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In thinking of the reasons for our gathering today to discuss the agenda for higher education in Michigan, I was reminded of an old story.

It seems that sometime in the Middle Ages, a stranger was visiting the French city of Chartres when he came across a crew of laborers working on the lowest level of a great Gothic church that would take several centuries to complete.

Knowing none of them would ever live to see much more than the foundation built, the stranger asked one man what he was doing.

"Well, can´t you see, I´m working. I have a wife and children to take care of and by digging dirt and laying stone from sunup to sunset here, I can go home at night with food for the table."

The stranger walked a bit farther until he came upon a second mason and he posed the same question to him. The second laborer answered,

"We´re preparing the ground and laying stone for a foundation."

Again the stranger moved farther along the construction site until he found a third man laboring amidst the pile of dirt and stones.
"And what are you doing?" the stranger asked.

The third workman looked up from his shovel, cast his eyes toward the sky, and said with passion, "Why, we’re building Chartres Cathedral!"

There is a lesson in this tale for those of us working on behalf of Michigan’s great university system. We can approach our task like the first worker as a labor to perform in order to help us meet our current budget. Or, like the second laborer, we can think a little more broadly and project our enrollment and financial needs five years down the road.

But if we are to be truly successful in our undertaking, if we are to fulfill our mission for the public good, we must look beyond our immediate needs and even beyond our five-year projections. We must think like the third builder: in visionary terms. We are not just meeting annual budgets like the first laborer nor are we only working toward five-year enrollments like the second laborer. We are rather building the future of Michigan through higher education.
And this is the message we need to get through to the citizens of Michigan if we are to count on their continued, maybe even improved, financial support. Once upon a time Michigan taxpayers ponied up to the bar for this state’s community colleges and universities, no questions asked. But those days are no more. Now this state’s taxpayers want to know, and I think they have a right to ask, what they’re getting for their hard-earned tax dollars.

The total state-local tax bill for Michigan residents eats up 12.8% of their personal income, the 11th highest in the country. I think that entitles them to some answers. We are here today to find ways to show those people what they’re getting for their money. They need to understand for themselves why a recent survey of university presidents ranked Michigan’s public institutions of higher education third in the country, behind only California and New York.

One product the taxpaying public gets for its money—and perhaps needs to hear more about—is the research that comes out of our university system, whether it’s an artificial ear drum from the University of Michigan, a failsafe airbag from Wayne State, or Interferon from Michigan State. Without a single privately funded research
university in this state--such as an MIT, a Princeton, or a Harvard--this
state's populace must rely on Michigan's universities to make the
break-through advances that will improve their personal quality of life.

The people of Michigan need to hear that, to a large part, the
economic security of this state depends on our colleges and
universities. In the hey day of auto profits in the 1950s before anyone
ever heard of a Honda or Toyota, Michigan's residents flourished along
with the auto industry. The state's per capita income in the 50s was 16%
higher than the national average and jobs were plentiful. But the energy
crisis, a recession, and the Japanese changed all that, and by 1985
Michigan's per capita income of $13,608 was below the national average.

Through economic diversification, Michigan is and will continue to
rebound from its dependence on the fickle auto industry. But the
significant economic forces that will drive the rest of this century are
the increasing capacity to gather knowledge and the simultaneously
increasing need to create systems that can process that information.
That means education.
Every year there are fewer new jobs in the industrial sector of Michigan, because the growth companies are high-tech and service. That means education. Information and how to use it--like Westinghouse--is becoming the world's most important product. That means education.

Once upon a time Michigan's predominantly industrial economy could pour its capital into new factories and equipment because workers came to work prepared to do their jobs. That is no longer the case. One reason the Sunbelt states are in an economic downspin is that they didn't see this coming need for more and better education to get a job. States like Texas got comfortable on oil and grew myopic about the value of investing in education. Because the state let itself be short-sighted on tax support for public education, today Texas has a severe shortage of literate and trained workers.

We know the graduates of our community colleges and universities will need to be trained by their own employers. But those new job providers expect to train people whose education has taught them how to be trained effectively. Michigan's colleges need to send them young men and women who have learned to think critically, solve problems efficiently, and
communicate accurately. Because the shelflife of knowledge grows shorter by the year, we can't possibly send the private sector college graduates who know all they'll ever need to know to become good employees. But we can send them college products who know where to look for what they need to know--employees who have learned how to learn.

If there's any question about how education-based the future of good employment is, then consider that last year IBM spent $1.5 billion on training its own workforce. That's half again as much as Harvard's annual operating budget of almost one billion dollars.

This corporate-training picture is consistent across the country. Last year the total public and private spending on elementary and secondary education was $190 billion; the same year employers spent $20 billion more--$210 billion--training their own employees.

Education is expensive, but in an information-driven, high-tech, continuously evolving, global economy, it is the sine qua non of economic security. A male entering the work force today with only a high school education can expect to earn a total of $861,000 by the time he's 64. That same man with a college education can look forward to earning
$1,190,000 by the same age, fully 40% more. A woman with a college education will earn 1/3 more in her working lifetime than will her sister with only a high school education.

In justifying our higher-education system's annually increasing tax demands on the residents of Michigan, we must also talk to them about the matter of accessibility for our entire population, not just the traditionally "college-bound" students. Michigan has made great progress in making higher education accessible to minority students who 20 years ago would have never dreamed of a college education.

A May 17 Wall Street Journal article makes it clear that states like Michigan with a strong public university system are going to be increasingly important to this country's non-traditional college students in their hopes for higher education. Next fall's high school seniors, for example, will have to spend $28,000 for four years at a public university. Four years at a private university for that same student would cost $59,000, over twice as much.
And for a child born this year, parents can expect to pay over $88,000 for a four-year education in a public university between 2008 and 2012. But if that same newborn were to head to a private university in 2008 when he is 18, his parents would have to pay over $187,000 for his four-year education. The Wall Street Journal worked out a savings plan for families of the baby who’s looking toward a private university in 18 years. The Wall Street Journal calculates that parents must right now begin putting away $387 every month for that infant in order to pay for a private university.

Maybe you do, but I don’t know many young couples who could begin to think of saving that kind of money for 18 years so their child can go to a private college. And those numbers also reinforce what a marvelous opportunity Michigan’s Educational Trust system offers young families by allowing them to prepay tuition for any one of Michigan’s public colleges or universities at today’s prices. If we are to make a university education accessible to children of single parents, minorities, and the poor, we must continue to make sure that through opportunities like MET,
we always have affordable doors through which the non-traditional student can enter.

Today Michigan ranks 12th among all states in the percentage of the state's residents who are enrolled in some form of higher education. That's a message of access and affordability our constituency needs to hear about.

Such accessibility to higher education is certainly practical, because it opens employment doors as opposed to public assistance lines. But it is also a moral calling in a free society that is based on equal opportunity for all our young people. In his book *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University*, the late Bartlett Giamatti, former Yale president but better known as the baseball commissioner who finally pulled the rug on Pete Rose, wrote of this higher purpose.

"...higher education in fact serves a democracy not by re-creating a class of micro-mandarins, strenuously emulating Socrates, but rather by maintaining faith with a national history that at its best aches for equality as well as quality, for accessibility as well as excellence."
And if our message to the public on the importance of Michigan’s higher education in terms of research that can improve all our lives can be made clear, and if our mission to make higher education accessible to all is understandable, the issue of "quality" is more intangible and thus harder to convey.

To tell the taxpayer that his hard-earned dollars are vital to helping our young people live a higher quality of life—not in the material sense here but in the mental, emotional, and even spiritual sense of the word—is not an easy sell. While he can understand research dollars for improved technology and higher learning for better jobs, to assert that our higher education institutions can elevate the minds and refine the souls of the young people who are this state’s future—well that’s a bit stickier to explain.

In their book *The Lessons of History*, Will and Ariel Durant observed that if today we were to close down all the world’s schools and stop teaching our children how to read and write, within a century humans would be back in the trees living the animal existence from which we’ve
evolved. Maybe that, as much as anything, suggests how fragile our humanity and civilization are—and how totally dependent they are on the way we educate our young.

And despite the frustrations of being a university president in a state that raised its prison budget 121% between 1983-89 when its funding for four-year colleges went up 33%—and only 25% for community colleges—I am optimistic. I think accepting our responsibility to be accountable for how we spend taxpayers' money is healthier for everyone than was our earlier ivory-tower isolation.

Without being Pollyana-ish, I think the fact that more Michigan residents are going to school than ever before has created closer ties between our state's universities and its public constituency. We are learning from each other things we both ought to know. They are reminding us daily of the "real world" out there at the same time we are reminding them of the importance of holding to the higher vision education offers a society.

This increasing merger of Michigan's residents with Michigan's university system allows us both to serve each other better.
And that brings us back to Chartres, France, and the third laborer whose great great-grandchildren would never live to see the completion of the magnificent cathedral that generations of his descendants would work on. Yet this simple stone mason 1,000 years ago never lost sight of what his work was about.

And while we need to be concerned about this year's budgets and 1995's enrollment numbers, we must never forget that what we are really doing, after all, is building Chartres Cathedral. Through higher education, we are building the future of Michigan.