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TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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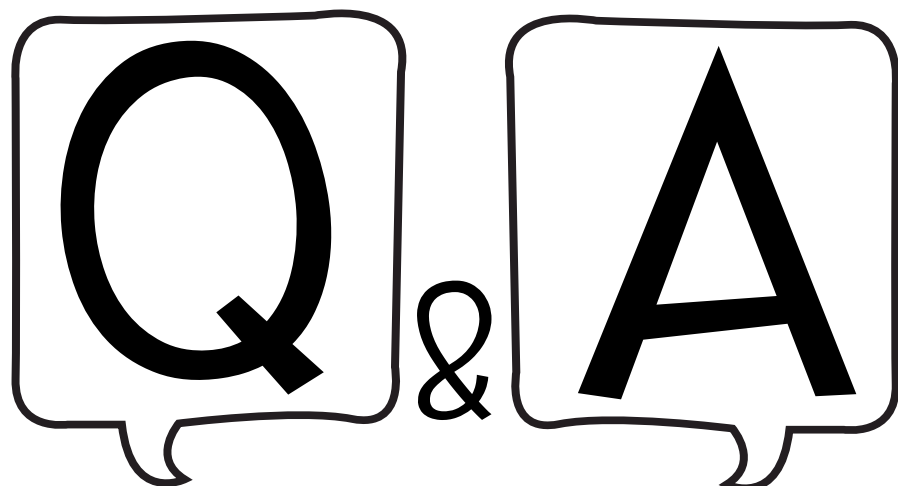
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Thomas weighs in on Truman's concerns



President
SUE THOMAS

answers Truman's questions



Submitted Photo

Interim President Sue Thomas will officially begin her position as Truman's University president March 1, 2017. Thomas's presidential contract will last until 2020 but is subject to early termination.

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After the Truman State University Board of Governors announced in an email on Friday, Feb. 10, that Interim University President Sue Thomas was selected unanimously as the 17th University President, Truman Media Network met with Thomas to get her take on both her newly - accepted position as well as prevalent issues in the Truman community.

Q: What are you looking forward to with being president?

A: "The coolest thing about being president is that you get to be involved in all aspects of the University. Whether it's academics, research, what the faculty are doing, what's going on in the classrooms, athletics, performances, student groups, residence hall things, working with donors, or alumni, or the legislatures. It's absolutely stunning you get to work with everyone who's affiliated with Truman. I think what I'm most looking forward to is being able to work with everybody and harness all of this and we are going to keep taking control of our destiny and we are going to keep doing phenomenal things."

Q: What would you like to say to students who are feeling discouraged or anxious about the budget cuts and the recent surcharge?

A: "The first thing I would say is don't be discouraged. Nobody wants to pay additional money. Everybody understands that. But I think we need to look across our whole institution and say to do the things we do and to have the high-quality education experiences we want to have and to continue to be a better and better Truman and ask what does that mean? What does that mean financially, in terms of resources, in terms of people, and how do we all come together to do that? I appreciate the \$50 surcharge was not anything anyone wanted to see, but out of an over \$3.1 million cut, that's only 8 percent of that entire cut. Truman dug deep to look for all kinds of other ways we could find that money. I think that's going to be true going forward, too. We're going to look to see how we can do things in different kinds of ways and how we meet our goals and outcomes in new and exciting kinds of ways. The fact of the matter is, when they take significant dollars away from you, you can only cut so much before it negatively impacts the experience you are offering. I think probably all of us agree the experience Truman offers is worth keeping and worth supporting. While nobody wants to spend money on that — if it comes down to it, do we decrease the quality of what we're doing, or do we put some additional dollars in because these dollars have gone away? I think that matters for all of us to do those kinds of things. Truman students have been quite lucky. If you look over the past five years, tuition has gone up \$174. That's all. Our students are very used to not having tuition increases. So it seems like a very dramatic increase because when you're used to nothing, anything seems pretty huge compared to that. Truman is very generous with institutional aid. We give probably double the institutional aid of most other universities like us. We significantly discount our tuition on campus, so I completely understand our students are not used to paying significant dollars for their education. As soon as there's any question about increasing [tuition], that makes people nervous. That makes people worried and stressed. If we're going to increase tuition, we're only doing it because it's necessary to do so. It's not a default option. It's how do we make sure we're the very best Truman we can be, and what does it take so we can be that best Truman? The problem is when it's done at mid-year, you have very few degrees of freedom where you can find that money because a majority of our budget goes to salaries and keeping the lights on and keeping the buildings warm. All of that is very expensive and something we can't cut out. Truman is always looking for ways to save money. But at some point you have to bring more revenue. We're looking at other sources of revenue and how we can bring money in whether it's donors or grants or programs. We can't just look at cuts. We're looking at bringing in other sources of revenue, but tuition income is also one of those sources of revenue. We're in the middle of a capital campaign which is a big public push to get donated a certain amount of money. Truman is working on a \$40 million capital campaign right now to bring \$40 million into the institution. The biggest one is to support scholarships."

Q: How do you plan to promote diversity on campus, especially for underrepresented students such as racial minority students, international students, LG-BTQ students, and students with developmental disabilities?

A: "I think those groups all share needs and have separate needs. I think the greatest way to support all those students is to support their individual needs. The question is how do we support individual groups who might have distinct needs? We have to work with those groups of students to find out what is it they really need. If they are not feeling enormously comfortable, why is that the case and then what do we do about it? I have no experience as an underrepresented racial minority. I don't have a developmental disability. I don't have a hidden learning disability or a mental health issue. I'm a married straight woman. But I can listen. I can hear what they're saying and work towards making sure their needs are met. I think we're making good progress with the

strategic plan for inclusive excellence. They're addressing major issues and symbolic kinds of issues. We will have a display of international flags. That's very symbolic. That doesn't do anything to help any one individual person but it sends a very strong symbolic message. The [Multicultural Affairs Center] is going to be on the first floor of Baldwin when it's renovated. We have to cut across the line from symbolic things to very substantive things. I really believe Truman having the discussions and having the commitment is what will make the difference. We can't just say it, we have to walk it."

Q: As a first generation student yourself, how do you plan to support first generation students at Truman?

A: "The very first step is recognizing first generation college students need some additional support. If you've had somebody who goes before you and knows how it works, they can help you figure it out. When you're a first generation college student, you don't generally have anybody who can help you navigate your college experience. You're as bright and as talented as everyone else on campus, but you're missing pieces of knowledge that other people just have naturally. I'm thrilled that we've realized first generation college students may need some support in terms of knowledge and connections. I remember when I was in college I worked in the cafeteria. I was a cruder — a cruder was the one who scraped dishes. There were lots of time I'd look and see my friends going out to dinner or on campus. I didn't have any money. I was putting myself through school and I had to work, and they weren't working. There were times I wondered if I belong there because I was having to do it differently than they did. To be able to let every single one of our students know that each and every one of them belongs here is huge. First generation college students have similar but somewhat different needs, and I'm thrilled we are looking at the needs of our students and seeing how we can help support them. I'm thrilled to be involved with the work they're doing, and it's important to me that every single one of our solitary students knows this is exactly where they belong, this is the place they're going to succeed. We just need to make sure we have support in place for all of them."

Q: How do you plan to destigmatize and help with the growing mental health concerns on Truman's campus?

A: "We've added additional mental health counselors, but that's not the long-term answer. One of the things we've been talking about a lot is developing programming in resilience and psychological grit. If you are able to have resilience and psychological grit, you see a set back, a mistake, a failure, as a growing opportunity and you don't let it throw you off your course. You don't let mistakes define you. You don't let negative experiences define you. You say 'how do I learn from it, how do I move forward, how do I pick myself back up?' You talk to any successful person and they've had a million different setbacks. There's an old adage — it's not how many times you fall down it's how many times you stand back up. One of the things we want to work with our students on is how to be able to work with that psychological grit and resilience and how to be able to stand back up. Setbacks don't define you. Your grades don't define you. Your ACT score does not define you. You define you. Helping our students to develop those kinds of mindsets we think can very much help mental health. Our students concern me in how stressed they get about all of those kinds of things. When you have a campus full of bright, young, talented students it's hard for them to ask for help. Many of our students are quite used to being the helpers. They're quite uncomfortable being the helpes. You all were great in high school, and you helped all your friends, so it throws you off psychologically if you feel like you have to ask for help because that's not who you think you are. You think asking for help is a negative. Asking for help is never a negative. It's always a positive, and, I would argue, a sign of strength. I ask for help multiple times a day. One person cannot know everything there is to know about this University and all the complexity of it. We have a whole team of people ready to help whenever people need it. Students just have to ask for it."

Q: What is your role as a woman in a position of power to other female students?

A: "A number of women students have told me how thrilled they are that there's a woman president. I don't think of myself as a woman president. I think it's very important for women that they don't put that descriptor in front of who they are. I think putting that descriptor on limits it for others or limits it for me. That being said, I know I'm a woman, I know I'm a president. I think for women students it's nice for them to see, but I never want a woman student to define herself with 'woman' as a descriptor in front of everything. A man doesn't do it. We didn't say [former] President [Troy] Paino was a male president. We never used 'male' as a descriptor. Let's not use 'female' as a descriptor. You should never define yourself by what you think a woman can or cannot do. If I can help by being in this position [and] have our students not define themselves that way, then that's fabulous for me."

Editor's Note: To read the full Question and Answer with Sue Thomas go to tmn.truman.edu.