

THE VIEW FROM THE HELM

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*Leading the American University
during an Era of Change*

JAMES J. DUDERSTADT

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To Anne, Susan, and Kathy
with appreciation and admiration
for their roles as Michigan's first family

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PREFACE

The American university presidency is one of those highly respected yet generally misunderstood roles in contemporary society. Most outside the academy view leading a major university as a prestigious and significant assignment, comparable to a corporate chief executive officer or senior public official, such as a governor. Certainly the size, complexity, and social impact of the contemporary university demand considerable skill as a leader, manager, politician, and, of course, fund-raiser extraordinaire. Yet, despite the importance of the presidential role, many students and faculty on the campus view university presidents as one of the lower life-forms of academic administration, and their respect for presidential authority is accordingly limited. The public visibility and responsibility of presidency, its rather anemic authority, and its accountability to lay governing boards demand both a very thick skin and a tolerance for high risk. The late Yale president A. Bartlett Giamatti once put it: “Being president of a university is no way for an adult to make a living. Which is why so few adults actually attempt to do it. It is to hold a mid-nineteenth-century ecclesiastical position on top of a late-twentieth-century corporation.”¹

At the University of Michigan, the Office of the President is located in the Fleming Administration Building,² a formidable block-

house-shaped structure with a Mondrian pattern of narrow slits for windows. This fortresslike building, constructed during the days of campus protest in the 1960s, suggests power and authority—and perhaps as well isolation from the surrounding campus. Yet in reality this building is the helm of the university ship of state, where the president must chart a course and then navigate the institution from its traditions, achievements, and obligations of the past, through the turbulent seas of social change, toward an uncertain—indeed, unknowable—future.

My own tenure at this helm of the university—as provost, acting president, and president—lasted almost a decade, sandwiched between other academic roles as a professor, research director, and dean, all at the University of Michigan and together spanning almost four decades. I regarded serving as president of the university as both a privilege and a high calling. But I must admit that there were times when it also seemed to be just another one of those onerous assignments a faculty member is asked to assume, more akin to chairing the curriculum committee or a task force on budget cuts than to being elected as a powerful chief executive officer of the university. Hence, it was not particularly surprising to most of my colleagues at Michigan when, following my 10 years at the helm of the university, I returned to the faculty to resume my activities as a teacher and a scholar, although such a decision was certainly counter to the current tendencies of many university presidents to migrate from one institution to the next.

Recently, several of my colleagues have reminded me that one of my presidential duties remained unfulfilled. Most presidents of major universities, such as the University of Michigan, are expected to write their memoirs of the experience. In some cases, these efforts turn into autobiographies that are both amusing and therapeutic. Others instead draw on their experiences as university presidents to focus on issues related to higher education and its role in society, a path I have followed in past tomes concerning an array of topics, such as the future of the public university, technology, and—perhaps against my better judgment—intercollegiate athletics.

In response to the reminders, I decided to kill several birds with one stone, by writing such a memoir but, rather than organizing it as

the traditional chronological narrative, instead using my tenure as president of the University of Michigan to animate a commentary on the state of the contemporary university presidency. In this effort, I have also introduced a historical perspective by drawing on the experiences and achievements of earlier presidents of my university. This synthesis of memoir, history, and commentary was stimulated by my strong belief that successful university presidents are usually those who build on the history, traditions, and culture of their institutions, learning well from the experiences of their predecessors. To illustrate this important principle, part I of this book begins in chapter 1 with a brief summary of the history of the University of Michigan, identifying what Burton Clark defines as its *institutional saga*—those long-standing characteristics that determine its distinctiveness. Here I have devoted particular attention to how earlier Michigan presidents have both shaped and been shaped by the Michigan saga in their efforts to face the challenges and opportunities of their eras.

With this historical background, the book then moves in chapter 2 to discuss the various paths to a university presidency, drawn heavily from my personal experience and later roles as counsel and confidant to both those seeking university presidencies and those responsible for selecting university leadership. Chapter 3 then turns to the selection and evaluation of university leaders, with the aim of providing guidance to both the hunters (governing boards) and the hunted (candidates) in the presidential search process. Again this chapter draws on my experience, as a quarry of the presidential hunt.

The diverse roles and responsibilities of the contemporary university presidency are the subject of part II of this book. Academic institutions are, in reality, very complex social communities. Their leadership involves not simply managing a complex array of activities but, more significant, providing intellectual, moral, pastoral, and, on occasion, even spiritual leadership for large, diverse communities. After a brief review of the general aspects of university leadership in chapter 4, chapters 5–9 consider in some depth particular presidential roles, including executive responsibilities, academic leadership, political roles, moral leadership, pastoral care for the university community, and strategic leadership.

Part III of this book concerns the personal and professional life of

the university president. Chapter 10 provides a perspective of the wear and tear of public leadership, its rewards and challenges, and the role of and impact on the presidential family. Chapter 11 illustrates the degree to which both risk and failure are important elements of all presidencies. The final chapter concerns the endgame, the decision to step down, and the afterlife of the university presidency. It concludes with a brief assessment of whether the contemporary university presidency, at least as it is currently structured and perceived, is a realistic assignment, capable of attracting talented individuals and enabling their successful leadership of these important social institutions.

It seems appropriate to mention here an important caveat. Although I have had the good fortune to have experienced essentially all of the academic leadership roles in the university—from my early years as a rank-and-file faculty member involved in teaching, research, grant hustling, supervision of PhD students, and faculty governance, to various administrative assignments as dean, provost, and president—I have done so at a single institution, the University of Michigan. 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 dean colleague that there were very few institutions in our society today worthy of total loyalty and commitment and that fortunately the University of Michigan was one of them. Actually, I do not remember just which of our deans 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.

Furthermore, the University of Michigan has played an important role in both defining and transforming the nature of higher education in America in the past, and it continues to do so today, in such areas as social inclusion (e.g., the 2003 Supreme Court cases defending the importance of diversity), technology (e.g., the 1980s development of the Internet), and public character (e.g., the "Michigan model" of transforming an institution of higher education into a privately sup-

ported public university more capable of balancing the vicissitudes of tax support with success in the competitive marketplace for private support). Hence, what better place could there be to use as a springboard for a career-long effort to lead change. Or at least, so I have believed.

Clearly the issues and perspectives discussed in this book are heavily influenced by the particular characteristics of the University of Michigan. Since Michigan is one of the largest and most complex universities in the world, the scope and complexity of that institution sometimes can magnify issues to levels far beyond those experienced by most other institutions. Yet, while perhaps different in magnitude, my experiences as president at Michigan are, for the most part, quite similar in character to those faced by the presidents of most colleges and universities.

The task of leading a university can be complex, confusing, and frustrating at times. The wear and tear of being on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; of defending the institution against its foes and sometimes even its friends; of conveying a sense of optimism and hope amid the doom and gloom that pervades a campus during hard times—all take their toll. Most presidents of the University of Michigan (myself included) have wondered at times, in personal papers or intimate conversations, whether they made the wrong decision to accept the position. On my last day in office, I took my e-mail pager, long cursed for its frequent emergency messages that drove my Pavlovian responses to crisis, and tossed it into a nearby lake as a symbol of cutting the cord and returning to the freedom of faculty life once again.

Together, my wife, Anne, and I began our years in Ann Arbor in university family housing in 1968, returning 20 years later for another decade in university housing in the presidential mansion. After 10 years at the helm of the university, serving together in my assignments as provost and president (which for us, as with many other colleagues in university leadership positions, were two-person roles), we decided to return to the faculty and the community where we began our Michigan odyssey. We have continued to serve on the faculty and within the campus community, if sometimes only as ghosts of the university past, since invisibility is an absolute requirement for has-

been presidents. We both regarded the opportunity to serve in the presidency of the University of Michigan as not only a calling of great responsibility but a privilege of leadership and service on behalf of a truly remarkable institution. It is my hope that this book will convey such a sense of both the challenges and the rewards that accompany the role of leading the American university.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
Fall 2006

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The arcane skills required to lead a major university are best learned from other accomplished academic leaders. In this regard, I must acknowledge the extraordinary impact that earlier Michigan presidents have had on my own career: Harlan Hatcher, Robben Fleming, and Harold Shapiro served as mentors, friends, and confidants. Beyond this, other Michigan leaders, several of whom went on to major university presidencies themselves, have been important role models, including Frank Rhodes, Billy Frye, and Chuck Vest. So, too, my friends and colleagues serving on the Michigan faculty and as deans and executive officers have similarly had great influence on my role as an academic leader.

Beyond the privilege of serving a great university, perhaps the most rewarding and satisfying aspect of my presidency was the ability to join with many remarkably talented and dedicated people in the task of keeping Michigan among “the leaders and best.” The size, complexity, and aspirations for excellence of the university both require and attract great leadership at all levels, among its faculty, students, staff, administrators, regents, and alumni. Whatever success was achieved during my years at the helm of the university was due to a very considerable extent to the effort, talent, wisdom, and courage of the Michigan leadership team, defined in the broadest sense.

During the decade covered by this book, the University of Michigan was particularly fortunate to have a truly remarkable team of executive officers, many of whom continued on to other significant leadership roles in higher education, all of whom had extensive experience with higher education, and all of whom are owed a deep debt of gratitude. This team consisted of the following people in the following positions:

Provost: Chuck Vest, Gil Whitaker, Bernie Machen

Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer: Farris Womack

Vice President for Research: Linda Wilson, Bill Kelly, Homer Neal

Graduate Dean: John D'Arms (d.), Bob Weisbuch

Vice President for Student Affairs: Henry Johnson, Mary Ann Swain,
Maureen Hartford

Vice President for University Affairs: Walt Harrison

Vice President for Development: Jon Cosovich (d.), Joe Roberson,
Tom Kinnear

Secretary: Dick Kennedy (d.), Harold Johnson, Roberta Palmer

Associate Vice President: Doug Van Houweling, George Zuidema,
Charles Moody, Lester Monts, Rhetaugh Dumas, Harold Jacobson
(d.), John Jackson, Robert Holbrook

Chancellor: Blenda Wilson, Clint Jones, Jim Renick, Charlie Nelms

Athletic Director: Bo Schembechler (d.), Jack Weidenbach, Joe
Roberson

Assistant: Robin Jacoby, Shirley Clarkson, Connie Cook, Ejner
Jensen, Susan Lipschutz (d.)

During my tenure, Michigan was truly a deans' university, providing the deans of our schools and colleges with unusual authority and opportunity, depending heavily on their leadership, and attracting some truly remarkable academic leaders. And, of course, the progress achieved by a university of the size and complexity of the University of Michigan depends on the efforts of talented and committed faculty, staff, and student leaders. Hence, in a very real sense,

the progress documented in this book should also be regarded as a summary and a tribute to all of their extraordinary achievements.

Revisiting the personal experiences of leading one of the nation's leading public research universities and capturing those experiences in accurate, balanced, and engaging prose a decade later is no small feat. It required the assistance and wise counsel of many former colleagues, too numerous to mention here. But of particular help in the development of the book was the critical analysis of Lisa Baker, who, as my former media relations officer, had learned well the difficult task of telling me what I sometimes did not want to hear; Julie Steiff, a particularly skilled and thoughtful editor, who has worked with me on several earlier book projects; and James Reische, who, as the assigned editor at the University of Michigan Press, provided strong and constructive feedback on various drafts of the manuscript.

However, most significant in this effort has been the role of Anne Duderstadt. Without her ability (not to mention her memory) to capture the spirit, excitement, and satisfaction of those years—tempered, of course, by occasional frustration and disappointment—this book would have been quite impossible. The two of us stood side by side at the helm during this decade of university leadership, experiencing the trials and tribulations of university leadership together. It was her contribution to our university leadership that frequently steered the institution through stormy seas and away from the doldrums, as it prepared to enter a new century.