

## Op-Ed #1

### Public Higher Education in Michigan: Reaffirming Fundamental Values

To serve--perhaps the most unique theme of higher education in America. For the bonds between a university and society are particularly strong in this country. Historically our institutions have been responsible to and shaped by the communities that founded them. They draw their agenda from these communities.

Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in our State of Michigan and with its institutions. For example, the founding principle of our universities can be found in those familiar words from the Northwest Ordinance, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

And perhaps it was appropriate that Michigan, a state with seemingly infinite resources of fur, timber, iron, and copper--a state with boundless confidence in the future--should play such a leadership role in developing the models of higher education which would later serve all of America. For while the University of Michigan was not the first of the state universities, it nevertheless is commonly regarded as the model of the true public university, responsible and responsive to the needs of the people who founded it and supported it, even as it sought to achieve quality equal to that of the most distinguished private institutions.

So too, our sister institution to the west, Michigan State University, is commonly regarded as the driving force behind the Morrill Act. It has become the prototype of the great land grant university that has served America so well. And our sister institution to the east, Wayne State University, has provided an important model of the urban university, seeking to serve the needs of one of our nation's great cities.

The State of Michigan, through these institutions and others which have arisen since, has provided a model of how higher education serves society through the triad mission of teaching, research, and public service. These institutions grew up with our state, responding to the changing needs and aspirations of its people: i) first, as Michigan developed an agricultural base; ii) then as it evolved through the industrial revolution to become the manufacturing capital of the world; iii) as the population of our state surged following the war

years; iv) and, most recently, as Michigan has sought to strengthen and diversify its economic base.

Yet the strength of our state, its capacity to build and sustain such extraordinary institutions, lies not in looking to the past. Rather it lies in our state's ability to look to the future, in its willingness to take the actions and make the investments in the present that would yield prosperity and well-being for its people in the future.

The strength of our public universities and their capacity to serve our state depends upon a sustained commitment to several fundamental values:

A spirit of cooperation: One of the great strengths of higher education in Michigan is the remarkable diversity among our institutions, a diversity that is all the more necessary to respond to the pluralistic nature of our society. Yet, despite this diversity, our institutions have far more in common than in contrast. In the past, leaders of our universities and their patrons in state government have had the wisdom to recognize that the state is far better served through strong cooperation than competition among its public institutions. While it is understandable that institutional loyalties were strong, there was always a line that was never crossed between advancing the case for one's chosen university and attacking other state institutions. It is critical today, in a time of limited resources and sometimes contentious politics, that we remember this lesson from the past and restore a spirit of cooperation and collaboration as we strive to serve the citizens of Michigan.

A stewardship for past sacrifices: As we prepare to enter an age of knowledge, our ability to sustain the strength of our state and our nation, to achieve the quality of life for our citizens will be determined, more than any other factor, by how we develop, nurture, and educate that most precious of resources, our people. It is true that our state has developed one of the finest systems of higher education in the world. But we must also remember this resulted from the willingness of past generations to look beyond the needs of the present and to invest in the future by building and sustaining educational institutions of exceptional quality, institutions that have provided those of us in this auditorium today with unsurpassed educational opportunities. Today's public leaders have inherited these marvelous institutions that represent the commitments and sacrifices of previous generations. They face the challenge of being responsible stewards to preserve and enhance these precious resources to serve generations of the future.

A commitment to the welfare of future generations: It is important to recognize that Michigan's public universities are deeply committed to serving the society that built and sustains them. They are not working on their own agenda but rather on an agenda to respond to needs of this state. It is always tempting to ask, "What have you done for me lately?" But it is also important to imbed this challenge to higher education in the dual context of the history of past service and the challenges that will face our society in the future. Higher education represents one of the most important investments a society can make in its future, since it is an investment in its human resources. Our generation has always believed deeply in providing each generation with the means for a better life. Our parents sacrificed for us, and we must be prepared to sacrifice for our children. We simply must re-establish the priority of both our personal and our public investments in education, in the future of our children, and hence in our own future.

It is time that we reaffirmed the importance of these fundamental values-- cooperation among institutions, stewardship for the investments in the past, and a commitment to serving future generations--that have been the cornerstone of higher education throughout the history of this state.