

DRAFT 6/5/96
Future Plans Letter

Dear Colleagues:

The time approaches for me to leave the presidency of this great University. I want to take the opportunity to write one last time to express my urgent concerns for the future of our own and other leading research universities; to share my plans for addressing some of these issues as I return to the faculty; to invite your interest and engagement in these efforts; and to thank all of you who have given so much help and support to Anne and me over the last eight years.

First let me point to the challenges I see ahead for us as an institution and as people who have invested our lives in the furtherance of learning. I believe our country is at the brink of a profoundly important debate about the future of higher education in America. The extraordinary growth and importance of universities in national life seen over the past fifty years will not continue as we have known it.

Of course, criticism of universities has been building for some time and comes from many directions. We are all familiar with the themes. The values of the academy are challenged—from scholarly ethics, to affirmative action, to political correctness. Our commitment to teaching is questioned and so is our ability to teach well. Faculty tenure is under serious attack. The quality and relevance of scholarly research is doubted. Tuition is protested. I don't need to go on.

Until recently, this criticism of higher education has been diffuse and sporadic but it is now gaining force and direction. Some of this may be the price of success. We would not warrant such scrutiny and questioning if our role in society had not become so significant. More and more citizens and politicians have a stake in what we do and how we do it. We are more publicly accountable now and we have tried to address many of the issues being raised by our critics both internal and external.

We have made significant progress. We are improving undergraduate education; fostering interdisciplinary research and social importance; investing in technology to support teaching, research and service; raising more than a billion dollars of private support, cutting costs and streamlining administration to free money for our basic mission; rebuilding our physical plant; improving our communications with significant constituents, and so on.

Thanks to your efforts, we have come a great distance in the past decade to reinforce our foundation, refine our mission, and improve the quality of teaching, research and service. We have ventured further and made some fundamental changes through such initiative as the Michigan Mandate, the Women's Agenda, international initiatives, and technological infrastructure all of which lay the groundwork for more far-reaching institutional change.

So far, change has been accomplished in the tradition of slow, linear, evolutionary progress that universities have followed for a thousand years—improve, expand, contract, reform—but without altering the fundamental institutional mission, approach, or structure. This will not be sufficient for the future. We dare not be complacent and assume that the forces challenging us will soon pass and universities will continue at the same pace or in the same fashion as before.

On the contrary, the world wide shift to a knowledge based society challenges every one of us to re-envision what we do and how we do it. We will need to question everything and to experiment with radical solutions. If we do not lead in re-inventing our mission and structures, we will see the role of universities marginalized, and our values compromised as the forces of change (and the multitude of competitors they generate) overtake and overwhelm us.

As the flag ship of American higher education, we have a responsibility to help lead way to change and make our voice clearly heard the debate about the future of universities in our society already underway. It will, I am sure, be an historic re-negotiation of the social compact that created and shaped research universities since the founding of the country. No question will be out of bounds: What is our purpose; What to teach, how to teach, delivery; who measures of quality; who pays for education and research; who benefits; who controls and how; what and how much public service; what are appropriate alliances, partnerships, sponsorships?

As we look around us at other institutions we can see that government and corporations are struggling with the same kind of fundamental questioning and restructuring. We will not escape the forces at work but we can bring our special intellectual and principled strengths to the process.

This brings me to share with you my plans for the next few years. The time has come to exchange action for rhetoric—a shift much more in keeping with my natural talents and disposition.

FOLLOW WITH DESCRIPTION OF PLANS BUT PERHAPS SHORTENED.

My colleagues and I encourage you to take part in some of these enterprises. We hope to offer a platform and a risk free environment for the testing of creative innovations for preserving, creating, and delivering knowledge. While our efforts must reflect our scholarly values, they must also challenge complacency and institutional rigidity. We need all the brain power we can muster. I don't know where this adventure will take us but I can promise an exciting time along the way.

Finally, I want to thank you. Anne and I have been honored to serve this University that we love. We are more grateful than I can ever say for all your help and support in these years. We look forward to working with you in the future and to continuing to do everything in our power to keep ours the very best public university in the world.