Future Directions: Shaping the Michigan Difference

President Mary Sue Coleman

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Good afternoon.

I want to welcome the deans, faculty members, staff, and students who have joined us.

Today, I am looking forward to introducing several aspirations and initiatives for the future direction of our University.

Every university president encounters the need to balance an ongoing agenda with new priorities that, combined, will shape the future of the institution. In my two presidencies, I have learned that sometimes the issues choose the president, but at other times, the president can choose the issues she wants to advance.

When I arrived on campus twenty months ago, we faced some monumental events that affected not only the University, but the entire nation.

Last year, we dealt with opportunities and challenges that many universities do not encounter within a single decade, or sometimes, ever.

I have watched the great monuments of our architecture come back to life this semester, with the reopening of Hill Auditorium and the Rackham Building. We have launched the ambitious Life Sciences Institute. We overcame the investigation into our former basketball program with the triumph of the championship at the National Invitation Tournament. And, we had the great privilege of learning how it feels to win landmark decisions at the Supreme Court of the United States.

I could not have led this University successfully through the critical final stages of those achievements without the help of many of you in this room, and I thank you for your wisdom and your support throughout these months, which have been so memorable for me and historic for the University.

But now it is time to move forward.

I want to ask our campus community to work with me to focus on the future of the University. It is now my opportunity to turn our energy to the agenda that *we* choose as leaders of this great institution. I will ask our campuses to devote much of the next academic year to developing the initial blueprint I am sharing with you today.

There are two reasons it is critical to begin this process now.

The first is the budget situation we have been facing. We know how serious the continued loss of state funding has been, and we established the protection of our core academic activities as our guiding principle, so that we will emerge with our excellence intact and even strengthened.

Budgetary constraints do not call for timid measures, but for wise action.

On a second front, we will continue to pursue a host of long-range ambitions as we launch the public phase of our comprehensive capital campaign next month. Private giving will animate our vision and goals, in every campus unit and collectively for the institution.

We will focus on the difference our University will make in the future – as it has made for almost two centuries – both on the lives of our students and in the world beyond our campuses. Appropriately, we will title the campaign "The Michigan Difference."

In conjunction with this campaign, and the future it will help us realize, we are shaping the guiding direction for the University that will deepen impact of the Michigan Difference in the next decades and beyond.

Today, I will outline several aspirations and initiatives I am presenting to our campuses to explore and develop. These ideas have evolved as I have immersed myself in the extraordinary life of our University.

I am confident that you share my commitment to a rededicated effort to sustain and elevate the character that makes this institution unique.

Our Aspirations – Defining the Great Public University of the Knowledge Age

Our university, of course, does not operate in isolation, but within a network of other prestigious research universities, a state that supports us, and a world that depends on our graduates and our discoveries.

We live in a world characterized by a whirlwind of dynamic change.

We are confronted with a ubiquitous and overwhelming rush of information.

The new economy has shifted the emphasis from manufacturing to knowledge.

Our new global society – social, political, economic and cultural – compels us to recognize a teeming variety of values and perspectives.

Technology continues to fulfill its astonishing promise – yet becomes increasingly more challenging.

Our environment is imperiled whenever society avoids accepting responsibility for global sustainability.

And in the middle of this complexity, we seem to be losing our ethical compass as we attempt to navigate the swirling rapids of these issues.

Because of these shifts in the social and technological landscape, the frontiers of knowledge are expanding dramatically. Exciting new spheres of thought are emerging and new forms of intellectual engagement are made possible by the connectivity of information technology.

The single laboratory and the solitary scholar are often supplemented by collaborative endeavors. Academic discoveries will emerge from the intersection of our disciplines and will be more intertwined with the world we inhabit and serve.

These are groundbreaking and often breathtaking challenges. The truly great university of tomorrow will meet them head-on.

It will mobilize its resources to address the constantly changing needs of society – and to push the boundaries of our understanding. The great strengths of the University of Michigan prepare it especially well to enhance its academic leadership and to engage its public mission even more profoundly over the next century.

This University is characterized by world-class programs across a broad range of disciplines. Our academic reputation blazes across the globe – and even beyond, with our alumni who have traveled to the Moon.

Dean Robert Dolan described this campus perfectly when he said that we have nineteen schools and colleges at the top of their game.

In addition to the expertise that has created such outstanding academic units, I believe our multi-disciplinary approach to scholarship is one of our most distinctive hallmarks – we possess an academic culture that breaks through traditional boundaries.

My goal is this:

The University of Michigan will continue to define the great public university of the world. We will move Michigan to a new level of excellence by building on its distinctive academic strengths while recognizing new areas of opportunity and societal need.

We will expand the collaborative innovation that is our signature in a way that reaches across traditional disciplines, into the classroom, and out into the world around us.

I want to articulate a set of aspirations that will guide our future work. These are shaped in part by our past and highlight the promise and commitment of our future.

I will use these guideposts in making decisions and determining the direction of my administration in every area, from the continued development of our campus master plan to the creation of special new initiatives.

I will ask each of our units, schools and colleges to use these principles to inform their future choices as well.

First:

We will sustain academic excellence.

Above all else, we are committed to advancing the work and values of a brilliant academic community. Academic excellence is never negotiable, even when we are faced with short-term budgetary pressures.

In previous years, our commitment might have been an unspoken compact, but today, we are dealing with external pressures that require us to assert, with determined insistence, our pledge to maintain the highest level of academic quality.

We are a university that expects and demands bold intellectual engagement. We will continue to recruit and retain the very best faculty and students.

And we must maintain the distinctive strength of our extraordinary staff, who provide the highly skilled effort that keeps our intellectual and physical infrastructure so robust.

We will never compromise on excellence.

Next:

We will foster active engagement.

Tomorrow's great university certainly will not be an ivory tower. We must be committed to translating our ideas into communication and action, with each other and with the larger world -- challenging ourselves to address the vexing issues that our global and local communities confront. We are called to support our society's hopes, development, and enrichment.

Whether we look at our work to develop a nationally prominent Depression Center or our partnership with the state's life sciences initiatives, we will focus on addressing societal needs and sparking a greater level of connectivity – inside and outside the academy.

There are many areas our community can explore as we strive to become a more actively engaged university. Here are a few examples:

- We must develop the infrastructure – technological and physical – to support all forms of academic engagement by our faculty and students.

- We have the opportunity to contribute in new and significant ways to economic development. I have been speaking to business organizations on this issue, and we must respond to their eagerness for increased interaction between our academic units and regional leaders in business and industry.

- I will ask our University how we might more effectively coordinate the missions of Ann Arbor, Flint, and Dearborn through a three-campus strategy, each with its own balance of regional engagement, while contributing to the institution overall.

- Also, we can expand our current international involvement in areas such faculty leadership on global issues, study abroad programs, and on-campus educational opportunities.

Third:

We will build collaborative learning communities.

As we deal with multifaceted social problems, we find they often do not fit into the discrete disciplines of academia.

In addition, we must prepare young people for the problem-solving, team-based environment that they will encounter not only in the workplace, but as informed and entrepreneurial citizens in a diverse democracy.

President Angell famously described the University of Michigan as providing an "uncommon education."

I believe that the uncommon education we create in the information age must be built upon interdisciplinary scholarship and team-based learning opportunities that are supported with digital tools.

Across our teaching and research endeavors, we have a tremendous opportunity to deploy our intellectual capital in new ways .

Here are a few of the areas I will ask our campus to explore as we consider how to build more collaborative learning communities and encourage an even greater level of scholarship across traditional boundaries:

- Although we have such a tremendous strength in interdisciplinary and collaborative research, we have not done what we should to bring these powerful approaches into our classrooms. It is exciting to imagine interdisciplinary teaching on a large scale, and Michigan is the place to do it.

- As we develop plans for residence hall renewal, how can we improve the residential life experience so that our future investments support the concept of collaborative living and learning environments in a digital age? In order to continue attracting the best and brightest students, we must have residence hall renewal. But our decisions about design must go far beyond "wired" versus "wireless" connectivity. Rather, our plans should address innovative ways learning can occur and how a student community can best be supported.

- As you know, I believe that our next steps to enhance the life sciences at Michigan will include expanding our approach and inviting dynamic new collaborations. There is wide campus enthusiasm for joining the life sciences more seamlessly to the other natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. In addition, we want to investigate opportunities that might be possible by adding neuroscience as a new pillar of the life sciences at the University.

As we aspire to sustain continued academic excellence, foster more active engagement, and build collaborative learning communities – there is one more fundamental commitment we must make if the University of Michigan will define the great *public* university of the future:

We will create greater access to Michigan's academic quality.

We must *ensure access* to the vast intellectual opportunity and knowledge this great public university generates — for the sake of the societies we serve, and for the intellectual ecosystem that provides our academic distinction. A public university has little value for our society if its resources are not accessible.

This will mean asking ourselves some tough questions.

- We need to know if there are financial barriers that place a Michigan education out of reach for some academically qualified students, and how we can lower those barriers. This discussion must include a significant study of our financial aid programs – along with an emphasis on scholarship support as a centerpiece of the upcoming capital campaign.

- We personified the commitment to the principle of diversity in higher education as we defended our use of affirmative action. Now we have to turn inward to enhance our efforts in recruiting and retaining a campus community – students, faculty, and staff – that reflects the full diversity of our nation, and creates a campus that is *truly* and *completely* supportive of that diversity. We are not there yet.

- As we consider ways to improve access to the University and its resources, I want to develop ideas that will make the figurative concrete wall around our academic community more permeable – too often, the public senses that our walls are rock solid and impenetrable. For instance, I will encourage new kinds of public arts programs, building on the successful model of the Royal Shakespeare Company residencies, and I want to find new ways to provide the business community with access to our many resources.

At our University, an infinite set of possibilities for research and learning will emerge as we apply our ingenuity to these aspirations.

Presidential Initiatives

In addition to the ideas I will outline next, our Flint and Dearborn campuses will pursue initiatives appropriate to their own agendas, led by Chancellors Juan Mestas and Daniel Little.

I intend to engage the campus community broadly throughout the next year to develop promising ideas, using these guideposts of sustained academic excellence, active engagement, collaborative learning, and accessibility as a framework.

As a first step, I am introducing four presidential initiatives I will ask this campus to pursue immediately. These ideas represent opportunities for our great public university of the world to take on both societal and university challenges that reflect the aspirations I have related today. These are not the only priorities the University will explore, but the president's office has the opportunity to identify special programs that complement the work happening across campus in the schools and colleges as we sustain our excellence and deepen the Michigan Difference.

First, I want to:

Support the development of multi-disciplinary paired courses and other team-teaching initiatives across departments and colleges.

We will expand the effort to bring our interdisciplinary culture to the classroom and to our research enterprise. To foster team-teaching, the Provost's office will establish funds for sustained team-teaching efforts. Pairing together faculty from divergent disciplines to design courses is an important way to engage our students in the fresh ideas that are emerging from intersections of scholarly fields.

Our students will learn that each discipline is given to specific formulations of issues that provide great insight – but that sometimes the deep focus of a discipline does not always offer the *broad* insight that can emerge when viewed within the context of other fields. Disciplines help us both to see and not to see; interdisciplinary teams help us to see more widely.

The next two initiatives will carry into action our commitment to actively engage our best minds in the significant social issues of the day. So, I will ask our campus to:

Explore the creation of a center for the study of ethical issues in the public domain.

In the past few years we have observed an almost cataclysmic decline in ethical behavior in public life, ranging from corporate malfeasance to egregious acts in college sports. I will ask a cross-disciplinary team of faculty members to assess faculty interest and scholarly expertise regarding the examination of ethical issues facing business, public policy-makers, cultural institutions, the sciences, and the media.

I want to know if we can build important and fresh research opportunities, curriculum, and public engagement around issues of ethics in the public domain.

Next, we will take on another major social concern as we:

Create a University of Michigan prototype for new approaches to rational and affordable health care.

We enjoy a singular position of having a hospital, health care providers, an insurance company, and health policy experts. With appropriate joint incentives, we have the means to mount a broad, collaborative effort to fashion a prototype program, testing the assumption that it is feasible to promote healthy living, contain health care expenditures, and define optimal insurance coverage for individuals and families.

We can use those intellectual resources to help the nation in addressing the growing crisis in health care. There are few current issues on which the University of Michigan is better positioned to engage public discourse and provide national leadership.

Also, we must:

Renovate, reconnect, and expand residential life on campus.

Comprehensive planning is underway to expand and improve the residential experience for students. This is an exciting opportunity to build collaborative and innovative spaces that will employ technology, create better environments for student living, and promote close connection between academic and residential life. We know that the physical environment is a critical element that supports the academic community and its excellence.

We have been engaged with groups of students, faculty, and administrators as we consider our residential life options; preliminary plans will be brought to the board for thorough review and discussion in the fall term. Ongoing student involvement will be very important as these plans unfold.

Conclusion

Today, I have shared a broad overview of our future direction. I am excited by its promise, but it is just the first step. We face significant dilemmas in the short term. The continuing state budget crisis, the troubling national trend of a 30-year erosion of state support, and a highly competitive recruiting environment for the best faculty, staff, and students provide real challenges.

We will need to plan wisely as we prioritize our activities.

But a sound framework for future development will help our university with that task as it crystallizes priorities and opportunities.

We will work together on how best to make these future aspirations reality. Certainly, our alumni, friends, and donors want to be part of our success. I will ask for their support for all the priorities identified by our schools and colleges for the capital campaign.

Our donors will provide critical funding for student scholarships, for faculty fellowships and chairs, for new and expanded programs, and for the next generation of facilities that will enhance our academic endeavors.

Support for the presidential initiatives will include funds donated to the president's office for strategic uses along with other sources such as research grants. And in the case of residence hall renewal, we will bring a funding plan to the Board of Regents for consideration.

Today's presentation is the first step into our future. I have laid out general directions we can pursue – but we have a great deal of work to do as a campus.
I will appoint faculty, staff, and students to cross-campus teams to explore all of these ideas and others that will emerge in the next academic year. In addition, we will encourage broad campus discussion of all these topics areas throughout the year. And, today we will introduce a Website that will track our activities as we move ahead.

As I told you at the outset, sometimes issues choose a president, and sometimes a president can choose her own issues. Every university must be ready to deal with unexpected challenges, but today, I am setting this University on a course that will sustain our tradition of being "leaders and best."

Thank you.