

An Open Letter to the University Community

Dear Colleagues:

Since last fall when I announced my intent to return to the faculty after serving as president of the University for the past eight years, there have been many questions--and, indeed, much speculation--about just what "return to the faculty" means for the Duderstadts. Indeed, Anne and I wondered ourselves about life after the presidency, but the press of our continuing responsibilities for leading the University gave us little opportunity to make more definite plans for our transition this July.

Some aspects of our new role were apparent enough. With a title of *President Emeritus* and *University Professor of Science and Engineering*, I will have a University-wide faculty appointment that will allow me to teach and conduct research in any of our academic programs. Clearly, as well, Anne and I will continue to be involved in a variety of roles associated with institutional advancement such as fund-raising and government relations. However, during the course of the past several months, I have agreed to serve in several additional roles:

- ◆ Director of the Millennium Project
- ◆ Chief Scientist of the Media Union
- ◆ Collaborator and Facilitator for Academic Outreach

This letter is intended to share with you my excitement about these new roles.

The Millennium Project

This summer I will be launching a small research center in the new Media Union on the North Campus aimed at exploring the future of the American university. This center, known as **the Millennium Project**, will draw together scholars and students both from our campus and beyond to explore various possible paradigms of the American university for the 21st Century (...or, better yet, the Third Millennium...).

While the Millennium Project will explore a number of quite different visions of future universities, it will not be a simple thinktank. Rather it will be an experimental laboratory. It is our intent to use the center to develop working models or prototypes of future university paradigms. Like the famous Lockheed Skunkworks, every so often the hangar doors of the Millennium Project will open and something really weird will be wheeled out and flown away

The Millennium Project will be launched on seed funding from the University for an initial five-year period (...to the year 2001...) But we have already had strong interest in support from both the federal government and private foundations, and the Project could eventually evolve into a major national center or institute for the study of higher education.

The Media Union

As we have noted on many occasions, the Media Union itself is designed to explore many aspects of the impact of information technology on education. To quote the initial prospectus:

“Our new Media Union merges the creative aspects of disciplines across the entire campus, ranging from art, psychology, and architecture, to engineering, philosophy and biology. Inventive scholars will come together with powerful resources, entering a free-wheeling space where extraordinary people can do exceptional things. Michigan’s portal to the rest of the world, the Media Union will reach out to the huge storehouses of information growing daily on the Web, while drawing national and international scholars and students into our campus conversations. New information technology will create a “virtual” community of thinkers, allowing face-to-face dialogue and collaboration across thousands of miles.”

Or, as put more succinctly by Dean Paul Boylan, “We are creating an environment where students and faculty can dream and then act on their dreams.”

In response to a request by the executive officers and the North Campus deans, I have agreed to serve as well as “chief scientist” ...or perhaps more appropriately “executive producer” of the Media Union. (Some have even suggested “The Wizard of MU” as a more apt title...) While others will provide the ongoing direction for the technical support and operation of the facility, it will be my role, joined by my colleagues in the Millennium Project, to provide much of the intellectual momentum for this exciting new resource.

Academic Outreach

I have also agreed to work closely with Doug Van Houweling and his colleagues on a number of projects associated with our growing efforts in academic outreach. These include the development of so-called “virtual” or cyberspace universities at the state, national, and international level; exploring new methods for the delivery of educational services such as multimedia; and designing and launching a major new academy for the education of future academic leaders. My particular role in each of these projects will vary. For example, the Governor has asked me to head up the effort to build a statewide virtual university to serve the automobile industry. The AAU universities have asked me to explore a similar concept that would allow these research universities to provide educational services on a worldwide basis. And Farris Womack has expressed an interest in working with me to develop a national academy for academic leaders, similar to the very successful executive education program conducted by our School of Business Administration.

Relationships

The interrelationship among these various roles is best illustrated by the diagram in Figure 1. This characterizes the Millennium Project as providing the intellectual content for a sequence of activities ranging from fundamental research to development to prototyping to actual production and delivery.

More specifically, the Millennium Project will explore various paradigms for the future of higher education within the extraordinary environment provided by the Media Union and sustained through strong interactions with academic units--in particular, the School of Information and the North Campus schools and colleges; the Information Technology Division; and the University Libraries. There will be extensive interaction with other ongoing efforts such as academic outreach, K-14 education, UMTV, and new initiatives such as virtual universities. Finally, it seems likely that new organizations will be formed to take successful paradigms beyond the prototyping and testing stage, such as nonprofit corporations and alliances with for-profit companies.

Other Activities

Of course, as a University faculty member, I will resume my career as a teacher and a scholar. While 15 years as an academic administrator have taken their toll on my mental skills as a theoretical physicist--not to mention destroying a significant fraction of my RAM--I do intend to resume some of my old interests in fields such as nonequilibrium statistical mechanics, nuclear systems analysis, and computer simulation. However, my experience as member and chair of the National Science Board for the past decade has provided an important perspective of the evolution of science in America, and I intend to develop and teach a course on this subject in the year ahead. I will also be leading a research seminar on strategic issues in higher education as a component of the Millennium Project in the Fall Term. Finally, I have been so outspoken about my belief that the classroom form of pedagogy characterizing education during the 20th Century is becoming obsolete that I feel obliged to develop and demonstrate some alternatives for undergraduates.

On a professional level, I will continue to be actively involved in national science policy, through the National Science Board, the National Academies, and other federal bodies. I will remain active in a broad array of groups and projects concerned with higher education. And, hopefully, my writing activity will resume its level prior to my sentencing to academic administration.

There is one final role that we will play in the years ahead. As we have said on numerous occasions over the past year, we have been privileged to serve the University in a variety of roles over the past three decade. We are fiercely loyal and dedicated to this institution. Like our predecessors who have also remained or returned to the University, the Hatchers, the Flemings, and the Smiths, the Duderstadts too are comfortable with our new role as "patron saints" of the University, ready and willing to serve in any way that we can. We look forward to working with the marvelous students, faculty, staff, and alumni who belong to the Michigan family.

Go Blue!