

Senate Assembly Address

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Introduction

This isn't quite how I remember past addresses to the Senate Assembly. I always found the surgery-gallery style of the Rackham Amphitheatre invigorating, to say the least!

A few of you might remember that in an earlier life I was also a member of Senate Assembly. In fact, I had just been elected to SACUA when I was sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in academic administration. Hence over the years I've had a great deal of respect for what faculty governance is able to accomplish at Michigan.

I have rejoined you as a faculty member—with the unique title of University Professor—not Distinguished University Professor, but just plain old (and rather “undistinguished”) University Professor. And, rumors to the contrary, I continue to teach—in fact this term I'm teaching three courses, two of which are new to the University.

Hence, as once again one of your faculty colleagues, I thought it might be appropriate this afternoon to use this opportunity stress the importance of the role of faculty in this University. You are the ones who make Michigan a great university through your academic achievements. You are the ones to are key to the University's long tradition of not only serving but changing the world. And you are the ones best able to keep the attention of this institution focused on its primary missions of learning and scholarship.

Actually my real agenda this afternoon is to suggest that we have an excellent opportunity to re-establish this focus on the intellectual life of the university. As some of you may remember, the official date of the founding of the University was set through 1920s court decisions as 1817. Hence in just eight years we will be celebrating the bicentennial of the University.

Hence my objective this afternoon is to propose that the theme of many activities leading up to this event should be to acknowledge, document, and celebrate the intellectual life of the University and the role of its faculty and

their extraordinary academic achievements over the past two centuries in building and sustaining one of the world's great universities.

So why is this so important now...after all, the bicentennial is still 8 years away.

Furthermore, 200 years is actually rather young, at least for western universities. After all, Harvard has celebrated its 350th, and Cambridge is preparing to celebrate its 800th.

So what is so special about Michigan's bicentennial.

After all Michigan is an exceptionally modest institution. All too often it prefers to pave over its past, rather than enshrine it as do places like Harvard, Cambridge, and Vienna.

I must admit that when I first came to Michigan I knew very little about the University. Oh, I knew that my department, nuclear engineering, was the first such degree-granting program in the world, with one of its first nuclear reactors, and has been throughout its brief history ranked with MIT as either #1 or #2 in the nation.

But when I came to the University, I was soon lost in the forest for the trees because of its size, complexity, (and all too frequent tendency toward bureaucracy).

While my perspective broadened out a bit as I cascaded downwards through the various levels of academic administration, even after becoming president, I still confess that much of my knowledge, particularly of its past accomplishments, was rather superficial.

Actually it was my wife Anne who first begin to convince me how very special the history of the University was—and the degree to which it had been neglected over the years. She persuaded me to create the University History and Traditions Committee and the position of University Historian, first held by Bob Warner (former director of the Clements Library and the

National Archives). She also launched a number of projects during the 1990s to give more visibility to University history, such as a reworking of the Peckham history by Peg and Nick Steneck (and more recently creating her own photographic history of the University campus), copies of which you have received last fall.

But I should admit that it wasn't until I had the opportunity to understand how others viewed the university from across the nation and around the world that I began to understand the true importance of this institution.

While all too frequently the public tends to see us (and unfortunately the University tends to promote itself) in terms of superficial activities such as football, building construction, or size (of enrollments, budgets, or football stadium), our real impact on the world has been through the intellectual activities of our faculty and staff!

In recent years I've had the opportunity to address many university organizations, university presidents, governing boards, state and federal commissions, in this country and abroad. However, I have quickly learned that these invitations are really not offered so much to me as an individual but rather to one who presumably represents the University of Michigan

The reason for this is quite simple: Although higher education leaders around the world have great admiration for (and envy of) the Ivy Plus group—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford—they understand they will never accumulate the wealth, or for most, or enjoy the private character and freedom, of these elite institutions. Rather they set they aspire to emulate the flagship public research universities in America, institutions such as UC Berkeley, U Wisconsin, and perhaps above all, the University of Michigan. And because of the way that Michigan throughout its history has influenced the development of higher education.

In fact, from this broader perspective I've become increasingly convinced that one can make a strong case that our University has had as much if not more impact over its two centuries of existence than any other university in America.

At a time when Yale and Harvard were still effectively British boys schools, Henry Tappan was attempting to build the first true university in America, and although he was fired for the effort, both what Michigan achieved and those he attracted to Michigan were instrumental in creating the first true universities in America.

During these very early years

- Michigan dedicated to astronomical research one of the three largest telescopes in the world
- It erected the first teaching laboratory for chemistry
- It established the first American professorships of modern history and education
- It open the first university hospital
- Its faculty taught the first courses in subjects such as meteorology, journalism, American literature, bacteriology, and forestry,
- And pioneered in coeducation, awarding 53% of its undergraduate degrees to women in 1898.

Yet all of these achievements can be traced directly to the Michigan faculty:

- Andrew Dixon White, noted as "perhaps the most significant of the university builders in the United States", spent a decade on Tappan's Michigan faculty before becoming the first president of Cornell.
- Charles Kendall Adams who put into place Tappan's University Course (the beginnings of graduate study) and then went on to lead Cornell and later transformed Wisconsin into a research university.
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- Henry Frieze, who not only continued Tappan's efforts to create Michigan as a university in the German sense but stimulated the birth of the secondary school system in America.
- Frieze also, together with other Michigan faculty, established the University Musical Society.
- John Dewey, while a Michigan faculty member, developed much of the modern theory of learning and pedagogy.
- Francis Kelsey, who shaped much of the early development of archeology and anthropology.
- Rensis Likert, Angus Campbell, Robert Kahn, and their colleagues who, through first the Survey Research Center and later the Institute for Social Research stimulated the quantitative approach to the social sciences, shaping fields such as sociology, regulatory economics, and the behavioral sciences.

And the list goes on and on and on...

The same is true of the professional disciplines.

- Years before Johns Hopkins was even founded and Abraham Flexner wrote his famous Carnegie report, Michigan had joined with Columbia and Penn to redefine medical practice and education, building the first university hospital and basing its medical education at the graduate level upon a strong scientific foundation.
- In my field, Michigan engineering has always been a trail-blazer—providing the first programs in disciplines such as naval architecture, electrical engineering, chemical engineering, aeronautical engineering (only a few years after the Wright brothers), metallurgical engineering, nuclear engineering, and computer engineering.

- Michigan faculty have played important roles in creating the knowledge society, through their early development of computer technologies such as time-sharing, later through Merit and NSFnet the Internet, and today through leadership in library and information sciences that is creating a truly universal digital library, a 21st Century version of the Library of Alexandria, through efforts such as the Google Book Scan project, the Hathli Trust, and the Sakai Project.

In fact almost every American intellectual movement from the mid-19th century onward must include some mention of Michigan.

Yet we can only understand the intellectual impact of the University of Michigan by understanding who our faculty were (and are) and what they did (and are going).

We need to trace the intellectual vitality of this institution by tracing its faculty members, their contributions, and their circles of discourse in an effort to understand the true impact of Michigan

We need to capture their stories and link them to our academic units—schools and colleges, departments and institutes.

So how should we approach using the approaching bicentennial to understand, assess, and honor Michigan's intellectual history.

Of course the first step that usually accompanies any University activity is to appoint a committee. Fortunately the University already has one: the History and Traditions Committee chaired by Fran Blouin. President Coleman has already asked it to refocus its efforts on preparing for the bicentennial, and both Anne and I have been appointed to the committee for this purpose.

Next, how should we begin?

Should we commission someone to write a book, similar to Howard Peckham's "The Making of the University of Michigan" prepared for the sesquicentennial celebration of 1967? We could always update the history of the institution, the growth of its campuses, the changes in its organization.

But this approach would clearly miss the most significant contributions of the university and probably distort even further public understanding of just what the University of Michigan is all about.

As Fran Blouin suggests, the broad intellectual span and size of the institution makes it hard to capture its history (or even understand its present nature) through conventional means (e.g., an update of Peckham, occasional papers on the University's intellectual history, etc.) Hence Fran suggests we should focus instead on building resources that would serve as a valuable resource to those wishing both to understand—and perhaps analyze—not only the University's history but even its intellectual structure and impact today.

Key in an such effort is to provide such materials in easily accessible and useable form, i.e., digital formats, easily searchable databases (i.e., Googled), and whenever possible, in the public domain (or Creative Commons licensing). Here new technologies such as DeepBlue, BlueStream, and the Hathli Project provide great opportunities!

We've already launched some of these efforts:

- A Faculty History Website, designed to capture the memoirs of senior faculty. We have a prototype of this website in place with the biographies, photos, and memoirs of several dozen faculty, but we're in the process of developing a production version based on the Deep Blue servers that will allow faculty to enter their own information via a web interface and be searchable by Google.
- Anne has spent much of the fall developing a complete faculty database, containing every faculty member who was ever appointed at the University (since 1837 this amounts to roughly 25,000) (You can't imagine the effort to go through old directories or edit huge UM Excel spreadsheets with tens of thousands of entries to get everything finally in flexible databases.)
- We're now beginning to fill in these databases with information such as photos, biographies, memorials, and perhaps even video oral histories and hopefully will have this up and accessible on the web by spring.

We've also begun some early work in interacting with various faculty groups. This past December Anne and I hosted a dinner for two of the oldest faculty clubs (the Azazels and the Scientific Club) to see their advice and involvement.

Some of the ideas arising from this discussion include:

- They agreed that a several year deployment was a good idea.
- UM Bicentennial should be integrated into the current strategic plans and activities of every academic activity of the university.
- It should also propagate not just to the schools and colleges but to the departments as well.

- For example, this could include major meetings, seminars, festschrifts, historical papers, invited professorships, alumni reunions, for the 2016-2018 period that would highlight the history of each unit.
- The provost/president could create a matching or seed grant program to jump-start the effort for a number of seminars and such.
- There should be a coordinated media and public relations effort to these activities. Maybe we need an innovative media czar who could monitor the developing efforts at the unit level and help coordinate a robust media campaign.
- The community aspect is quite important. While we all are part of an elite UM of which the Ann Arbor community is proud, most of them do not feel as though they are a part of the university. Hence using the Bicentennial to highlight our value to and part in the community would be good.
- Transcending all units of the University are other themes that should be considered independently for the bicentennial:
 - Women at Michigan
 - African Americans at Michigan
 - Relation of Michigan to Asia
 - The University in American and international politics
 - UM in medical education
 - After defining a few key domains, a planning committee could consider having a few key champions to represent these topics.

Our biggest challenge, however, is documenting the intellectual history of the university. Many of schools, colleges, and departments have brief histories on websites or buried away in file drawers, but these are usually concerned with buildings or enrollments or who was dean or chair. But few concern the intellectual life or achievements and impact of the faculty.

(Actually, this might be one reason why the Harvards, Yales, Oxfords, and Cambridges are better known than us, since there are dozens of books about their faculties and achievements.)

And this is where you folks come in.

Over the next several years we will have a remarkable opportunity to remind ourselves—and the state, the nation, and the world—of the most important contributions of the University of Michigan as we approach the celebration of our bicentennial in 2017.

- What are your ideas?
- How best should the University prepare to celebrate its remarkable history.
- How can we elevate the importance of the intellectual contributions of the faculty of this university?
- And is there a role that you and your colleagues involved in faculty governance can play in this effort.

One Final Observation

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One final observation...but first, a question:

First, how many of you have been on the Michigan faculty for at least ten years? 20 years? 30 years? 40 years? (anyone...anyone...) Since Marilyn Mason and Paul McCracken are not here, I won't go on to 50...

Well, this past December marked 40 years since Anne and I first arrived in Ann Arbor, in weather much like this.

- Several days earlier we had packed our furniture and our VW on the moving van in Pasadena in 90 degree weather (a Santa Ana condition) and arrived in sub-zero weather to lodging in the Holiday Inn East (Arborland)
- Waiting for our furniture to arrive so that we could do what many poor young faculty did by moving first into married student housing in Northwood.

After that first cold winter in good, gray Michigan, I expected that we would stay a few years and then head back to California. But as the years went by, Ann Arbor soon became our home...and this University became our family.

This happens to be an anomaly in higher education, since these days it is quite rare for a university president to be selected from an institution's own faculty and rarer still for a university faculty member to spend an entire career at a single institution.

To some my mobility-impairment may suggest a personal character flaw, perhaps a lack of imagination or marketing skill.

- However, I used to rationalize this dogged determination to remain in Ann Arbor by recalling an observation made by a former colleague that there were very few institutions in our society today worthy of total loyalty and commitment, and fortunately the University of Michigan was one of them.

- Actually, I don't remember just which of my faculty friends said this, since he or she has probably long since left the university for greener pastures. In any event, it was a belief I shared.

Forty years...through the ranks as a faculty member, then as dean, provost, and president, and now to the most enjoyable (and I believe) consequential role of all, a senior member of the faculty—an entire career at a single institution.

It is from this perspective that I would like to end with one final thought:

Last Tuesday most of us saw—and many participated in—a truly extraordinary event with the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

During his speech President Obama challenged America:

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit, to choose our better history.

Let me suggest a very similar challenge might become the rallying cry for the faculty as we prepare for Michigan's bicentennial:

Yet for us, just as for the nation, the time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit and to chose our better history.

To use the opportunities we will have over the next several years in preparing for the bicentennial to remember that it has been the achievements of our faculty that have made Michigan a great university;

- To remember and celebrate these achievements.
- To use them to reaffirm academic achievement and excellent as the cornerstone of the quality, strength, and impact of this university

- To reflect this in every priority we set, every decision we make, and the myriad ways in which we serve society,
- And finally, to rededicate ourselves as faithful stewards for the remarkable legacy left by previous generations of Michigan faculty members...and accept our responsibilities as Michigan faculty members today to add our own contributions to extend this legacy into the future!
- So that they may be celebrated at the tricentennial of the University in 2117!