Some colleges and universities refuse to think of themselves as businesses, yet higher education is one of our nation’s most competitive industries. Thousands of schools dot the landscape: large research institutions, state schools, private liberal arts colleges, for-profits. Like any business, we attract customers by demonstrating what distinguishes us from our competitors. What does Robert Morris University provide that students might not find elsewhere?

What we give students is a professionally focused education, consistent with our roots as a business school, but with a personal touch. It’s integral to our promise to change students’ lives. That means our faculty work closely with students in small classroom settings, not merely as instructors but as professional mentors, sharing their own industry experience — something RMU requires faculty to possess, which is not typical in higher education. That’s why, even in a down economy, most of our students find jobs in their field within a year of graduation.

In practice, though, what does this look like? I’m happy to show you in this edition of the President’s Insider. Most of you know that on September 6, we marked the opening of our new School of Business building and celebrated our 90th anniversary. At that event, we surprised RMU trustee Dave Malone with the inaugural David J. Malone Volunteer Service Award in recognition of his leadership of our “Changing Lives, Building Futures” capital campaign.

What made this particularly special was that the award itself was created by RMU graphic design student Casey Stephens and Jon Radermacher, M.F.A., head of the Department of Media Arts.

As Jon and Casey explain in the pages that follow, Casey was not Jon’s assistant, but his collaborator. They shared ideas and solved problems, even connecting over Skype when necessary. They not only designed the award together but hand-crafted the version that was given to Dave. The award will become a symbol of what RMU does to ensure its students’ success, and how hard they work to earn it.

Jon and Casey’s collaboration also demonstrates how we apply RMU’s unique brand of education to a field like graphic design. We introduced our Media Arts programs in 2002; it would have been unfathomable 20 or 30 years ago that RMU would offer a bachelor of fine arts. Yet it is our longstanding emphasis on business and communication skills that give our Media Arts programs an edge over traditional art schools. Our students not only excel in their medium, but they know how to translate that talent and creativity into success in the workplace.

It’s why we are excited to bring our Media Arts programs to our Moon campus from downtown, which we will do next fall with the opening of the new School of Communications and Information Systems building, pictured on the last page of this issue. Media Arts are the last of our programs to leave downtown Pittsburgh, and they will carry with them the tradition of excellence we started there 90 years ago.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
When Nina Margiotta, associate vice president for institutional advancement, was looking for someone to design and craft the inaugural David J. Malone Volunteer Service Award, she did not have to look further than RMU’s own Department of Media Arts. Jon Radermacher, M.F.A., department head and associate professor of media arts, was a natural to create the award, due to his expertise in sculpture. But Jon wanted this to be a collaborative project and immediately thought of graphic design major Casey Stephens, a junior from Washington, Pa., who had shown great promise in Jon’s 3-D design class. The resulting award is not only an honor for one of RMU’s most venerated trustees, but an example of the special nature of an RMU education, one in which students and professors collaborate to study, explore, and create together.

Jon and Casey sat down with writer Amy Scanlon to hear how David’s accomplishments inspired them to design and craft an award that would honor the impact of volunteers for years to come.

**CASEY:** I thought going into it that Jon would have the idea and I was just there to help out. At first, I was waiting for him to tell me what to do. Then he pretty much said, “You know we’re working on this together, and it’s not you following me.” I started jotting down imagery that popped into my head, and we played off that.

**JON:** He comes back with a few ideas, and we start throwing concepts, symbolism, all kinds of stuff. We sat there for an hour and a half and just went back and forth.

**CASEY:** I filled up two pages of a sketch pad with words and symbols.

**JON:** The product of that is you start homing in and getting closer to what you think is a solution to the design problem. That initial session, we got a lot out of the way, so I would say that we were probably 60 percent of the way toward having the design finished by the time we finished that one brainstorming session.

The design process happened over the course of several months. At one point, Jon was in Slovakia, and he and Casey used Skype technology to keep the process moving.

**JON:** I was gone in June for 10 days and we had to connect over this. It was 11:00 at night, my time, and 4 or 5 in the afternoon for him, and we hooked up. He’s holding up his sketch pad over the webcam!

According to Jon and Casey, the final design represents Dave Malone’s action and impact. The entire structure is grounded by a black marble base, symbolizing solidity and strength. As you trace the sculpture upward, it moves from natural to man-made materials. The arms reflect the idea of “having his hands in everything,” the ball is a central point that holds together his...
accomplishments, and the rippled disk represents everything that is affected by his hands and his accomplishments.

Coming up with the design was only the first part of the challenge. The second half involved crafting the award.

**JON:** We did soldering and made jigs to form the metal around. We were whaling on this half-inch brass stock with a 3-pound dead blow hammer trying to bend it.

**CASEY:** We probably went through six or seven different processes, trying to get one...

**JON:** ...To find the one that worked. It’s always a learning process for me when it’s a new project I’ve never made before. There are always challenges to overcome with the fabrication – that’s half the fun.

**CASEY:** If you get it right on the first time, you’re suspicious of it!

we ended up making what’s called a spontaneous design change, with the bevel on the bottom of it. But the bevel actually looked better than having the cone go straight to the ground, so that was actually a happy accident, a very happy accident.

In all, Jon and Casey spent approximately 60 hours fabricating the award, working down to the last minute. At noon on the day of the ceremony, the glue was still drying.

**CASEY:** I remember finishing it, having a huge high-five. The ceremony was just a weight lifted off my shoulders, seeing it in [Dave’s] hand. It was four months of work.

Neither Casey nor Jon will forget the experience anytime soon.

**JON:** I’d worked on projects with other people, but it wasn’t so much two minds coming together to make one project. While I’m a trained artisan who has been doing it for 17 years now, there were still things that he mentioned and brought up that were eye-opening to me.

**CASEY:** It was absolutely unique. I’d never done anything like that, and it was a great honor.

Because the process would be difficult to repeat annually, Jon will source the award components so that future awards require assembly only. Dave Malone’s award will be the only one that is hand-crafted, and as Jon says, “I think it should be special that way.”

**KNOW WE’RE WORKING ON THIS TOGETHER, AND IT’S NOT YOU FOLLOWING ME.”**
NEW HOME FOR MEDIA ARTS

The Department of Media Arts, and ultimately the entire School of Communications and Information Systems, will be housed in what is now the Wayne Center, a one-story, U-shaped building that formerly housed the facilities services department. The building, constructed in 2002, sits on a gentle rise on the eastern perimeter of campus, across from the intramural field and adjacent to the Upper Massey parking lot.

When the entire project is completed, the building will include three stories and 53,000 square feet, featuring a first-floor atrium, café, and public art gallery. Construction is taking place in phases. During the first phase, underway since November, the building’s existing shell, approximately 20,000 square feet, is being renovated to provide studio and classroom space for the Media Arts programs, which will move into the facility from downtown Pittsburgh next fall.

The second phase will consist of a three-story addition that will be built in what is now the Wayne Center courtyard, and will add 33,000 square feet to the existing structure. The second and third floors will include faculty offices and a screening room. The building also will include digital and film photo labs, a metal shop and a wood shop, and four general purpose classrooms. The exterior of the building will feature a prominent video screen to display student work and messages, visible to much of campus.

The building will have extended hours, a traditional facet of art schools, where students and faculty like to congregate, collaborate, and bounce ideas off one another any time, night or day. That not only eliminates the inconvenience of having to shuttle back and forth downtown – particularly since most Media Arts students live on campus – but it will also integrate the Media Arts programs fully into the life of the campus. The facility adds a cultural component to RMU that we plan to share with the Moon Township community.

Once both phases are completed, the Wayne Center project will free Patrick Henry Center for the School of Education and Social Sciences, another step in providing each of our academic schools with their own dedicated space.