

# A Time of Tradition and a Time of Change

EMU, 1973–2023

BY JOHN G. McCURDY

## Snapshot: 1973

When classes began at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in September 1973, *The Eastern Echo* bemoaned the fact that enrollment had fallen to 18,392 students. The school newspaper also highlighted the work of the Office of Minority Affairs which aimed “to solve problems, create racial justice.”

In 1973, eighteen-year-olds celebrated their new constitutional right to vote, and political awareness touched Eastern. The *Aurora* yearbook carried an article titled “Abortion: Arousing Many Emotions,” while President Harold Sponberg helped celebrate the university’s first American Indian Heritage and Awareness Week. Yet the biggest issue was parking. “It’s a big hassle...it costs a lot of money,” complained one student.

Fifty years later, much at Eastern Michigan University has changed and much has stayed the same. The university has grown and shrunk, and student groups have come and gone, yet through it all, EMU has remained the educational heart of Ypsilanti.

## They Boogied and Won!

The spirit of the ’70s infused Eastern Michigan University fifty years ago. Chicago; Arlo Guthrie; Earth, Wind & Fire; and the Black Gospel Choir performed on campus, while students debated impeachment, stagflation, and the bicentennial. The EMU Band made its way into the *Guinness Book of World Records* when it played for fifty consecutive hours in February 1976. An interest in space movies brought Dr. J. L. Hynek to campus to speak on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which his research had inspired. Omega Psi Phi won the *Aurora*’s group picture award in 1975 for boogying, while the theme of the 1979 Homecoming was “A Natural Hi!”

EMU also expanded far beyond its roots as a teacher’s school. The College of Human



Eastern Michigan University, c. 1973

Services was added in 1975 and the College of Technology in 1980. Music students found a home in the new Alexander Building, while the new Psychology of Sex class enrolled 103 students.

Change was afoot in the 1970s. With African Americans constituting six percent of students in the mid-1970s, the Black Student Association demanded greater inclusion on campus, an initiative supported by the Chicano Student Association and the American Indian Student Association. The spirit of feminism saw Mary Schmitt elected the first female president of the student body in 1974, although a day-long strike of women termed “Alice Doesn’t Day” fizzled out. The Movement for the Physically Exceptional brought attention to disability rights. The culmination of such activism was Humanitarian Days, a campus-wide effort to make every student “aware of humanity, or the lack of, in society.”

Former Michigan lieutenant governor James Brickley led EMU through the contentious era. In October 1977, students boycotted registration when a new rule required them to pay half their tuition up front, and two years later, the faculty union brought the university to a standstill with a two-week strike. Students protested when EMU discontinued its bus service, while severe winter weather led President Jimmy Carter to declare much a Michigan a disaster area. No wonder Brickley left in 1978 for another term as lieutenant governor.

### **The Decade of Advancement**

In 1979, John Porter was named president of Eastern Michigan University, making him

the first African American to hold this position. Porter's arrival initiated a period of sustained growth on campus labeled "the decade of achievement" by university promoters.

A new spirit was evident when the *Aurora* dubbed the 1980 Homecoming "a time of tradition and a time of change." Alongside the bonfire, pep rally, and powder puff football game, students elected their first Homecoming king, enjoyed a laser demonstration, and giggled at "the Bong Show." In the years that followed, childcare was established at Snow Health Center, while the Home Economics Association began raising money for scholarships, announcing: "We've come a long way from stitchers and sewers!" In 1988, Phelps/Sellers dorms went co-ed.

Life on campus in the 1980s was active. Each September, fraternities competed in the Float-a-Thon down the Huron River, and athletes played on the new IM field. In winter, students huddled inside trying to solve Rubik's Cube, or headed to Pizza Huts and local taverns to play video games like Space Invaders. Various groups took turns painting "the Kiosk," a thirteen-foot-high cylindrical structure that already had an estimated 3,500 coats of paint by 1984. Others served their country through ROTC, and in November 1990, fifty-eight EMU reservists were called up for Operation Desert Shield.

McKenny Union was the "soul of campus" with shops, restaurants, game rooms, and a bowling alley. McKenny's fiftieth was celebrated with a 1930s-themed Golden Ball in 1981, and updates including a computer lab followed a decade later. Off campus, students headed to Suds (Factory) and the Spaghetti Bender, while establishments north of campus led Cross Street to be labeled: "The place where EMU and Ypsilanti shake hands."

Students were politically active throughout the 1980s. Anti-apartheid activism appeared when students picketed the 1982 Homecoming game to demand that South African heart surgeon Dr. Christian Barnard not be allowed to speak on campus. Three years later, student protests led the Board of Regents to withdraw from an investment fund that did business in South Africa.

Rosa Parks and Betty Shabazz spoke on campus, while a decade-long effort led to the creation of the Multi-Cultural Center in 1990, which aimed to help African American, Hispanic, and Native American students navigate life at Eastern. Whether the Huron mascot was racially insensitive was "one of the top stories on EMU's campus" in the late 1980s. In February 1985, the Gay Students Association was established "to battle the discrimination and lonely feelings that gay students face," while the AIDS crisis led to the installation of condom machines in public bathrooms.

The decade of advancement was also a time of growth. The number of students enrolled at EMU topped 20,000 for the first time in Fall 1984, and this growth continued throughout the 1980s, such that by 1987, EMU had the third largest undergraduate enrollment in Michigan. As numbers rose, so too did student quality and achievement. In 1984, EMU opened the Honors College, and five years later, the university awarded its first doctorate in education.

The higher enrollments led to a need for more space. “Crowded. That was the feeling on campus last year,” lamented the *Aurora* in 1988. In response, EMU expanded south of Cross Street. By 1991, the Corporate Education Center at I-94 and Huron Road had opened, as had the Gary M. Owen College of Business on Michigan Avenue.

### **Campus Moves Toward Future**

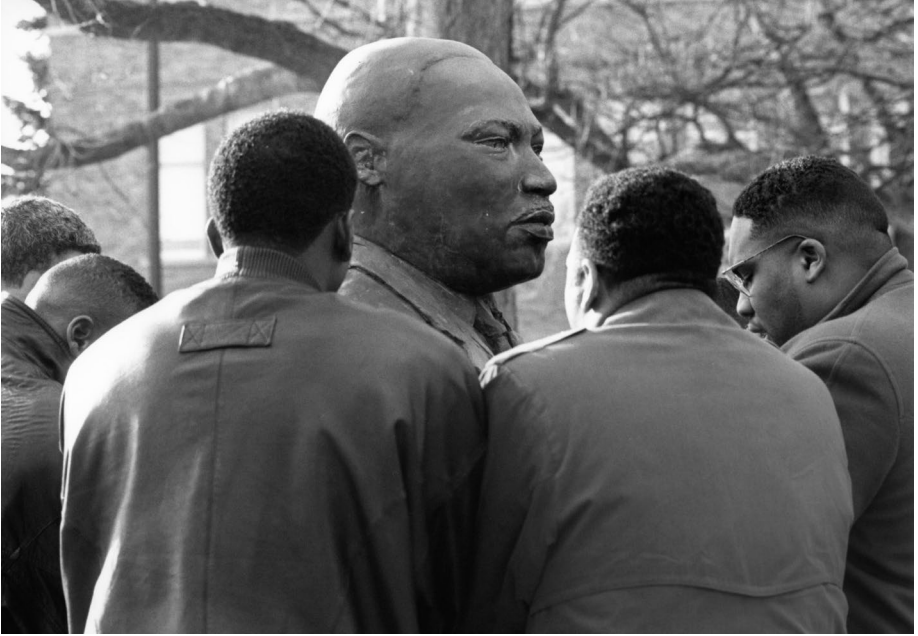
Despite the growth of Eastern Michigan University, the financial burdens on the students began to grow. When William E. Shelton became EMU president in 1989, he faced declining state appropriations and a series of tuition hikes. In response, the university sought money from donors. In 1981, radio station WEMU raised \$47,000 to keep operating, and three years later, singer Barry Manilow donated \$5000 for a music endowment. Nevertheless, tuition kept rising, doubling between 1983 and 1993, and increasing eighteen percent in 2001 alone.

The *Aurora* yearbook celebrated its hundredth annual issue in 1993 and was then promptly discontinued. The *Eastern Echo* promised that the yearbook would take on a “new format” of a magazine and video recording, but this failed to materialize. Civil rights continued to be an important issue, and the university marked the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., with events and speakers. However, students complained that these celebrations conflicted with their classes, so in November 1994, the Student Organization for African American Unity announced a boycott of classes. Thereafter, EMU would cancel all classes on MLK Day. Native American students held an annual Pow Wow “to educate, entertain” beginning in 1991.

In 1993, the *Eastern Echo* reported an “older, more racially diverse student body” on campus. African American enrollment neared ten percent, and four Black fraternities and four Black sororities appeared. There were more non-traditional students as older enrollees completed bachelor’s degrees or pursued graduate studies.

As the millennium approached, EMU remained a place of political engagement. An AIDS support group appeared, and the university offered HIV testing at Snow. “Coming Out Week” encouraged LGBTQ+ students to be visible, while the university protested violence against women at an annual Take Back the Night March and Rally. Students concerned for the environment worked to clean up the Huron River, while others raised money to fight hunger and homelessness. EMU canceled classes after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as faculty, counselors, and student groups helped the community grapple with a changed world.

Presidential politics were particularly exciting at EMU in the 1990s. The Rev. Jesse Jackson visited twice to encourage students to vote and to “hold character above color.” The election of Bill Clinton convinced the *Aurora* that “1992 will forever be remembered as the year of change,” and such sanguine opinions of Clinton amplified when the president spoke to 4500 at the Bowen Field House on October 30, 1996. Clinton



Alpha Phi Alpha members at the Martin Luther King Bust, 1996

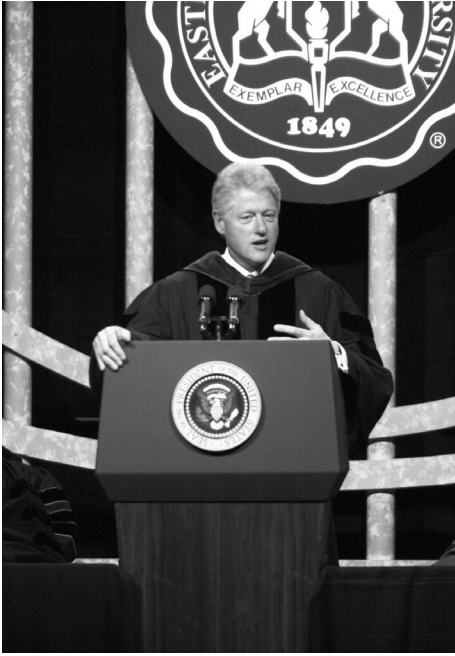
returned to campus in April 2000 to deliver the commencement address at graduation.

As Eastern Michigan's sesquicentennial approached in 1999, the *Eastern Echo* announced: "Campus moves toward future." Following a student protest against inadequate facilities, EMU opened the Bruce T. Halle Library in 1998. The Convocation Center began operations that same year, as did a new student center in 2006.

By far, the most controversial new building project was University House, a 10,000-square-foot residence and event space built in 2001. President Samuel Kirkpatrick drew a sharp rebuke for the project's price. Kirkpatrick initially claimed that University House would cost \$3.5 million, but when the final tally came in at \$6 million, the Faculty Senate issued a vote of no confidence and Kirkpatrick resigned in disgrace.

### **Education First**

In 2005, John A. Fallon III became EMU's president and promised "to restore the university's image and uphold standards of integrity." Unfortunately, Fallon was soon engulfed in scandal when undergraduate student Laura Dickinson was found dead in her room in Hill Hall in December 2006. Although the university initially announced that there was "no reason to suspect foul play," it came out that Dickinson had been murdered, which led EMU to be accused of not disclosing campus crime information. In 2007, the Board of Regents fired John Fallon, as well as several other administrators, and EMU was fined \$357,500, the largest amount ever levied against a university for



President Bill Clinton at Commencement, 2000

violating the Clery Act.

Susan Martin became EMU president in 2008. Martin was first woman to hold this position, a somewhat surprising delay for a university that has been majority female since its founding. Under Martin, the university's strengths were promoted with a new advertising campaign that promised "Education First." In 2016, Martin was succeeded by James Smith, who remains Eastern's president today.

Enrollment reached 23,000 as the twenty-first century began, and the university continued to invest in its campus buildings. Following the construction of the new student center, McKenny Hall was repurposed for advising and classes. The College of Health and Human Services occupied Everett L. Marshall Building in 2000,

while Pray-Harrold and Mark Jefferson were renovated between 2007 and 2011.

The student body continued to diversify. In Fall 2021, students of color made up around thirty percent of enrollees, and international students made up about three percent. When racist graffiti appeared on several buildings in 2016, students and faculty marched for justice at the campus's Martin Luther King, Jr., Plaza. In December 2020, the theatre building was renamed the Judy Sturgis Hill building in honor of an African American alumna and longtime Communications, Media, and Theatre Arts professor.

### Snapshot: 2023

Fifty years later, Eastern Michigan University is different and yet not so different from what it was in 1973. Currently, around 15,000 students are enrolled, and they still complain about parking and tuition. New programs continued to be added, and a new set of dormitories is under construction. After 174 years, EMU remains the educational heart of Ypsilanti.

### A Note on Sources

Information for this essay comes from the *Aurora* yearbooks and the *Eastern Echo*, both of which can be accessed at the EMU Archives. Additional information comes from

the EMU website, and *EMU Today*. Images come from the EMU Archives and can be found at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/emuarchives/albums>.

### **About the Author**

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