

Plain talk from the president

George Russell has no thoughts on the origin of his nickname, Bullet. But the new president has an arsenal of ideas about running the University of Missouri System.

His plain-talking, no-nonsense character appealed to the Board of Curators last summer. They catapulted him into the presidency, effective Nov. 1, bypassing the typical national search process to the ire of faculty members.

"The curators wanted somebody who knew the system, who could get something done," says Russell, 70, former chancellor of the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "They did a room-wide search, and there I was." He replaces C. Peter Magrath, who resigned after six years to become president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-grant Colleges in Washington.

Russell wondered whether his wife would come with him. "She wasn't all that happy about it, but this is our 48th year and she wasn't about to bail out," he says. The Russells held no inauguration and are quietly settling into Providence Point, the president's home in a wooded area south of the Hearnes Center. The house needed bathroom curtains and a kitchen upgrade. When a designer proposed an \$85,000 remodeling, Ruth Ann whittled that down to \$8,700, a figure that includes a refrigerator. She shopped for the curtains at K-Mart and Wal-Mart.

Such efficiencies Russell intends to chart for MU.

"There are certain things that have been bad management, and we're not going to do that anymore," he says. "We are going to have competitive salaries. Our facilities are going to be maintained. We're going to have more money going into the library. We're going to improve the equipment we have in the laboratories."

To get the \$80 million for the four-campus system to fund those priorities, Russell has initiated a five-year plan that involves upping student fees and redirecting campus resources. About half of the money will come from each. No major infusion of state dollars is expected, given the recession and Proposition B's failure.

"We're not going to spend less money; we're going to spend more money. I hope we spend it more wisely than we have in the past. To that extent, the University of Missouri-Columbia has an opportunity to become a much greater, much more important institution to the state than it is now. If we cannot sustain a program at sufficiently high quality, we must quit doing it. And, with the resources we have, we simply cannot continue all we are doing now with the level of quality we must demand."

Russell raises the question whether the system needs two medical programs, two law programs, veterinary medicine, two engineering programs, three schools of education and three schools of business.

"We spread ourselves so thinly that we do some jobs not too well and some jobs that could be done by others." Contributing to the University's economic state, Russell says, are abnormally low student fees. "If you look at the 1970s and 1980s, there's four or five years in there we had no increases at all even though inflation was 5 or 6 percent." During that time, MU let faculty salaries and building maintenance slide. "That's a disgraceful way of handling state resources."

To Russell, access to higher education and student fees are separate issues. "To some extent, you cut off people by keeping fees too low because you don't have the resources to support really needy students." Student fees account for one-third of the

total cost of educating students. Russell says that every student at the University is subsidized \$6,000 a year from General Assembly appropriations. Last year as UMKC chancellor, Russell led a four-campus task force that set a \$200-a-year base increase over each of five years in addition to inflation. It was forwarded and approved by the curators. At the January board meeting, 45 medical students protested the increases.

His philosophy is this: "I believe that what we should try to do is make it possible for every young person to obtain a baccalaureate degree if they're capable of doing so."

Russell believes the economic gains of graduate and professional study accrue more to the individual than to society. "I don't believe the University should pay its faculty inadequate salaries, should allow its physical facilities to run down and not have good laboratory equipment just so we can subsidize somebody in veterinary school or whatever professional school.

"We tend now to have students who believe they're entitled to low fees," Russell says. "Entitlements in the long run, in general, tend to undermine society." He envisions a statewide scholarship commission that would have the resources to take care of needy students.

If that makes him sound like an elitist, so be it. "Higher education is an elite operation. There's no way you can take two people with an IQ of 80 and have them produce for society what you'll have one person produce with an IQ of 160. But you want to carry people as far as they can go in that process. I don't mind being called elitist, a quality place."

Story by **KAREN WORLEY**
Photo by **ROB HILL**

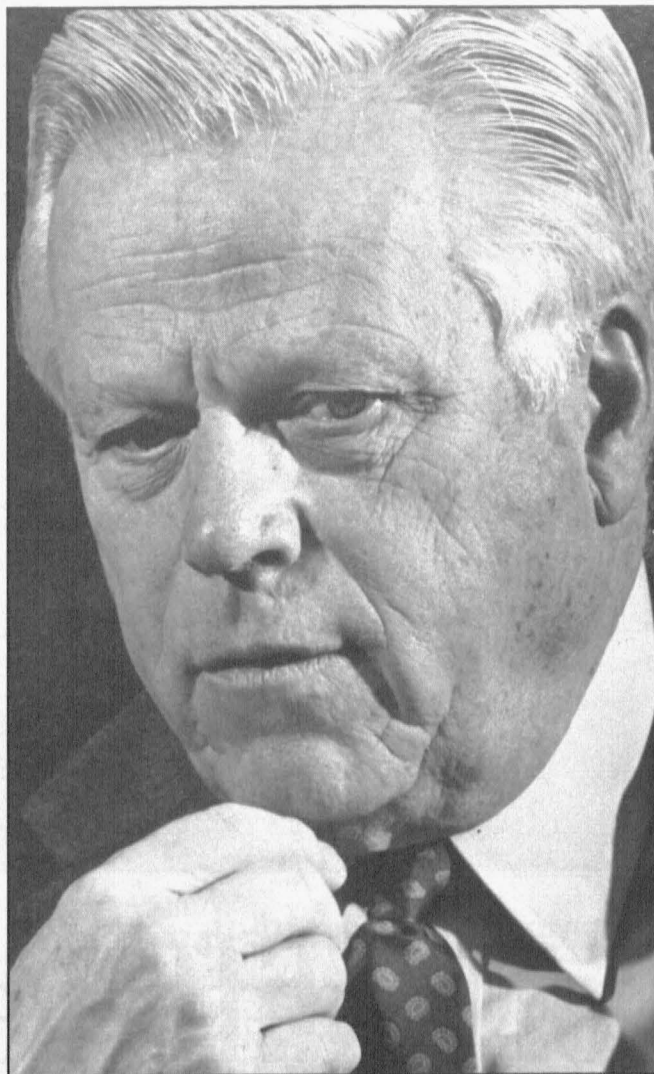
Russell has appointed a nine-member search committee of curators, deans and faculty to find a replacement for Haskell Monroe, who resigned as chancellor Dec. 31. Student leaders are upset they're not represented. Neither are alumni and staff. "Adding people around the table doesn't help that process at all," Russell says.

He welcomes recommendations. Once the search committee has identified the best candidates, Russell says, "We'll expose those candidates to as broad a spectrum as we can — the executive committee of the MU Alumni Association, student government officers, deans and directors." Written assessments will be requested. He hopes to have the position filled by the start of fall semester.

Each time the MU chancellor's position is in transition, speculation abounds about combining it with the system president job, and Russell intends to discuss it with the curators this time. "I think it could be done very easily and efficiently," he says.

Would he want the job? "I don't lust for any more jobs than I have. The first person to come in there would have a whole host of problems that need to be solved — put the organization together, that sort of thing. I wouldn't mind doing that. I think I could do it and do it well and also make certain that the other campuses didn't feel set upon."

One reason he thinks it could work is because the MU Campus has a statewide mission. It is the oldest Campus with the broadest array of programs. But much has changed, including state demographics, since the University was founded in 1839 as a major land-grant institution satisfying the needs of an agrarian society. Russell says today's statewide needs include engineering and agriculture. His biggest concern with MU



George Russell

Personal: Native of Bertrand in southeast Missouri
Family: Married to Ruth Ann Ashby Russell of Charleston, Mo., for 47 years; father of four, Russ, Frank, Cissy and Andy, and grandfather of 12.
Hobbies: Golf, reading.
Residence: Columbia
Retirement: "When it's not fun is when I'll retire."
Education: Bachelor's in electrical engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1947; master's and doctoral degrees in physics from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1952, 1955.
Salary: \$150,000

Russell makes impression on college chum

William Holman of Fayette, Mo., knew George Russell in his younger years. In a Dec. 24 *Columbia Daily Tribune* column, Holman recalls their days as students at the University of Illinois.

"I read where there was some criticism of Russell's sleeping through the curators' meetings. Don't you believe it. Bullet never slept unless he had the course material cold. This is a man who does not suffer fools gladly, so I would advise those doing business with him to do their homework. I can assure you he has done his.

"And don't be fooled by his age. It could have only improved his judgment, which was already good a long time ago."

is a lack of boldness. "The idea that MU would not have a major presence in Kansas City and St. Louis and be absolutely essential to those areas is sort of puzzling to me. I would like to see MU once again become very important to those communities."

And it can. "In the long run, quality programs will be the programs in which students want to be. We ought to be the most challenging institution for undergraduates. I think we ought

to try to 'rightsize,' not downsize, not upsize. The curators want this to be the premier public institution in the Midwest. For the resources we have, we ought to take X number of graduate students, Y number of professional students and Z number of undergraduate students and do a high-quality job of handling those students. In the long run, the people of Missouri will say we're doing it right and our resources would not suffer." □