Public Research Universities: Serving the Public Interest in Michigan

On April 4, 2016, Mark S. Schlissel (President of the University of Michigan), Mary Sue Coleman (President Emerita of the University of Michigan), Patrick Doyle (President and CEO of Domino’s and Chair of the Board of Directors of the Business Leaders for Michigan), M. Roy Wilson (President of Wayne State University), and Lou Anna K. Simon (President of Michigan State University) participated in a discussion at the University of Michigan about public research universities and their role in serving the public interest in Michigan. The program served as the Academy’s 2036th Stated Meeting. The following is an edited transcript of the presentations.

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Mark S. Schlissel

Mark S. Schlissel is the 14th President of the University of Michigan. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2015.

The ideas being examined and advanced by the Academy’s Lincoln Project are essential to the future of our nation. My predecessor at the University of Michigan, Mary Sue Coleman, has characterized this project as addressing the financial and moral commitment of our country to public higher education. This is a conversation we must have.

Parents often ask me what is special about a research university. They want to know why they should send their son or daughter to be educated at Michigan or Michigan State or Wayne State.

I tell them that at a research university your child will learn from faculty who are redefining the current limits of human knowledge and posing the next questions to be answered, teaching students not just what we know but how to look around corners, how to ask questions, how to doubt and be skeptical, how to demand proof and evidence.

At a research university, students get to participate in the act of discovery by working with faculty on their research projects—a mode of learning that is much more active than what one finds at less research-intensive universities. Great public research universities are thus of tremendous value to the students they educate.

They are also economic drivers. Think about what the United States would be like without the discoveries that came from research-intensive universities. They spawn entire new industries. They produce advances in health care and engineering and communications. The Internet, our ubiquitous iPhones, and all of the other technologies we rely on for modern life are heavily dependent upon research done at our great public research universities.

However, America’s public research universities face big challenges. We are in the midst of a period of massive disinvestment in public goods, especially public higher education, by elected governments, both state and national. Federal support for research is flat or, when you take inflation into account, declining.

We also face demographic challenges. We have had difficulty first diversifying and then maintaining the diversity of our student body and our faculty. Building inclusive learning environments has become increasingly challenging.

The Lincoln Project is bringing together federal and state higher education and business leaders. It is working to encourage the development of new federal, corporate, and philanthropic sources of support to sustain public higher education across our nation. We have an outstanding example of collaboration right here in Michigan with the University Research Corridor, a group started by Mary Sue Coleman and Lou Anna Simon about a decade ago. It is a collaboration...
of Wayne State, Michigan State University, and the University of Michigan.

This year the economic impact of these three universities on the state will be $17.5 billion. For every dollar invested in the three universities, the state gets back $22 in financial benefit.

We are highly ranked among similar clusters of research universities around the country. We are first in enrollment, first in total degrees granted, first in medical degrees. And we are number two in advanced degrees in high tech fields such as engineering and the sciences.

This is all critical for the economic resurgence and the continuing competitiveness of the state of Michigan, as well as our nation as a whole. This year we are issuing a special report on the work being done, collaboratively and individually, by Michigan’s three public research universities to promote Detroit’s recovery.

The Business Leaders for Michigan, represented today by Patrick Doyle, is a statewide organization made up of the chief executives of major businesses from the different sectors of the state’s economy, including the leaders of the major public research universities. This group is involved in promoting the importance of investment in public higher education to the citizens of Michigan as part of its plan for the economic revitalization of the state.

We have a business engagement center here at the University of Michigan that has partnered with many state universities as well as businesses of all sizes. Along with Michigan State, Wayne State, the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Western Michigan, and Michigan Tech, the center launched the Michigan Corporate Relations Network. This public/private partnership has helped small and medium-size businesses access research expertise and students from our institutions. With essential support from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the center has worked to facilitate tech transfer from Michigan universities to Michigan businesses.

Recently, I welcomed attendees to the first meeting of a new leadership council called MForeisght, a federally sponsored think tank of leaders from research-intensive industries, research-intensive universities, and federal research support agencies. The council’s mission is to identify emerging technologies from universities that can lead to the next generation of tech industry development, as well as to help identify which new technologies the manufacturing sector in particular should be paying careful attention to and which we need to develop into platforms for future economic growth.

A better Michigan will mean a better future for all of us. We all share a passion and sense of optimism, and I believe that the institutions of public higher education in Michigan—thanks to their complementary missions, complementary strengths, and shared values—can propel our state forward. We can make Michigan a powerful global leader in economic prosperity once again.

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