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Article for Great Michigan
Magazine - Jan. 22, 1981
A.D. Lubbers

"In a civilized society we all depend upon each other."

Samuel Johnson penned those words in 1763, more than two centuries ago, but those of us living in this economically-troubled time in Michigan would do well to heed them today. Most of us have become ~~aware~~ aware of the dependency of our state economy on the automotive industry, but few of us have stopped to think about how other segments of our society contribute to our state's economic well-being.

These are hard times throughout our nation, and particularly in Michigan. People who are frustrated by unemployment, by their inability to buy or sell a home, by their lack of job mobility, and by what they perceive as unreasonably high taxes are clamoring for dramatic changes in our state's tax structure.

Few deny the need for tax reform, for a more fair method of taxation than is presently ~~being~~ used. But too often the goal of an equitable tax plan is overshadowed by a desire to shave a few dollars from our next tax bill. ~~More~~ More important than the instant gratification of an immediate tax cut is the need for a reassessment of our funding priorities.

Our ultimate goal should be not simply to cut government expenditures in order to reduce our tax bills. It should be to assure that Michigan offers us the quality of life we seek. That environment will require a healthy economy.

Many Michigan residents have expressed a certain satisfaction because state government has been forced to reduce its expenditures, albeit at the cost of a declining state economy. But what many fail to realize is that it has become a far more serious matter than simply cutting the fat from government. Programs which affect the health and welfare of thousands of citizens are jeopardized. Today's cuts affect our base budgets for years to come. The full significance of these budget reductions will be felt not only in the months ahead, but in the years to come.

What does all of this mean for higher education in general and for west Michigan in particular? For public higher education, it means the acceleration of a disturbing trend of declining state support. In the 1960s, Michigan was among the top ten states in the nation in its per capita support of higher education. Today, we are ~~at the~~ the bottom of the list. *In the past decade higher education's share of the Michigan budget has decreased by*

The inevitable result of this reduction in state support *33 percent* is higher tuition. Tuition at public colleges in Michigan is now among the highest in the nation. There is growing evidence that we are reaching the point where more and more potential students simply cannot afford to go to college -- a situation which will have a significant effect not only on the lives of thousands of individuals, but also on the economy of our state.

In this era of technological and social change, with its attendant demand for educated professionals and skilled technicians, the uneducated and unskilled will increasingly be found in unemployment lines. Those who are employed will be called upon to carry an even larger burden to help support those who are not. And we will learn the painful lesson that ignorance is far more expensive than education.

The reduction in state support will also affect our colleges' ability to respond to the needs of our state -- needs which are particularly evident in this economic climate. Governor Milliken has called for greater involvement of colleges and universities in creating a healthy and expanding economy in our state. Such involvement would include not only the obvious -- educating people for jobs in a more broad-based economy -- but also a greater commitment of funds for research in agricultural, technological and other areas offering potential for contributing to the diversification of our economy.

Essentially, then, higher education is ~~being~~ called upon to intensify what it is already doing to respond to the changing needs of a dynamic society. To do so, we must strengthen our general education programs to assure that college graduates have not only the facts -- the hard knowledge required for decision-making -- but also the broad humanities background

which will assist them in making critical judgments, in taking creative approaches to the complex problems they will face on their jobs, in their family lives and as responsible citizens.

In addition to strengthening humanities programs and better integrating them with the more technically-oriented studies, colleges will also need to create new programs to equip graduates to meet the demands of today's job market. In west Michigan, a glance at the classified ad section of any daily newspaper gives proof of the need for local programs to train people in areas such as nursing and engineering.

Those involved in the medical professions have long recognized the need for expanded nursing education programs in this region. Grand Valley's own undergraduate nursing program is filled to capacity, and we are currently embarking on a master's degree program, thanks to funding support provided by the federal government in response to studies which have demonstrated the need for such a program.

As for engineering, on the national level the demand for engineers is increasing rapidly, and a shortage of engineering graduates is predicted through the 1980s. Locally, although west Michigan has a large and growing group of technological industries with a continuing need for engineers, the closest engineering programs are more than 50 miles away. There is a widespread awareness of the need for a local program, but where will the money come from?

To assist in the development of high technology industry, in fact, to assist in the growth of all business and industry, our institutions must provide computer science education for growing numbers of people. At Grand Valley our fine undergraduate computer science and mathematics program should be expanded and advanced work added, to help meet the needs of this region and of the state with the professionals needed in the field.

Michigan has natural resources to be protected and used rationally for the improvement of the economy and the enrichment of leisure time. More geologists and environmentalists will find jobs in an expanding Michigan economy. They will be needed to help bring about the expansion. Here too, your local state college has excellent programs to meet the demand and thereby help in our state's development.

There are other areas, too -- Physical Therapy, Nutrition, and Administrative Work Systems, for example -- in which there is great demand in our area for undergraduate degree programs to provide more qualified practitioners. At the graduate level, there is a growing need for master's degree programs in Criminal Justice and Computer Science, to name a few.

In addition to creating programs to meet current needs, we must also look at changes required in our systems for delivering education in order to meet the changing needs of our students and potential students.

When Grand Valley was established in 1960, most college enrollments were comprised chiefly of 18-to-21-year-olds who became full-time college students shortly after graduating from high school. Today, the percentage of students who reside on or near the campus and who attend school full-time is decreasing while the ranks of older "continuing education" students are swelling.

The average age of Grand Valley students is now 26 years. That reflects not only a diminishing population of 18-to-21-year-olds, but also career mobility mandated by a rapidly changing society. The statistics show that the average person will change jobs ten times -- including four major career changes -- over the course of a lifetime.

The result: more people seeking, and needing, to return to college to upgrade their skills or learn skills in a new field. These are people who are already members of the work force and who, because of the demands of their jobs and

families, seek educational programs available at more convenient times and locations -- in the evening, and close to home.

To meet these needs, Grand Valley should expend its course offerings in Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Holland, Grand Haven, and other population centers in west Michigan.

Will Grand Valley be able to meet these regional needs? In the face of public outcry for lower taxes, how will we find the resources needed to make these changes? Some have suggested that we designate a portion of the revenues collected by the state specifically to fund higher education. That is one possibility -- and it is a suggestion which merits serious consideration and public discussion. Such a fund would not necessarily involve new taxes, but it would be a means of providing continuing, stable and adequate funding for higher education.

The fact that our citizens have not already begun to demand this kind of approach is evidence of the need for us in higher education to become more vigorously active in telling our story. We must do far more to strengthen their awareness that, as a Detroit Free Press editorial pointed out recently, Michigan's "colleges and universities are terribly important to the future of this state and the quality of life here."