



Battered EMU turns to healing

University plans to restore image, focus

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As the board that governs Eastern Michigan University prepared to vote to oust top administrators over the cover-up of a campus killing, its leader spent several minutes highlighting all that was going right at EMU.

Even he acknowledged those accomplishments had been overshadowed.

Covering up the slaying of a student on campus. Underreporting other crimes. A faculty strike. Missing master keys. Building problems. A \$6-million president's home. In recent years, it seems, it has been one controversy after another at the Ypsilanti campus.

Many observers say the school is in a crisis, desperate to change its image, restore its damaged credibility and turn the focus back to the things officials say define EMU. Members of the Board of Regents said Monday that they are ready to build a culture of transparency and openness and get the campus back to its mission of teaching and learning.

Regents said the first step toward turning EMU around came this week when they dismissed President John A. Fallon III, Vice President of Student Affairs Jim Vick and Director of Public Safety Cindy Hall.

"It's a takeoff point to move ahead and focus on our students, focus on the fact that this university is all about supporting learning and student development," Donald Lopnow, the provost and executive vice president, said Tuesday. He has been tapped to handle presidential duties until an interim is named.

Experts say it could be a long haul.

"The sooner Eastern can get its focus back on its primary mission, the better off they will be," said Michael Boulus, president of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan. The controversies have hurt, said Steven Smith, an EMU senior from Westland.

"Unfortunately I think EMU has a negative image," Smith said. "We had people that are not honest leaders. They're worried about their personal agendas instead of the students and the staff. For Eastern to move forward, they really need to quit the backdoor politics."

The selection of a new president will be a key part of the turnaround, said Richard Novak, executive director of the Center for Public Trusteehip and Governance at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Just as important, some say, there needs to be a demonstration that the culture is changing. Board of Regents Chairman Thomas Sidlik talked Monday of a culture on campus characterized by lack of respect, bitter personal relationships, rumormongering and lack of credibility.

Transparency is the only way to go, said Christopher Simpson, who works with colleges in crisis. EMU erred, he said, in waiting about 10 weeks to announce that Laura Dickinson, 22,

of Hastings had been raped and killed in her dorm room in December.

"The American public is very forgiving. They understand bad things happen to good people on our campuses," Simpson said. "What they don't understand is lying, cover-up, obfuscation and spinning."

A U.S. Department of Education report this month criticized EMU for underreporting or misreporting campus crime for years. Why officials withheld information about Dickinson's death remains a mystery.

Some believe it was an effort to protect the university's reputation.

"There are some universities who do not want to make that information public for numerous reasons," said Alison Kiss, program director at Security on Campus, the Pennsylvania group whose complaint led to the federal investigation.

Loppnow said the university will continue to work to restore trust. University officials are implementing a new safety plan, staff will be trained in complying with federal safety rules and they'll launch a marketing campaign in the works prior to Dickinson's death.

The number of alumni donors is up, but the dollar figures have declined slightly.

"We trust that as we move ahead ... support for the institution will continue to grow," Loppnow said.

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