THE MICHIGAN FIFTEEN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES
Gateways to Opportunity

Presidents' Perspectives

Commentary by Michigan public university presidents and chancellors on important issues affecting Michigan.

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Hot universities = "cool cities"

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Putting it in Perspective

Universities are the anchors of Governor Granholm's "cool cities" approach to strengthening our cities' cultural, civic, and economic infrastructure; they serve as the magnets which draw human talent that creates and sustains strong local economies in cities that host our state's public universities.

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We all know that our state strives to be competitive in education and industry. But now the *Washington Post* is telling us that, "in a Darwinian fight for survival, American cities are scheming to steal each other's young."[1]

This is just as ominous as it sounds. Even cities in the supposedly inviting Sun Belt, like El Paso and Miami, are seeing a migration of younger people to livelier urban centers such as San Francisco, Seattle, and Austin. Without the strength of a new generation of the best minds and the energy of youth, the cities that are losing their youthful populations will enter a new type of decline, one that will affect the economy as well as the cultural environment.

To combat the signs of this youthful ex-migration in Michigan, Governor Granholm has championed the new concept of "cool cities" as a critical element for the future of our state. She recently noted that "The future economic success of our state is directly tied to our ability to attract and retain exciting new jobs and young workers who are hard-wired into the knowledge-based economy."[2]

Recent studies have identified a number of "brain-gain" cities: Austin, Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Minneapolis, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle. What do all these cities have in common? Great colleges and universities.

A key element of the "cool city" concept is the anchor of a university or college, which renews its own youthful population every year, attracts some young people to put down roots, and provides a wealth of intellectual and cultural activities that are open to the surrounding community, generating a natural energy that flows from the campus to entire towns and cities.



Ann Arbor, one of many university-anchored cities in Michigan, exemplifies the cultural and economic vibrancy that is at the core of the "cool cities" concept.

"Cool city" has become an economic buzzword, designating a community that attracts a population not only because there are jobs and the promise of a thriving economy, but because of activities which engage young adults.

Our universities are critical components in creating the environment that will attract and retain a younger generation: first, we generate the jobs that will be a magnet for a younger population, and then we provide the atmosphere that will provide a full array of cultural opportunities.

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State support for higher education is directly linked to our ability to be drivers of the economy that will provide a strong future to our state. We often talk about our economic impact in terms of jobs and dollars generated, but we also must consider the human aspect of our contribution. Every year, we graduate a new wave of highly educated fresh professionals, and we attract a significant number of new Michigan residents through the positions available on campus and in the industries that are generated by our research and development.

Cuts to higher education are cuts that affect the very core of our next generation – the number of students we can admit, and the number of highly trained faculty, staff, and researchers that we and our technology-transfer businesses can bring into the state. Michigan is a beautiful state, but we are in direct competition with the great urban centers for the youth that will invigorate our region. We cannot afford to lose the next generation to the cities that are vying for their energy – it will take longer than one generation to rebuild that population, once it has been lost.

That same *Washington Post* article notes that the new centers of young urban life are not only found in the Sun Belt, but in "such foul-weather havens as Minneapolis, Seattle, and Ann Arbor."

While I would take great exception to this description of the climate of Ann Arbor, I certainly would agree that the city of Ann Arbor provides a wonderful harbor for a vibrant cultural life, which exists in synergy with the University of Michigan. The energy of our distinctive businesses and restaurants, the animation of our ethnic communities, the excellence of our public schools, and the engaging personality of our civic life allows us to attract faculty members and staff from urban centers around the globe, who in turn encourage students to attend this great university.

Governor Granholm is hosting a conference this week on "Creating Cool: Linking Culture, Community, and the Economy," which already has sold out all available spaces. As we discuss the ways to invigorate our cities, let us not forget the need to keep our universities and colleges, the anchors of this concept, as strong as possible.

With the support of our Governor and Legislature, our cool cities and hot universities are going to vanquish the current chilly economic climate.

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[1] *Washington Post*, November 6, 2003, p. A1.
[2] Governor Granholm, press release, November 20, 2003.



Mary Sue Coleman is the president of the University of Michigan, one of the state's 15 public universities. She is a member of the board of directors of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan.

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