise “the largest philanthropic bet in the history of Pittsburgh.”

Not that we see it as a gamble at RMU, where 32 Pittsburgh Promise students have wrapped up their freshman year. More Pittsburgh Promise students enrolled at RMU last fall than any other private college or university.

One of them is James Jermany, a graduate of Schenley High School who is majoring in software engineering. “The professors here at Robert Morris actually want to see you become something, and to have that support in college is great,” says James.

The Pittsburgh Promise provides a $5,000 annual scholarship for four years – it will grow to $10,000 a year in 2012 – regardless of need to graduates of Pittsburgh public high schools. RMU has the lowest tuition of any private school in Allegheny County, but only 21 students from the Pittsburgh Public Schools enrolled at RMU in the fall of 2007, before the scholarship program was available.

“There are students who would not be able to afford a private school without the Pittsburgh Promise,” says John Michalenko, RMU’s dean of students.

Two hundred more students from the Pittsburgh Public Schools attended college in the fall of 2008 than in the previous year, even though the graduating class was smaller, according to Saleem Ghubril, executive director of the Pittsburgh Promise.

“The real measure of success will be in four years to see how many of them complete their college education,” he says.

To help our RMU Promise students succeed, we provide them with academic support, mentoring, leadership training, and special social events. The students formed their own campus organization, and they’ve become some of RMU’s best ambassadors to their former high schools.

So far it’s working. As a group, the RMU Promise students have a mean QPA of 2.82, and 15 have a QPA of at least 3.0. One RMU Promise student has a perfect 4.0.

“I’m a product of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, and I saw a lot of the people I went to school with not have the opportunity to go college,” says Paul Spradley, an RMU alumnus and assistant director of student life for multicultural affairs.

A 1999 graduate of Brashear High School, Paul is overseeing the RMU Promise program. “Having a support program like ours is huge,” says Paul.

Civic leaders in Pittsburgh are betting on the Pittsburgh Promise and its associated school reform measures to revive the city and its school district. The program was inspired by a similar effort in Kalamazoo, Mich., that is credited with helping to attract 400 new families from outside the city within two years of the program’s launch.

“One of the key issues for people wanting to live and work in the city is to have a strong public school system,” said John Ellis, spokesman for the Pittsburgh Foundation, which administers the Pittsburgh Promise. “The Pittsburgh Promise is not in itself a silver bullet. But it’s as close to one as we’re going to get.”
Veterans: RMU Wants You

In a year of difficult economic decisions, I recently had an easy call to make – our announcement in February that we will offer a free education to any qualifying veteran who applies to Robert Morris University under the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. The bill, which goes into effect in August, pays up to the highest public school tuition in the state. The RMU Military Service Award makes up the difference between that and our own tuition, half with the university’s own funds and half with a federal matching grant.

We were one of the first private universities in the country to make such an offer, and we’ve had hundreds of inquiries since the announcement. Already 130 veterans study at RMU, and I am eager to find out how many more will accept our invitation. With almost 30,000 veterans under age 45 in the Pittsburgh metro area alone, we could be looking at quite a few.

From the outset we chose not to limit the number of new veteran students we will accept for the Military Service Award. It’s our privilege and our duty to welcome them. In America’s hour of need, these brave men and women stepped forward and volunteered to serve. Now many are returning to civilian life in the midst of a financial crisis.

It’s a tough enough job market for anybody. But veterans face additional challenges. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, veterans who have served their country since 9/11 have an unemployment rate of 7.3 percent, almost 2 points higher than the 5.6 percent unemployment rate of non-veterans. The gap is even greater for women; over 9 percent of female veterans who enlisted since 2001 are looking for a job.

Richard Portis, who runs RMU’s Veterans Business Outreach Center, frequently touts the raw business aptitude of our servicemen and women. As Richard puts it, they are comfortable with technology, they understand the value of diversity, they respect good leadership, and they are trained to perform under pressure. That makes them a tremendous potential asset for the region’s workforce.

Still, there is something deeper that veterans can contribute. I was inspired by the story of Silas Watkins, a member of the Air Force Reserve who is working on a degree in sport management at RMU. Like many veterans, Silas has to balance his studies and other student activities – he plays inline hockey on the university’s club team -- with military commitments that can take him away from campus for months at a time.

Last summer Silas was sent to Delaware, to work in the unit that receives the remains of deceased soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan and prepares them for return to their families for burial. That experience stuck with him. It helps Silas to bear his own sacrifices with true dignity, and it makes him an example to others.

I agree with state Sen. John Pippy, a veteran and West Point graduate, who says RMU is not only helping veterans with this program. It’s helping other students too. The more our students can meet people like Silas and come to understand what he and others like him have given for their country, the richer their own educations will be.