

Oct. 14, 2004

Friends and colleagues,

I'd like to take a few minutes of your time to talk about the opportunities and challenges that face the University of Michigan-Dearborn at this point in our history. President Coleman has articulated a set of strategic priorities and values that will guide her efforts on behalf of the University of Michigan throughout the next few years, and she has requested that I bring forward an inspiring vision of the future of this campus that will fit within these values. So the time is right for us to gather our best thinking about our past, present, and future and to set forth a compelling strategic vision of our mission and role as a university. This letter is intended to be a starting point for the discussions I would like to engage in throughout the current year.

The context. This campus has achieved remarkable excellence and impact in the 45 years of our existence. The campus has created a culture of faculty engagement with students that gives all our students the opportunity for challenge and stimulation that creates real learning. Our faculty have striven towards that difficult mix of research, teaching, and service that constitutes the challenge and excitement of the faculty work life. Our staff have shown great commitment to maintaining a culture of service and quality that supports the learning environment of the campus. The campus has established a rich network of partnerships and projects that benefit the region in which we reside. And we are proud to be part of a great university, the University of Michigan.

The challenge. It is now desirable for us to consider how we will take these achievements and make them even better in the coming ten years. How can we deepen the academic excellence of the campus? How can we improve upon the education that we offer our students, both undergraduate and graduate? How can we craft an even more significant role of contribution and excellence within the University of Michigan as a whole? And how can we extend and strengthen the positive impact we have upon the communities and constituencies that we serve in southeast Michigan?

In short, how can we chart a course for the coming decade that will guide us towards even greater impact and excellence?

I am convinced that the time is right for us to ask these fundamental questions, and I think that the answers are implicit in what we already know about the University of Michigan-Dearborn. At the same time, I believe that greater articulation of our vision and shared purpose will allow us to focus our resources and achieve even more fully the excellence and impact of which this campus is capable. I've spent a great deal of time over the past several years talking with people about UM-Dearborn—faculty, staff, students, alumni, regional leaders, legislators, executives, and many others. The Futures Retreat, the “Back to the Futures” discussions, and many focused conversations with faculty, staff, and community leaders have pointed to several themes where UM-Dearborn can make a highly noteworthy contribution.

“University of Michigan excellence with a metropolitan focus.” I believe that there is a distinctive and aspirational role for this campus that fits all these pieces together. We can aspire to becoming a great metropolitan university, offering a distinctive combination of academic excellence with commitment to addressing the problems of our metropolitan region. Through our curriculum, our special programs, and our areas of advanced faculty research we can have a significant impact on finding solutions for the issues and challenges that face southeast Michigan. And by preparing well the undergraduate and graduate students whom we teach, we will have made a major contribution to enhancing the competence, knowledge, and leadership of the region that will be its most valuable asset in the future. This conception offers us a powerful combination of two dimensions: the excellence of the University of Michigan, and an enduring dedication to serving the needs of metropolitan Michigan. It is a role that is highly consistent with our past and our current strengths, and it can be the basis of even greater focus, excellence, and impact in the future.

What are some of those central issues that our region faces and to which this university can make a meaningful contribution? Everyone’s list may be somewhat different, but here are five items on my list: the future of manufacturing and global competitiveness; race and ethnicity; K-12 schools; urban environmental problems; and regional leadership development. Each of these represents a cluster of issues that our region needs to confront and solve if we are to thrive as a community, and each represents an area of emerging strength on the campus. Existing groups of faculty, programs, and areas of the curriculum already offer significant leverage on addressing these issues. So our campus can contribute to solutions in these areas, and there would be great value in doing so.

We can also give renewed attention to some of the ways in which our academic experience might be structured in such a way as to increase civic engagement among our students. Does this definition of mission suggest more attention to co-ops and internships for our students? Should we find more ways of giving attention to service learning and civic engagement? I note that there are a number of initiatives under way on the campus today that would strengthen each of these areas—another sign to me that the time is right for this definition of our institutional identity and future.

The benefits. By expressing more clearly and more precisely our strategic vision of the future for our campus, I believe we will lay the basis for solving some of the longstanding challenges we’ve faced for a long time—enhancing and strengthening the public perception of the campus in the region, enhancing the appeal of the learning opportunities we provide to prospective undergraduate and graduate students, and drawing additional resources to the campus in pursuit of our core mission and goals. Finally, we can establish a distinctive and enduring role for the campus within the University of Michigan as a whole by refining our distinctive excellence and enhancing our contributions to the metropolitan region. We have a compelling story to tell, and we have established our ability to have a significant impact on the many challenges that face our region and our constituencies. We can build upon these strengths and bring new and old friends into partnership with us as we strive towards greater impact and excellence.

Next steps. In order for us to make progress on these important questions concerning the future of the campus, I will be organizing a series of conversations with all segments of the campus community over the next several months. These conversations will culminate in a campus-wide retreat during the winter term at which we will undertake to arrive at some clear, basic principles that can guide us as we make future decisions, and some clear and compelling messages that can be the basis of effective communication with external audiences.

This is an exciting time for UM-Dearborn, and it presents us with an opportunity to make some collective decisions that will influence our campus for many years to come. So I hope you will join with me in helping articulate an inspiring vision for our future.