I started the new year with a trip to the annual Council of Independent Colleges presidents’ conference, where I was privileged to give a presentation about how Robert Morris University weathered the financial crisis and recession of 2008 and 2009.

Many colleges and universities were hit hard by the collapse of the financial markets, and RMU was no exception. We started the summer of 2008 anticipating a 6 percent growth in new freshman enrollment, based on the number of students who had paid their deposits. By the time classes started, our freshman class was actually down by about 3 percent.

That “melt,” as it is called, opened a hole in our budget and appeared to be an ominous sign of things to come. If new students could not afford to enroll, what would happen to our current students, many of whom come from low-income families hit hard by the recession?

As I explained to my fellow presidents, we emerged from this crisis stronger than ever thanks to the shared sacrifice and collective action of all our faculty and staff. We took defensive measures that included a strategically implemented 15 percent cut to most departmental budgets and a staff salary freeze. Our Faculty Federation volunteered to forgo much of the raise due our professors under their collective bargaining agreement, and we funneled all the money saved on faculty and staff raises financial aid for needy students.

Just as importantly, I called on all employees to accept responsibility for student enrollment and retention. This was not a tough sell; RMU is a student-centered institution where faculty and staff have a strong sense of mission. We empowered employees by creating a scholarship program in which prospective students referred to RMU by employees received $4,000 over the course of their college career.

My senior leadership team and I always shared the unvarnished truth about the university’s short-term financial challenges, while asking staff to nonetheless stay focused on our long-term goals. You might expect employees to become panicked or demoralized, and no doubt some did. But many seemed to go about their jobs with a renewed sense of purpose, and that manifested itself in myriad ways – things as simple but as vital as stopping to smile and say hello to prospective students and their parents as they toured campus. It showed up in more tangible ways as well: From 2008-09 to 2009-10, faculty and staff donations to the university increased by approximately 20 percent.

Over the next three pages you’ll read about what we accomplished at RMU in spite of these challenges. As I learned at the conference, many of our peers continue to hunker down, fearful of what the future might bring. But that’s simply not how we do things at Robert Morris.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
For the fall of 2008, the Office of Admissions expected to bring in 700 new students. But only 647 showed up when classes started in August.

“It was disappointing, to say the least,” says Kellie Laurenzi, dean of admissions.

Kellie and her team didn’t sit around wringing their hands. Along with the rest of the university, they went to work, and set about bringing in two consecutive record-setting freshman classes: 720 in the fall of 2009, and 900 this past fall.

“Most important, this growth has come without degradation of quality or diversity,” says Michael Frantz, vice president of enrollment management.

Mike says the rising interest in RMU comes from the growth the university has seen both in academics and athletics. “The maturation of a number of relatively new academic and athletic programs makes them appealing to a greater number of students,” he says. “Certainly, being in the news around March Madness the last couple of years has been helpful.”

Mike is quick to point out that one of the main reasons for the increased enrollment is the way RMU treats admissions as a team effort.

“The admissions office is blessed to have individuals across campus who understand we are a tuition-driven institution and who put great effort, well above and beyond their ‘regular’ jobs, into recruitment,” Mike says. “This extends from faculty members who meet individually with campus visitors and make calls and send e-mails to accepted students, to the entire Student Life staff who show up in force for every open house. It includes maintenance and custodial employees who ensure that we have a beautiful campus, to coaches who put winning teams on the field, which, in turn, garners much-needed attention for the university.”

All of this growth, although positive, has presented challenges. In addition to all the new students, RMU saw a 20 percent increase this year in the number of returning students who wanted to live on campus.

In order to make more room, the Residence Life staff converted lounges and other residence hall gathering spaces into living spaces. The university also placed 212 students at the nearby Holiday Inn Pittsburgh Airport Hotel, including approximately 20 freshmen. Dining hours were extended and seating added in all campus eateries. And the university broke ground on a new apartment-style residence hall, Peter Salem Hall, which will open for the fall of 2011.

“It’s just a much better living-learning environment,” says John Michalenko, vice president for student life. “There is more engagement on campus. It’s a more vibrant atmosphere with greater school spirit. We’ve added more than 20 student organizations in the past three years, and there is much more to do on campus now.”

John says that students like the convenience that campus living provides. It’s more affordable, there are more jobs available on campus now, and more students are sticking around during the weekends, too. “The majority of our residents tell us that living on campus is convenient, for activities, sports. They like living here.”
The enrollment crunch was the not the only impact of the recession on RMU. When the financial crisis hit, many donors were unable to give or wanted to wait to see how the economic situation would unfold. So major fundraising all but ceased, even though we were in the quiet phase of our capital campaign.

We still continued to build relationships with both longtime and prospective supporters, but in a way that was sensitive to their needs. We invited alumni to campus to see how RMU had grown since they were here. We brought supporters to basketball games and football games, and Polly and I hosted events at our home. We made sure they had opportunities to meet students and see how an RMU education changes lives.

Building relationships genuinely, based on our history and vision, is something I believe to be a strength of the university. Recent months have borne that out. We are grateful for these gifts, as well as others:

- $5 million from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, which, when it was announced, was the largest gift in the university’s history. The foundation gave $3 million toward a new building for the School of Business — under construction and set to open in the fall — and $2 million to create an endowment for the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management. The Bayer Center also recently received a gift from the Eden Hall Foundation to support a program researching the lives of women in nonprofit organizations.

- $10 million from the Pennsylvania Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, including $5 million for the business school building and $5 million for a planned medical simulation center for the School of Nursing and Health Sciences.

- $1 million from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous, to endow a four-year, full tuition scholarship for an economically disadvantaged student in the university’s actuarial science program. The student will have to meet the actuarial science program’s rigorous enrollment standards: at least a 650 on the mathematics portion and 550 on the verbal portion of the SAT and at least a 3.5 GPA. The H.J. Heinz Co. Foundation also has agreed to fund a full-tuition scholarship aimed at business students from diverse backgrounds.

- $250,000 from the Jewish Healthcare Foundation to establish the Alvin Rogal Research Award in Safety and Quality Improvement, which supports research by students in the doctor of nursing practice program.

The simulation facility, called The Regional Research and Innovations in Simulation Education (RISE) Center, will be a 19,000 square-foot building dedicated to nursing simulation education, research and training. The RISE Center will be a community resource that will be used to train nursing/health sciences educators, as well as be made available to other regional schools of nursing and health care organizations including the programs at Heritage Valley, Ohio Valley, Community College of Allegheny County, and others. The RISE Center is currently in the design phase.

The nursing school also received $845,000 for its simulation laboratory in John Jay Center, including $250,000 grant from Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield; a $500,000 state grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, presented by state Rep. Mark Mustio and state Sen. John Pippy; and a $95,000 federal grant made possible by U.S. Sens. Robert Casey Jr. and Arlen Specter.
Enrollment and fundraising are just part of the RMU story the last two years. Our students, faculty, and staff have earned many honors and accolades for the university. Too many, in fact, to list them all here, but these are a few recent highlights:

- Senior accounting and management major Andrea Beats received RMU’s Rising Star Award at the 2010 President’s Council Dinner. The award is given each year to a graduating senior who demonstrates academic success, individuality, determination, passion, and potential in his or her field of study. Receiving the Alumni Heritage Award was Jeff Bergman, a long-time NFL referee and entrepreneur who founded SMT Health Services.

- Heather Pinson, assistant professor of communication, wrote her first book, *The Jazz Image: Seeing Music through Herman Leonard’s Photography*. The late Herman Leonard took some of the most iconic photos of jazz’s golden age during the 1940s and 1950s.

- RMU’s student chapter of the American Marketing Association was recognized as one of the Most Outstanding Collegiate Chapters for 2009-10.

- The football team won its sixth Northeast Conference championship. Senior linebacker Alex DiMichele was named NEC Defensive Player of the Year, RMU’s all-time leading rusher Myles Russ was named NEC Offensive Player of the Year, and Joe Walton earned his fourth NEC Coach of the Year award.

- Shellie Hipsky, assistant professor of education, co-authored *Mentoring Magic: Picking the Card for Your Success* with Claudia Armani, a graduate of RMU’s Ph.D. program in instructional management and leadership.

- The softball team had the highest GPA in NCAA Division I softball for the second consecutive year, with a team average of 3.58. Annie Dubovec was named the NEC Softball Scholar-Athlete of the Year for her 3.92 GPA and .359 batting average.

- Philip Harold, assistant professor of political science, received a Fulbright Scholarship to study at The Catholic University in Eichstatt, Germany.

- The RMU-produced documentary “What Does Trouble Mean? Nate Smith’s Revolution” won the Award of Merit from the University Film and Video Association. The film, which tells the story of African American labor leader Nate Smith, was screened at the Three Rivers Film Festival and the First Glance Festival in Philadelphia.

- The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education extended accreditation for RMU’s nursing degree programs. Our degree programs in computer information systems, information ABET and the Nuclear Medicine Technology Program received accreditation by the Joint Review Committee on Education Programs in Nuclear Medicine Technology.

- The university added eight online degree programs this year. Other new degrees and course offerings include a master’s in special education and courses in Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin Chinese.