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The Next Bold Experiment: A Land-Grant Revolution for the World

The President's Address: Dr. Lou Anna Kimsey Simon

“Without industrial development there can be no wealth; without wealth there can be no leisure; without leisure, no opportunity for thoughtful reflection and the cultivation of the higher arts.”

—Booker T. Washington MSU Commencement Address 1900

We gather today to observe and to celebrate the birth of a revolution—a revolution born 150 years ago in Michigan that has influenced the development of higher education across our nation and around the world. As the first land-grant university—the pioneer land-grant university—our university spearheaded a movement that led to the development of a totally new educational tradition.

I'm not speaking here of the establishment of agricultural colleges, which many people mistakenly believe the “land-grant tradition” to mean. I'm speaking of a visionary idea of higher education that called for embracing practical knowledge, as well as traditional scientific and classical studies, and giving all—not just those preparing themselves for a few traditional professions—an equal opportunity to become citizen leaders and to shape a new, wider range of knowledge required by our rapidly growing nation.

This vision—our pioneering vision of a university—was a bold new experiment that became the model for the land-grant legislation first sponsored in 1857 by then Congressman Justin Morrill of Vermont, who, after a five-year struggle, succeeded in establishing the Act of Congress known as the Morrill Act, which Abraham Lincoln signed into law in 1862.

Today, we gather to reaffirm the values—the ideals—behind that vision and to recommit ourselves to continuing our pioneering work of advancing knowledge and transforming lives in the years ahead. Foremost among our values are:

- Quality: dedicating ourselves to achieving excellence in all of our endeavors—good enough for the proudest and recognized among the best;
- Inclusiveness: providing opportunity for learners from all backgrounds—bringing their passion and talent to join a vibrant, intellectual community built on mutual respect—to experience and to multiply the benefits of the power of knowledge throughout their lives; and

- Connectivity: among one another, among academic enterprises, to society and to those we serve—locally, nationally, and globally.

For 150 years, our values have served us well. Michigan State University is now one of the top 100 research universities in the world and regarded as one of the most engaged institutions among the prestigious Association of American Universities.

We have a legacy of nearly half a million alumni—more than 350,000 currently living around the globe. And we are known far and wide as a caring university—a university that promotes promise and hope, touches lives, and demonstrates its connectedness in simple, deeply felt and deeply appreciated ways:

- In the beauty of our campus and our friendly, diverse, unpretentious culture;
- In our willingness to roll up our sleeves and dig into work—both at home and abroad—on society’s most complex problems; and
- In our enthusiasm and ability to blend the best of the liberal arts and practical knowledge to develop innovative, humane, and sustainable solutions that empower people to create a better life for themselves and their communities.

Yet, with all of the accomplishments we celebrate today and every day, our mantle of leadership and our pioneering legacy require that we set our sights even higher.

Today, higher education and, in particular, public research universities are suffering not just a storm but a climate change. We, by nature of our historic relationship with our states, are joined in a covenant with society.

For a land-grant public research university, this covenant entails special, unique responsibilities and special expectations.

- We have a responsibility to serve as a catalyst for realizing upward mobility—the American dream—and for advancing the state and nation’s economic competitiveness and quality of life.
- We have a special responsibility to listen and respond to society’s needs and to shape an intellectual agenda that addresses the issues facing global society today while anticipating and shaping the issues of tomorrow.
- And we have a responsibility—an expectation—that we will marshal our intellect and our will to assure that our value to society globally and to

those whose lives we touch directly will continue to grow and to appreciate over time, no matter what circumstances we face.

Today this covenant is at risk. It's been hit by a cold wave driven by an Arctic front of national and global economic and social stress, and this is having a chilling effect on local levels of regard for—and support of—public higher education. The impact of this front can be seen in declining state funding—for Michigan State, a decrease from two-thirds of our budget in 1970, when I first came here, to now less than half—and it continues to drop.

Increasingly, the public sees the success of the great public research universities in garnering private funds and federal research dollars, the economic benefits to our graduates, and the demand for our innovations in the marketplace as reasons to disinvest, rather than to invest in us.

Instead, the language of entitlement and private good is drowning out the language of the land-grant movement, which is higher education built on cutting-edge research and engagement for the public good.

By seizing upon the private good of education at public research universities, lawmakers across the country think they have discovered a strategy to help balance the short-term budget; but in the long term, this strategy may ultimately deny the American dream to future generations and diminish our impact around the world.

We need the wisdom not to be reactive to these cold winds and the courage to forge a new covenant with society based on our land-grant ideals. We must warm to the challenge and be strong to avoid seeking shelter in a private, inward-looking mindset. We must also avoid the temptations to yield in ways that will harm our quality, inclusiveness, and connectivity—our stewardship for the public good.

Acknowledging and affirming the unique, critical role that we as the pioneering land-grant university are called upon to play, Michigan State University must lead Michigan, our nation, and the world in achieving a redefinition—a revitalization—of the covenant we share with society.

In Michigan, the dialogue leading toward that redefinition is under way. It began with Governor Jennifer Granholm's mandate that, in the next 10 years, we double the number of students earning post-secondary degrees or other credentials in our state in order to ramp up Michigan's ability to seize a share of the emerging global knowledge economy.

As a result, last fall a special commission was formed—the Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth chaired by Lt. Governor John Cherry—to bring leaders together to figure out how to achieve this ambitious goal. The

report of the commission suggests a new covenant. It charges the state's public institutions of higher education—flagship research universities, state universities, and community colleges—to require more of themselves.

- It requires an active engagement with the problems of society, particularly K through 12, and more emphasis on translating our knowledge into entrepreneurship, not just jobs.
- It also requires us to form partnerships among Michigan educational institutions, industry, and communities to create an immediate impact on Michigan's future.

As one of the leading public research universities in the world, Michigan State has the same obligation to form partnerships around the globe that rebound positively to Michigan, yet also fulfill our land-grant responsibilities to the global society.

The new economy will not be built on the skills or knowledge of workers alone but on the capacity of our research universities as creators of knowledge. This knowledge is what generates the innovations, the new technologies, and the new businesses, which don't simply provide jobs, but improve life for all citizens of Michigan. Seizing a major share of the new economy suggests a need for more, not less, investment in our flagship research universities' strengths—and in Michigan State's unique brand of engagement.

As we focus on preparing Michigan—and the world—for the new economy, we also must take a new look at today's graduate and undergraduate students and the resources they will need to survive and to thrive in the decades ahead.

Both will need state-of-the-art knowledge to shape and advance their chosen careers. And in the knowledge economy, they will need more—a new worldview, a new expectation of what applying that knowledge and developing a satisfying, productive life will take.

A vision of this worldview is only now beginning to materialize, particularly for graduate education. We are told by futurists and by academics who study employment trends that today's graduates—albeit baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate—can expect to change jobs between 10 and 20 times in a working lifetime. Today's graduates will most likely change the industry in which they work at least three times.

At Michigan State University, we already have traveled a long way toward anticipating the needs of our graduate and undergraduate students and designing educational experiences across the rich fabric of the university to prepare them for the future.

- Our faculty are themselves scholarly active and engaged globally, but also locally, in creating a culture of active learning.
- We have supplemented our course-based instruction with a wide array of opportunities, like research and service-learning, to expand our students' knowledge and their capacity to be innovators throughout their lifetimes.
- We have embraced technology as a means both to broaden our reach intellectually and geographically and to forge timeless bonds with our graduates and our partners around the world.

But we must become even more creative. We must go to greater lengths to acknowledge and prepare all of our students for the paths their lives will take. We must encourage them to become citizen leaders by embracing innovation and creativity in all that they do. We must foster in them a pioneering spirit that continues to give new form and substance to their lives and—in the land-grant spirit—to the lives of the people around them.

To prepare our graduates to be citizen leaders in the rapidly advancing economy and culture in which they will live, we must be forward thinking.

- We must continue to broaden our approaches to teaching, learning, research, outreach, and multiculturalism.
- We must strengthen our commitment to teaching the liberal arts and sciences to provide our students with a bedrock of critical thinking skills and cultural sensibility and sensitivity.
- We must expand our nation-leading effort to make international education a component of every student's program and expand our international professional linkages with researchers, artists, and other universities around the world to enhance our ability to expose our graduate and undergraduate students to research, technology developments, and artistic expressions around the globe.
- We must expand our post-baccalaureate programs to prepare the intellectual leaders who will become the faculty of the future and the entrepreneurs who will advance the frontiers of knowledge, creativity, and innovation.

And we must continue to be agents of change—holding ourselves to the same standards for innovation and creativity, not bracing against challenges as if they are the Arctic winds but warming to them and embracing the opportunity they present to advance our academic community.

Michigan State University is a special place. We all know that. That's why we are here today to celebrate its glorious 150-year pioneering heritage.

Who would have imagined 150 years ago:

- That an experiment that began with a tiny class in a rough-hewn building carved out of a forest would excel and lead others to greatness.
- That by our example, we would become the global prototype of a genuinely American brand of higher education—one that is an engine of the economy, a force for the democratization of public learning, the model for engagement with the world beyond the campus, and a catalyst for improving the quality of life in Michigan and around the world.

Just as the establishment of the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan gave impetus to the work of Justin Morrill to create the land-grant system to prepare for the 20th century, let us work together to create the platform for a new covenant for 21st century America and the world.

Today I'm calling for a new land-grant revolution, the next bold experiment—the land-grant university for the world. As a great public research university, one of the top 100 in the world, endowed with a difference—the great land-grant spirit, the great land-grant heart—Michigan State University accepts the mantle and the mace of leadership for this revolution.

Our role, once again, will require confidence and conviction. It will require boldness and risk-taking. It will require making and acting on decisions that feel like they might not fit today at the beginning, but we—and the society we serve—will grow into them. The world will see that Michigan State University—the pioneer land-grant university, the leader of the new land-grant revolution—may march to a different step, but we are never out of step. And it is our different step that often makes the critical and creative difference in meeting society's needs.