

June 28, 1996

Dear Colleagues:

During the final week of my University of Michigan presidency, I am writing to share with you some of my concerns for the future of my own and other leading research universities. I also would like to tell you of my plans for addressing some of these issues as I return to the Michigan faculty. I invite your interest and engagement in these new initiatives. I also want to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to all of you who have been so generous in giving Anne and me counsel and support during these last eight years.

First, let me share with you my sense of the challenges ahead for those of us who have invested our lives in the furtherance of learning in America's great universities. We are entering a period of profoundly important debate about the future of higher education. The singularly productive partnership that research universities have built with our society is not likely to continue on the same terms and conditions we've relied on for more than fifty years.

We are all familiar with the recent criticism of universities coming from many ideological directions and from within and outside our walls. For the most part it has been scattered and sporadic, but it is gaining force and direction. 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 are questioned. Political forces encroach on governance. Tuition is protested. I don't need to go on . . . .

Michigan and its sister universities across the country have worked hard to address many of the issues being raised. As a result, undergraduate education is greatly improved. We have increased our share of student financial aid. University hiring at all levels is more open, rigorous, and fair. We have succeeded in raising billions of dollars in private support to compensate for the losses of public funding. We have invested in

state-of-the-art information technology to support teaching, research, and service as well as to improve overall productivity. Costs have been cut and administration streamlined to free dollars for our core mission. The physical plant on most campuses has been renewed. We are communicating more effectively with key publics to build support and understanding for higher education.

Our universities have ventured further and set goals for more far reaching change to meet the challenge of the twenty-first century. We show significant progress in increasing the representation of people of color among students, faculty, and staff. Women are advancing in the academy. Our campuses are internationalizing at every level. Our

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technological infrastructure is revolutionizing the way we preserve, discover, transmit, and transfer knowledge. Researchers are able to take on ever larger and more fundamental issues--global warming and population, the human genome, the origin of the universe.

We will need this foundation of strength and stability in the years ahead as academia faces more fundamental questioning. Politicians, pundits, and the public increasingly challenge us at the same time that technology increasingly drives us. No question is out of bounds: What is our purpose? What are we to teach and how are we to teach it? Who teaches under what terms? Who measures quality and what measures to apply? Who pays for education and research? Who benefits? Who governs and how? What and how much public service is part of our mission? What are appropriate alliances, partnerships, sponsorships?

Some of the most significant shorter-term pressure for change in universities is driven by a converging political agenda at every level to limit educational costs even at the expense of quality; to make education ever more widely available; to draw back from the national commitment to research support--at least in the forms and amounts we have depended on since World War II; and to accelerate institutional transformation through application of information technology.

To mention only a few of the troublesome trends affecting our immediate future, there is declining public funding for student aid in a climate where education is increasingly seen as a personal economic benefit more than a public good in and of itself. The allocation of research funding is increasingly driven by those who mobilize the most voters, politicians, or celebrities, thus distorting the research and graduate teaching agenda. At the same time, the overhead which sustains our research infrastructure is dwindling. Our curriculum is deformed by the competitiveness and vocational demands of students whose debt load impels them toward excessive careerism.

Of all the negative trends, I am most alarmed by the undermining of public university autonomy. We see the intrusion of political forces in nearly every aspect of university governance and mission. State and federal government seek to regulate admissions decisions or financial aid.

There are egregious examples of political or judicial intrusion in the research process, itself, exemplified by Congressional star-chamber hearings inappropriately investigating scholarly research integrity. The crippling effects of open-meetings requirements on the conduct of business and on hiring are only beginning to be felt. We are over regulated and the costs of accountability are excessive both in dollars and in the administrative burden. Governance of public institutions is too often in the hands of people selected for

partisan political reasons rather than their understanding and support for higher education. These trends are symptomatic of the erosion of public confidence in universities that parallels the loss of trust in our institutions across the board.

Not that we in universities are blameless. We too often have been reactive rather than proactive in responding to demands from funders, students, faculty, government, politicians, ideologues, and demagogues that distort or undermine our fundamental values and purposes. Academic structures are too rigid to accommodate the realities of our rapidly expanding and interconnected base of knowledge and practice. Higher

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education as a whole has been divided and competitive at times when we need to speak with a single unequivocal voice. Entrenched interests block the path to innovation and creativity. Perhaps, most dismaying, we have yet to come forth with a convincing case for ourselves and an effective strategy for making it.

For a thousand years and more, change in universities has proceeded in slow, linear, incremental steps--improving, expanding, contracting, and reforming without altering our fundamental institutional mission, approach, or structure. We do not have the luxury of continuing at this same pace nor can we confine the scope of changes underway. On the contrary, I believe we are seeing the beginning of a paradigm shift of the kind Thomas Kuhn so brilliantly described.

This impending revolution in the structure and function of higher education is generated by the world-wide shift to a knowledge-based society that is transforming all of our institutions. Educated people and the knowledge they produce increasingly are seen to be the source of wealth for nations. Knowledge itself is expanding exponentially with no slowing in sight. Thus, higher education is both driving and being driven by technological, social, and political forces at work throughout the world.

These forces challenge each one of us in higher education to re-envision what we do and how we do it. We will need to question everything. We must become more fault-tolerant, more encouraging of experimentation with seemingly radical solutions. If we do not lead in re-inventing our mission and structures, we risk seeing the role of universities marginalized and our values compromised as the forces of change (and the multitude of competitors they generate) overtake us.

American higher education has a responsibility to help show the way to change, not to react to and follow it. Our voice must be loud, clear, and unified in the public forum. At the same time we must engage in vigorous debate and experimentation within academia, put aside our narrow self interest, and accept without fear the challenges posed by this extraordinary time in our history.

This brings me to share with you my plans for the next few years. The time has come for me to trade rhetoric for action--a shift much more in keeping with my disposition. It is also one to which my experience as president adds a sense of urgency.

Beginning in July, I will be leading several projects here at Michigan designed to explore new frontiers in learning and teaching. I'll be heading what I call for now the Millennium Project. It will be a think tank and a forum for ideas, but with a difference. It will bring together leaders, faculty, and students from Michigan and around the world to develop new paradigms for the research universities of the future. The Center will go

beyond theorizing to provide an experimental laboratory for the testing of innovation in teaching, research, outreach, and administration. We hope the project will evolve into a major international center for leadership in higher education innovation.

I will also be associated with Michigan's new Media Union (MU), which I hope to help develop into a leader in exploring and testing the innumerable ways information technology can contribute to education and research. My role as "The Wizard of MU" will be to provide conceptual leadership with no holds barred while I leave the

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administrative responsibility to others. I hope to draw in the most inventive minds from Michigan and across the world to create, as a colleague puts it, "an environment where students and faculty can dream and then act on their dreams."

In related efforts, I plan to take part in a number of projects to promote academic outreach. These include fostering the development of "virtual" universities functioning at the local, national, and international level; exploring new avenues for delivering educational services and formats such as multimedia; and launching an academy to prepare future academic leaders.

As a start, at the request of Michigan's Governor, John Engler, I'll be looking into the possibility of building a statewide "virtual university" to support the automobile industry. And, on behalf of the American association of Universities, I'll be exploring the possibility of American research universities offering educational services on a worldwide basis via the World Wide Web.

I also very gladly resume my professional writing and teaching in nuclear systems and computer simulation. I can only hope the years of administrative duties haven't taken too serious a toll on my brain cells. Finally, after many years of outspoken concern about traditional pedagogy, I'm obliged to try to develop and demonstrate some alternatives for undergraduates.

My colleagues in these programs and I hope to involve many of you in some of the initiatives I've described. We will offer you a platform to propose new directions and test new paradigms. We aim to be a catalyst for change by enabling you to ask any question, try any method, challenge any institutional rigidity. Please let me hear your comments and ideas and pay us a visit anytime. I cannot predict where this adventure will take us; I can promise an exciting time along the way.

It is my great good fortune now to turn over the reins to my friend and colleague, Professor Homer Neal, who will be interim president. I know Michigan will flourish under his leadership. My own experience indicates that he can draw on an enormous wealth of talent, good will, and wise counsel not only here at Michigan but throughout higher education.

Anne and I are honored to have served this University that we love so deeply. We feel equally privileged to have served with so many exceptional academic colleagues in institutions and organizations across the country. We are more grateful than I can ever say for all your help, cooperation, 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 advance the cause of higher education in America and the world.

Sincerely,

James J. Duderstadt