

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Throughout the history of American higher education, the university presidency has had a strongly political character. Presidents are expected to be skillful in working with local, state, and federal governments, both to represent the interests of their universities and to protect them from unnecessary government intrusion and control. The success of their leadership is frequently measured in terms of political objectives, such as level of state appropriations or volume of federal research grants. Although such political skills are undeniably important for public universities, they are also essential for private colleges and universities, since these are clearly affected by government regulation and tend to benefit from public policies, such as those concerning taxes and student financial aid.

University presidents also need considerable skill in dealing with the multiple constituencies and myriad interests of the university community. University campuses are, by design, “free and ordered spaces” where important social issues can be debated.¹ Furthermore, as large, complex, and basically anarchical organizations, universities are frequently dominated by politics among their various constituencies—students, faculty, and staff. The faculty, by its very nature, tends both to be skeptical and to challenge leadership. Students are frequently at that age where challenging authority becomes almost a

rite of passage. Governing boards, particularly at public institutions, tend to be highly political, bringing to the table many issues (e.g., tuition policy and affirmative action) that reflect fundamental political convictions. The size and impact of the contemporary university on its community, its region, and the nation itself can place the president at ground zero on major political controversies.

The political role of the president is particularly important in public universities. These institutions are not only dependent on public tax dollars for support but are subject to a complex array of government regulations and relationships at the local, state, and federal level, most of which tend to be highly reactive and resistant to change. By their very nature, public universities can become caldrons of boiling political controversy. From their governing boards (usually determined by either gubernatorial appointment or popular election) to the contentious nature of academic politics, student unrest, or strident attacks by the press, public university presidencies are subject to political stresses more intense than those in other arenas of higher education.

GROWING UP IN A ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD

The University of Michigan, highlighted for its free and liberal spirit during its early years, has a long tradition of political activism on the part of its students, faculty, and alumni. Student concerns on and extending beyond the university's campus have frequently not only addressed but influenced major national issues, such as the Vietnam War, the environmental movement, and civil rights.

While Ann Arbor may be a small midwestern community, the university itself has always had more of the hard edge characterizing the urban centers of the Northeast. Sports fans might suggest that this flows naturally from Michigan's reputation in violent sports, such as football. Actually, it has evolved as a defensive mechanism to protect the university against the reality of its harsh political environment. In a sense, the University of Michigan grew up in a rough neighborhood and had to become lean and mean and capable of looking out for itself. Michigan is a state characterized by confrontational politics. It was long dominated by the automobile industry, which meant big

companies, big labor unions, and big state government. During the last half of the twentieth century, as the state's economy and population faced the challenges and hardships driven by global competition and poverty in its industrial cities, this political atmosphere has become more strident, with organized labor fighting to retain its control of the Democratic Party, while the conservative communities of western Michigan, dominated by the religious Right, now control the Republican Party.

In many ways, Ann Arbor was an oasis, a liberal eastern community planted in the center of a tough midwestern state. It did not help the university that the politics of the city of Ann Arbor suffered a hangover from the protest days of the 1960s. The community continues to this day to mark its history of civil disobedience by celebrating each April 1 with the annual Hash Bash, where thousands come to promote and experience the evil weed, uninhibited by Ann Arbor's liberal laws governing the possession of marijuana.

Despite the changing nature of its economic and politics, the state of Michigan still has very much a blue-collar mentality today. This is perhaps best illustrated by a comment made to me by a senior executive of General Motors during my years as dean of the College of Engineering: "As long as we can put a car on the showroom floor for fewer dollars per pound than anybody else, we will dominate the global marketplace!" Of course, the Japanese demonstrated convincingly that people no longer buy cars by the pound—they choose quality instead. Similarly, in the global, knowledge-driven economy of the twenty-first century, it is the quality of a workforce that counts, as evidenced by the increasing tendency of American companies to outsource—rather, "offshore," in contemporary language—not only unskilled labor but high-skill activities, such as software engineering. Yet, higher education in Michigan tends to be treated at best with benign neglect and at worst as a convenient political whipping boy.

Much of the University of Michigan's political challenge was stimulated by its very success as one of the nation's leading research universities. Its aspirations for excellence were frequently met by state government and the public at large with the questions "Excellence for whom?" and "Excellence for what purpose?"—the assumption being that excellence really meant an elitism that would exclude their con-

stituents. Furthermore, as one of the largest and most prominent universities in the nation, Michigan was frequently targeted by those in the federal government hoping to use it as a lynchpin for driving broader change in higher education. Since the university operates one of the nation's largest and financially most successful university medical centers, it was understandable that Michigan would be the target for federal efforts to reduce health care reimbursement and funding for medical training. The university's national leadership in sponsored research also made it an attractive target for the same congressional investigations that trampled Stanford in the early 1990s, ironically led by Michigan's own congressman John Dingle. However, unlike Stanford, Michigan was prepared and immediately responded to the congressional attack, not only with a strong public defense led by alumnus Mike Wallace, but also through back-channel conversations with the congressman, which successfully deflected the attack.²

There were other factors that frequently placed the university in the political bull's-eye. The success and visibility of the university's athletic programs—particularly its football team—made the university a primary target for the enforcement of gender equity through Title IX of the Education Amendments Act in the 1970s. As the largest employer in Ann Arbor, with vast assets in the billions of dollars, it was also natural that Michigan would become a popular target of litigation on almost every issue imaginable from those plaintiffs and lawyers who were hoping that the institution's deep pockets would lead to a quick settlement, regardless of the merits of the case.

Giving the university even more prominence were its institutional saga—to quote James Angell, “an uncommon education for the common man”—and its success in leading the struggle for campus diversity through such efforts as the Michigan Mandate, which doubled minority student and faculty representation on campus during the early 1990s. Hence, it was not surprising that the institution would become a target for conservative groups seeking to challenge and roll back affirmative action policies in college admissions, an effort that would lead to the important Supreme Court decision of 2003 and later in 2006 to a referendum amending the state constitution to ban affirmative action in Michigan.

As the point person on controversial issues in higher education,

the president of a university is frequently placed under a political microscope by politicians, the press, and the university community itself. Of course, all presidents have certain political preferences on most issues, but it is extremely important to keep these carefully veiled. However, in contrast to many skillful public leaders who, like a chameleon, are able to change their political colors depending on the situation, I took a more honest, if occasionally perplexing, approach. During my early tenure, the Michigan governor (James Blanchard) was a Democrat, and the U.S. presidents (Ronald Reagan and George Bush) were Republicans. During my later years as president, this situation was completely reversed, with a Republican governor (John Engler) and a Democratic president (Bill Clinton). As UM president and as chair of the National Science Board, I participated in both state and national arenas, so I had to be very careful not to get caught in a political crossfire.

On occasion, I suffered the usual problems of public leaders by getting mislabeled as in one political camp or the other. The Democrats believed that since I was a friend of Governor Engler and a White House appointee of Presidents Reagan and Bush, I must surely be a Republican. The Republicans viewed my stances in support of diversity and gay rights as telltale signs of a Democrat. My true political background and beliefs were far more complex. I had been raised as a dyed-in-the-wool Missouri Democrat in the tradition of Harry Truman. My mother was a long-standing chairperson of the Democratic Party of Carroll County, Missouri, and my sister was the producer of the conservative viewpoint used on WGBH's program *The Advocates*. I grew up a fan of Kennedy and McCarthy. Yet I developed an independent streak in the 1960s and 1970s. I generally stayed in the middle of the road, almost always voting a split ticket. In fact, a Progressive at heart, I would probably be most comfortable as a member of Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party. In reality, I was simply not a political partisan. Nor was I politically impaired, as was suggested by some of my more political colleagues. Rather, I held a more complex set of values than the terms *liberal* or *conservative* would tolerate, values that would manifest themselves on a case-by-case basis during my presidency. With this confession now on the record, let me move on to consider the political leadership of the university president.

DEFENDING THE UNIVERSITY

One of the most important roles of the president is to protect the university from hostile political forces, both internal and external, that could cause it great harm. At the beginning of each academic year, my Michigan leadership team of executive officers would meet together for a risk-assessment session, to predict the most significant political threats to the university and develop strategies for its defense. We actually developed a threat chart identifying the greatest concerns for the year ahead. At the top of the chart would usually be the governor, since whether by opportunistic intent or just neglect, this state leader was frequently the source of many of the woes facing higher education in the state. Close behind was the state legislature, dominated during my tenure by graduates of Michigan State University, who took great delight in thrashing that arrogant institution in Ann Arbor. Washington also posed an ongoing threat, usually through the meddling of federal agencies or congressional action. There were times when even members of our own Michigan congressional delegation would make the list—for example, when manipulated by their staff into taking positions hostile to the university in order to win political influence or visibility at the national level.

Next on the chart would be the media, particularly the hometown newspapers—which in Michigan's case included not only the *Ann Arbor News* but also the Detroit papers. While most hometown newspaper editors soon realize that university controversies stimulate public interest and advertising sales, the Ann Arbor paper occasionally was led by people who actually carried a chip on their shoulders about the university—perhaps because Michigan was perceived as elitist and arrogant, because of rocky town-gown relations, or even because we refused to invest heavily in building degree programs in journalism (flames occasionally fanned by several of our own faculty members). We usually did not bother listing the student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, as a major threat, since it tended to be more preoccupied with college sports or student causes, such as disciplinary policies.

We never included any students, faculty, or staff on our threat chart. We realized that student activism, while occasionally annoying to administrators, was nevertheless an important and positive element

of the Michigan saga. To be sure, Michigan had its share of outspoken students and faculty members, some enjoying the spotlight of campus politics, some content as squeaky wheels pushing one personal agenda or another, and some speaking out on issues of considerable importance to the institution or broader society. But generally we regarded this as a normal—indeed, desirable—characteristic of a campus with an activist tradition. We preferred to not only tolerate but actually encourage such behavior, even when, in one case, it led to the Supreme Court case on affirmative action. Although we occasionally had outspoken staff members as well, particularly on union issues, most staff were intensely loyal university citizens whom we viewed as strong allies rather than threats.

We did include on our threat chart an occasional member of our board of regents. We viewed most members of the board as conscientious public servants, basically supportive of the university, although some had their particular hang-ups, such as football, campus architecture, or student rights. However, we always had one or two regents who were renegades, frequently seizing on opportunities to embarrass or even disrupt the university to promote their personal visibility and political agenda.

Finally, there was the usual array of special interest groups (some on campus, some off) inclined to use the university as a convenient and highly visible target to further their particular cause. Here, the list was very long and ever changing. It spanned the political spectrum from the Marxist Left to the Genghis Khan Right.

State Relations

Public university presidents play important political roles in managing their universities' relationships with state government. The relationship between public universities and state government is complex and varies significantly from state to state. Some universities are structurally organized as components of state government, subject to the same hiring and business practices characterizing other state agencies. Others possess a certain autonomy from state government through constitutional provision or statute. All are influenced by the power of the public purse—by the nature and degree of state support.

Although the University of Michigan faced many of the challenges experienced by other state universities (inadequate state appropriations, intrusive sunshine laws, overregulation, politically motivated competition among state institutions, and a politically determined governing board), two characteristics of our relationship with the state were quite unique. First, as I noted in chapter 1, the university was given unusual autonomy in the state constitution, autonomy comparable to that of the legislature, government, and judiciary. While it was certainly subject to state funding decisions and regulations, the university's board of regents possessed exceptionally strong constitutionally derived powers over all academic activities of the institution. Second, because of the university's autonomy and its long history (first as a territorial institution and then later, in effect, as a national—and today, one might argue, world—university), it was determined to do whatever was necessary to protect both the quality of and access to its academic programs and its service to these broader constituencies.

In particular, the university refused to allow the quality of its academic programs to be determined by state appropriations, which were usually insufficient to support a world-class institution. Instead, it developed an array of alternative resources to supplement state support, including student tuition, federal research support, private giving, and auxiliary activities (e.g., clinical care). Furthermore, it used its constitutional autonomy to defend its commitment to serving a diverse population, reaching out not only to underserved minority communities but also to students from across the nation and around the world. While this philosophy of independence was key to the quality of the university and its ability to serve not simply the people of the state but those of the nation and the world, it did not always endear the university to state government, which tended to equate the university's independence with arrogance.

Political winds tend to shift over time, and this was certainly the case for the political fortunes of the University of Michigan. For its first century, the university enjoyed a privileged position. Many of its alumni were in the state legislature and in key positions in government and communities across the state. Political parties were disciplined, and special interests had not yet splintered party solidarity. In

that environment, the university had little need to cultivate public understanding or grassroots support. A few leaders from the university met each year with the governor and leaders of the legislature to negotiate our appropriation. That was it. The university was valued and appreciated. A historic and intense public commitment to the support of public higher education characterized the founders of the University of Michigan and the generations of immigrants who followed, sacrificing to provide quality public education as the key to their children's future.

This situation changed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s, because of the aggressive ambition of the other state colleges and universities and the laid-back and occasionally arrogant attitude of the University of Michigan. In the early 1950s, Michigan State's legendary president John Hannah transformed that institution from an agricultural college into a major university, relying on both his own political skill and UM's missteps. Hannah began, ironically enough, with football, by maneuvering Michigan State into the opening left by the University of Chicago's departure from big-time football and the Big Ten Conference. With this visibility, he then persuaded the state legislature to change the name from Michigan Agricultural College and later Michigan State College to Michigan State University, later adding professional schools such as medicine. The University of Michigan adamantly and unsuccessfully opposed each of these steps, finally attempting to save face by capitalizing the word *The* in its own name.³ These unsuccessful battles firmly established UM's reputation in Lansing for arrogance (as in, "those arrogant asses from Ann Arbor").

A story contrasting the styles of the presidents of the two universities at the time illustrates the challenge. UM's president, Harlan Hatcher, a tall and distinguished English scholar, used to travel to Lansing to meet with legislators in his chauffeur-driven Lincoln. John Hannah, in shirtsleeves, would drive himself over in his Ford pickup to make the case to legislators more typically from farm country than big-city Detroit. A second story about Hannah is of interest here. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Michigan State campus was pock-marked with construction projects. The legend was that Hannah would get funds from the legislature for a single building, use the

funds to dig the foundations of several more buildings, and then turn to the legislature for the funds to fill all those holes in the ground with new buildings.

A longtime leader of the state legislature portrayed the University of Michigan during this period of its history as a university led by a distinguished but conservative president and by moneyed Republican regents determined to hang onto the past. These leaders were surprised when the state legislature not only labeled Michigan as arrogant but actually took great delight in disadvantaging it relative to other public universities. The student protests on campus during the 1960s provided even more ammunition to those who wanted to attack Michigan for political reasons. The university entered the 1970s with both a bruised ego and a damaged reputation—at least in Lansing.

Slowly the university began to realize that the world had changed and that it no longer had monopoly on state support. The state was in the midst of a profound economic transformation that was driving change in the political environment. Political parties declined in influence. Special interest constituencies proliferated and organized to make their needs known and their influence felt. Even as the university became more central in responding to the needs of the state, it was also held more accountable to its many publics. Compounding the complexity of this situation was a growing socioeconomic shift in priorities at both the state and federal level. In Michigan, as in many other states, priorities shifted from investment in the future through strong support of education to a shorter-term focus, as represented by the growing expenditures for prisons, social services, and federal mandates (e.g., Medicaid), even as a conservative administration cut taxes in the 1990s. This was compounded by legislation that earmarked a portion of the state budget for K–12 education, leaving higher education to compete with corrections and social services for limited discretionary tax dollars. As a result, the state's support for higher education declined rapidly in real terms during the early 1980s and continued to drop, relative to inflation, throughout the remainder of the decade.

As an interim strategy, Michigan lowered its sights from hogging the entire trough to simply trying to stay even with Michigan State. But even this proved to be a formidable challenge, with Michigan

State alumni as governors (James Blanchard and John Engler) in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the University of Michigan at least managed to avoid being low man on the totem pole during the latter part of the 1970s, the university's Replacement Hospital Project exhausted the state's discretionary capacity to fund higher education capital facilities. The cupboard was bare.

The 1980s began with a deep national recession—read “depression” in Michigan, since when the nation gets a cold, Michigan catches pneumonia because of the sensitivity of the automobile industry to the national economy. Although the University of Michigan was not singled out for abuse, it suffered greatly along with the rest of higher education. It also faced an unusual alignment of the political planets when legislative champions for Michigan State University and Wayne State University assumed the chairs of the key higher education appropriation committees, along with a two-decade long succession of Michigan State alumni as governors.

There were many theories about what was actually happening. Despite the fact that the state's governors paid lip service to the unique role of the University of Michigan as the state's flagship university, none lifted a finger to help the university if political capital were at stake. As William Hubbard, former UM dean of medicine and Upjohn CEO, put it, the state was cursed with an extreme intolerance of extraordinary excellence. It was certainly true that an angry strain of populism ran throughout the state. One key legislator summarized the situation to me: “It is no longer possible for a kid like me to go to the University of Michigan. The university's prospects in Lansing are at a low point. The Senate is controlled by MSU Republicans more interested in agriculture and boosting their alma mater. The Democrats are simply not very effective, dominated by the Detroit Black Caucus. The key legislators are simply no longer swayed by public pressure. They cannot be intimidated, since they cannot be beaten in their districts.”⁴

With fewer and fewer Michigan graduates in influential positions in state government, it was questionable whether a traditional approach to lobbying legislators would be effective. There were those who believed that UM bashing had become a popular sport in Lansing because the university no longer had allies with sufficient power

or commitment to threaten retaliation. The university was drifting politically without a plan of attack or even an effective defense. Another Lansing observer put it this way: “Michigan is big, vulnerable, and doesn’t dance very well!”

Actually, the 1980s started off a bit more positively for the university, when the new Blanchard administration made a special effort to recognize the impact of the research universities on the state’s economy through the Research Excellence Fund, a special \$30 million annual appropriation for campus-based research. As dean of the College of Engineering, I was able to help shape this legislation so that roughly \$11 million of this annual appropriation flowed to the university. But this effort to differentiate among institutions and mission soon ran afoul of Lansing politics, and eventually the special funding for research disappeared. Blanchard’s second term became a disaster for higher education when he realized, through polling, that he could get more votes by attacking the rising tuition levels of public universities—a consequence of inadequate state support—than investing in their capacity. State funding for higher education dropped from 12 percent to less than 8 percent of the state’s budget during the decade. Even more dramatically, the state of Michigan fell into the bottom quartile in its support of higher education, dropping as low as forty-fifth in the nation at one point.

In summary, during the last half of the twentieth century, the University of Michigan’s political influence in Lansing plummeted. Although changing external factors—such as the rise of populism, changing demographics, and the rise of the religious Right in western Michigan—were key factors, the university’s presidents had been largely ineffective in reversing the situation since the 1940s. Ruthven’s declining health prevented his active role in Lansing. Hatcher was effective with moneyed Republicans, but he was a poor match for John Hannah’s shirtsleeve approach. Fleming relied heavily on others, keeping his powder dry for the periodic crises erupting on the campus during the volatile protest years of the 1960s and 1970s. Shapiro was dedicated and tireless, but the sharp mismatch of his thoughtful style with the crude populism and paranoia of the legislature was simply too great.

The key factor allowing the university to sustain its quality during

this difficult period was its constitutional autonomy. Relying heavily on this autonomy to control its own destiny, the university began to increase both its tuition and its nonresident enrollments, to compensate for the loss of state support. Yet even the constitutional autonomy of the university faced formidable challenges from legislative efforts to control admissions, gubernatorial efforts to freeze tuition, and even media efforts (carried out under the guise of the state's sunshine laws) to control everything from presidential searches to regental elections.

This was the challenging political environment I faced when I became provost and then president in the late 1980s. Fortunately, I also inherited a top-notch state-relations team with experience on both sides of the aisle.⁵ Although we soon reaffirmed the pragmatic conclusion of our predecessors that it was unlikely that the university would ever again benefit from its flagship status in Lansing, we also realized that we were destined to continue to lose in state politics as long as we stayed on the defensive, simply reacting to whatever trumped-up charge—concerning out-of-state enrollments, high tuition, racism on campus, and so on—that our enemies used to disadvantage us with respect to other state universities.

To test our assumptions, we decided to conduct a reality check with a number of the state's political and corporate leaders. Each was asked to challenge two assumptions about the future of state and university relations. The first was that because of the state's limited will and capacity to support higher education and due to a weakened economy and other social needs, the state would, at best, be able to support higher education at the level of a regional four-year college—not at the level of a world-class research university. The second assumption was that political pressures would make it increasingly difficult for state leaders to give priority to state support for flagship institutions and that, instead, strong political forces would drive a leveling process in which state appropriations per student would equalize across all state universities.

In the end, few of the leaders disagreed with our premises. Furthermore, all believed that the university's only prudent course was to assume that state support would continue to deteriorate throughout the 1990s. Consistent with the university's long-standing philosophy

of refusing to let the state control our quality, first Harold Shapiro and then I embarked on a new strategy: (1) to build alternative revenue streams (tuition, federal grants and contracts, auxiliary enterprises, and private giving) to levels sufficient to compensate for the loss in state support; (2) to deploy our resources far more effectively than the university had done in the past, by focusing on quality at the possible expense of breadth and capacity, while striving to improve efficiency and productivity; and (3) to enhance the university's ability to control its own destiny, by defending our constitutional autonomy, building strong political support for our independence, and strengthening the quality of the university's board of regents.

We were well aware that the University of Michigan was a creature of the state constitution and was unlikely ever to separate itself from this constraint. Yet the political realities of the past several decades had shifted the university's Lansing strategy from offense (e.g., maximizing state support) to defense (i.e., minimizing the damage to the university from state government). We chose a different and more aggressive strategy: to move toward operating more like a private institution, while becoming less dependent on the state.

Associated with this increasingly pragmatic view of the future of the university as a public institution was a recognition that we should abandon strategies to advantage ourselves over other Michigan universities and instead direct our efforts to increasing the general state support for all of higher education, adopting the philosophy that a rising tide raises all boats. In the process, we also began to realize that we simply did not have a sophisticated capability for marketing and outreach. Hence, I began to spend much of my time as president during the early 1990s leading the presidents of Michigan's public universities in a series of political and public relations efforts throughout the state to make the case for enhanced support of higher education. Key in this effort at civic education was knitting together the interests of the state's universities through the Presidents' Council of State Universities of Michigan (PCSUM), which I chaired during the early 1990s.

Yet this remarkably effective spirit of cooperation was broken when new leadership at Michigan State University persuaded a new governor, who just happened to be an MSU alumnus, to disrupt the long-standing balance in appropriations among UM, MSU, and

Wayne State University to advantage his alma mater. Fortunately, the Wayne State president, David Adamany, and I were able to counter this with a treetops strategy and activate the influence of alumni and media throughout the state. In the end, we managed to block the MSU effort, but the strong spirit of cooperation among Michigan's public universities had been replaced by a conflict and discord that would last a decade in the state's higher education system.

These events provide an important case study of the impact—both positive and negative—that a state governor can have on public higher education. The deterioration in state support of the University of Michigan ironically began under a moderate Republican governor, William Milliken. Although in principle quite supportive of the University of Michigan as the state's flagship university (and a Yale graduate himself), Milliken refused to support the tax increases necessary to plug a hole in the state budget resulting from the deep recession of the late 1970s, thereby necessitating deep cuts in state appropriations for higher education. His Democratic successor, James Blanchard, was also quite supportive of higher education at first, but he soon became convinced by staff that he could win more votes by attacking the tuition charged by universities than by providing adequate state appropriations. Although Blanchard, an MSU alumnus, did not play favorites among state institutions, the adversarial approach taken by his staff toward higher education soon turned the universities against him.

Blanchard was succeeded by a moderate Republican governor, John Engler, who, while supportive of higher education, adopted a conservative financial policy based on tax cuts that allowed only inflationary growth in appropriations, rather than restoring earlier cuts to higher education during a boom period in the state's economy. His policy led to a structural imbalance in the state budget that triggered catastrophic cuts during the recession in the next decade. More serious, however, was Engler's willingness to join in a blatant effort to advantage his alma mater over the state's other universities. In the long run, this probably had more damaging impact on higher education than the actions of any other Michigan governor in modern times, because it destroyed a long-standing spirit of cooperation among the state's universities.

University presidents are responsible for building and sustaining favorable relationships with state governments. But in the end, they must play the hand they are dealt. They face few opportunities and many challenges when forced to deal with inattentive governors and term-limited legislatures.

Federal Government

Although the United States leaves most of the responsibility for higher education to the states and the private sector, the federal government does have a considerable influence on higher education, both through federal policies in such areas as student financial aid and through the direct support of such campus activities as research and health care. In fact, some people maintain that the most transformative changes in American higher education have usually been triggered by federal actions, such as the Land-Grant Acts of the nineteenth century, the GI Bill and government-university research partnership (resulting from Vannevar Bush's famous report "Science: The Endless Frontier") following World War II, and the Higher Education Acts of the 1960s.

As Washington became convinced that higher education was important to the future of the nation in the decades after World War II, the federal government began to provide funding to colleges and universities in support of research, housing, student financial aid, and key professional programs, such as medicine and engineering. Yet, with significant federal support came massive federal bureaucracy. Universities were forced to build large administrative organizations just to interact with the large administrative bureaucracies in Washington. Federal rules and regulations snared universities in a web of red tape that not only constrained their activities but became important cost drivers. Universities were frequently whipsawed about by unpredictable changes in Washington's stance toward higher education as the political winds shifted direction each election year.

With increasing involvement of the federal government in the affairs of higher education came additional responsibilities for the

university president. Just as the presidents of state universities were expected to take the lead in relationships with governors and state legislatures, the presidents of major research universities became familiar figures in Washington. The University of Michigan joined many other universities in establishing well-staffed offices near Capitol Hill. Others retained professional lobbyists to advance (and protect) the interests of their institutions in such areas as student financial aid, federal research priorities, and health care financing. The national associations of universities—such as the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (known collectively as the “One Dupont Circle group” because of their location in Washington)—became, in effect, lobbying organizations on behalf of the interests of their universities.

As leader of one of the nation’s leading research universities, Michigan’s president should—indeed, must—be highly visible on the national stage, promoting higher education. So, too, with one of the nation’s largest academic health centers, UM presidents have been heavily involved in federal health care policy. In my own case, service for over a decade as a member and then chair of the National Science Board and then as a member of the National Academies provided an important platform for advancing the interests of the nation’s research universities.

With over eight thousand graduates living and working in the Washington area during the 1990s, Michigan’s alumni network was a particularly powerful one, reaching into Congress, the administration, and even the White House itself—including, of course, former U.S. president Gerald R. Ford. Furthermore, the state of Michigan had very considerable influence in Congress, including four powerful “cardinals” as chairs of key congressional committees during the 1980s and early 1990s: John Dingell, William Ford, John Conyers, and Robert Carr. Yet the university also faced some unusual challenges in Washington. Although the Michigan congressional delegation was powerful, it rarely used its influence to attract resources to the state, leading to the ironic situation in which Michigan usually ranked last among the states in the return of federal tax dollars. Instead, their

power was used to protect the interests of Michigan's principal industry, Big Auto (and, of course, Big Labor), from federal intrusion into such matters as automobile emissions, safety standards, and labor legislation. The one important exception was Michigan congressman William Ford, chair of the House Education and Labor Committee, who was an important force in the periodic reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. The university worked closely with Ford on such important national issues as the establishment of a direct student lending program designed to reduce the costs of federal loans to college students.

During my years as president, my leadership team substantially increased the university's presence in Washington by establishing a permanent office on Capital Hill, significantly expanding our federal relations staff, and mobilizing our extensive army of alumni in the Washington area. We strongly encouraged university faculty members to become actively involved in federal policy activities, and we provided politically active faculty with support through our Washington office and federal relations team. Perhaps most important, however, was our acceptance of a major role in acting on behalf of all of higher education on important issues ranging from research policy to student financial aid to health care to diversity. We encouraged our federal relations team to work closely with the various national higher education associations. This spirit of building alliances was very similar to that we had employed in our state-relations efforts, since we realized that the interests of the University of Michigan were best served when we helped advance the interests of all of higher education.

Yet while we looked for opportunities to benefit higher education, our basic federal strategy was more defensive than offensive. Unlike many other universities, we refused to use political influence to go after legislative earmarks that bypassed and undermined the peer review process. Instead, we closely monitored potential federal legislation and actions that might harm our efforts, a continuing challenge with the never-ending expansion of complex federal regulations in such areas as research policy, occupation safety, environmental impact, tax policy, and equal opportunity, as well as the confusing and frequently intrusive federal regulations aimed at higher education.

Community Relations

The relationship between a university and its surrounding community is usually a complex one, particularly in cities dominated by major universities—such as Madison, Berkeley, Austin, Chapel Hill, and Ann Arbor. Although town and gown are linked together with intertwined destinies, there is nevertheless always a tension between the two. On the plus side is the fact that the university provides the community with an extraordinary quality of life. It stimulates strong primary and secondary schools, provides rich cultural opportunities, and generates an exciting and cosmopolitan community. The income generated by the university insulates these communities from the economic roller coaster faced by most other cities. Without such universities, these cities would be like any other small towns in America; with them, they become exciting, cosmopolitan, richly diverse, and wonderful places to live and work. But there are also drawbacks. The impact of these universities—whether through parking, crowds, or student behavior—can create inevitable tensions between town and gown. Members of the city community who are not directly associated with the university are sometimes viewed as outsiders in the life of both the university and the city.

Since my wife, Anne, and I had been members of the Ann Arbor community for two decades before assuming the role as president, we saw this town-gown relationship from two sides. While we understood well the university's interests, we also had experienced frustration with the occasional negative impact of the university—rising property taxes as the university took more property off the tax rolls, traffic and parking congestion, student disruptions, and a frequent university attitude of insensitivity and even arrogance concerning city issues. Unfortunately, the contentious nature of Ann Arbor city politics, aggravated by an Open Meetings Act that required the televising of all meetings of government bodies (e.g., the city council or the school board), made interactions with city officials very difficult. Hence, we instead formed an informal group of community leaders, drawn primarily from the private sector, with whom the executive officers could meet monthly on a private basis. We also developed

quite good relations with the mayors of the city, who not infrequently had strong university ties.⁶

Although this informal process did little to satisfy the appetite of the local media and City Council, it did provide a very productive mechanism for discussing important strategic issues facing the city and the university. It led to a genuine effort to strengthen relationships between the leadership of the university, the city government, and the local business community. It also established important informal channels of communication, so that neither town nor gown was taken off guard in important decisions. However, we were not successful in many of these efforts, since the barrier of local politics was sometimes too difficult to overcome.

Public Relations

The public's perception of higher education is ever changing. Public opinion surveys reveal that at the most general level, the public strongly supports high-quality education in our colleges and universities.⁷ Surveys of leaders in the public and private sector believe that the United States continues to have the strongest higher education system in the world, a fact they believe to be of vital importance to our nation's future.⁸ They believe it essential that higher education remain accessible to every qualified and motivated student, but they also remain convinced that the vast majority of these students can still get a college education if they want it. However, when one probes public attitudes more deeply, many concerns about cost, student behavior (alcohol, drugs, political activism), and intercollegiate athletics appear. There is a growing concern that too many students entering our universities are not sufficiently prepared academically to benefit from a college education.

Public universities have an obligation to communicate with the people who support us—to be open and accessible. People want to know what we are doing, where we are going. We have an obligation to be forthcoming. But here we face several major challenges. First, we have to be honest in admitting that communication with the public, especially via the press, does not always come easily to academics. We are not always comfortable when we try to reach a broader audi-

ence. We speak a highly specialized and more exacting language among ourselves, and it can be difficult to explain ourselves to others. But we need to communicate to the public to explain our mission, to convey the findings of our research, to share our learning.

Second, as I noted earlier, the public's perception of the nature and role of the modern university is inconsistent with reality. To be sure, we remain a place where one sends the kids off to college. Such concerns as cost, student behavior, athletics, and political correctness are real and of concern to us just as they are to the public. But the missions and the issues characterizing the contemporary university are far more complex than the media tends to portray them.

One of the curses of the American public is our willingness to embrace the simplest possible solutions to the most complex of problems. Higher education is certainly an example. People seem eager to believe that our system of higher education—still the envy of the world—is wasteful, inefficient, and ineffective and that its leaders are intent only on protecting their perquisites and privileges. Public university presidents recognize there is a very simple formula for popularity with the public:

1. Freeze tuition and faculty salaries
2. Support populist agendas, such as sunshine laws
3. Limit the enrollment of out-of-state students
4. Sustain the status quo at all costs
5. Win at football

But most university leaders also recognize this as a Faustian bargain, since it would also put their institutions at great risk with respect to academic program quality, diversity, and their capacity to serve society.

The Media

One of the facts of the modern university president's life is the public nature of position and the role of the press. This poses a particular challenge in a public university, subject to intrusive sunshine laws that can be used by determined reporters to pry into every aspect of the institution's operation and the private lives of its leaders. It is also

a greater challenge when the university is located in a small city, where there is little other news.

In earlier times, the relationship between the university and the press was one of mutual trust and respect. Given the many values common to both the profession of journalism and the academy, journalists, faculty, and academic leaders related well to one another. The press understood the importance of the university, accepted its need for some degree of autonomy similar to its own First Amendment freedoms, and frequently worked to build public understanding and support for higher education.

In today's world, where all societal institutions have come under greater scrutiny by the media, universities prove to be no exception. Part of this is no doubt due to an increasingly adversarial approach taken by journalists toward all of society, embracing a certain distrust of everything and everyone as a necessary component of investigative journalism. Partly to blame is the arrogance of many members of the academy, university leaders among them, in assuming that the university is somehow less accountable to society than are other social institutions. But the shift in the media's approach is also due in part to the increasingly market-driven nature of contemporary journalism, as it merges with or is acquired by the entertainment industry and trades off journalistic values and integrity for market share and quarterly earnings statements.

Rare indeed is the newspaper that assigns high priority to covering higher education. Even in college towns, the local papers assign far more resources to covering athletics than to reporting on academics. While it is certainly true that the academy does not understand how the press operates, it is equally true that the press is remarkably ignorant of the major issues facing higher education.

Whether the local press is supportive or hostile depends most sensitively on the persuasion of the editor, who determines not only the editorial position of the paper but also which reporters are assigned to cover the higher education beat. For the first few years of my administration, we experienced relatively positive or at least benign treatment in the local papers. Looking back over press clippings, I was quite amazed to find a number of very positive editorials commend-

ing the university's actions or positions on most issues. However, eventually the local editor reached the conclusion of his predecessors: university controversy in a community dominated by a large university stirs up interest, sells papers, and, most significant, sells advertising. Hence a junkyard-dog reporter was assigned to cover the university and stir things up, and life became considerably more difficult.

THE LOYAL (AND SOMETIMES
NOT SO LOYAL) OPPOSITION

Of course, the political role of the president is not confined to external constituencies, such as state and federal government, the public, or the media. With various internal constituencies (students, faculty, staff, trustees) and special interest groups always jockeying for position, university campuses can become political tempests. Although university presidents generally have relatively little influence over the university's political culture or political issues, they frequently receive demands to take one side or another, to make a statement, or to take action. At the very least, they are expected to manage the political battles, to prevent the intrusion of outside forces (e.g., government), and to create—as best they can—a level playing field for the debate over contentious issues. Throughout this effort, presidents are also expected to protect the interests, the values, and the reputation of the university.

For the most part, campus-based political activities are not only highly constructive but also can become important elements of the educational process. They represent one of the most important roles of the university in America, to challenge the status quo in a setting that allows free and thoughtful debate. Furthermore, most participants in these activities are well intentioned, if frequently quite passionate about their concerns. Faculty members voicing concerns about university policies or broader social issues are usually not only well informed but thoughtful and creative, willing to listen to and consider other points of view, even as they make persuasive arguments for their own views. Although students are frequently ill informed about particular issues (e.g., student disciplinary policies or campus

safety), they are largely sincere in their beliefs—even though, in many cases, they have not learned yet the importance of allowing all sides of an issue to be heard.

Several examples of constructive campus-based debate during my tenure come to mind. The Supreme Court case that challenged the university's use of race as a factor in student admissions was stimulated by a long-standing Michigan faculty member, Carl Cohen, who passionately believed that in a truly diverse and egalitarian society, race simply should not be used as a factor in any decision. Cohen was also deeply loyal to the university, and although his opposition to university affirmative action policies triggered a national debate and expensive litigation, it was an important issue that deserved this attention. Although I disagreed strongly with Cohen's stance, we respected one another, and I actually encouraged this debate.

So, too, students who were passionate about particular issues were usually well intentioned and believed they were fighting on behalf of just causes. Students were the primary driving force and energy behind the Michigan Mandate, the university's massive effort to diversify its campus and extend educational opportunity to underserved populations. If students had not taken to the battlements on issues involving racial justice and tolerance on the campus, it is quite unlikely that the university would have moved as vigorously or successfully to equate social diversity with academic excellence. To be sure, there were times when the most contentious students would take on causes that would have been highly questionable to outsiders, such as the long-standing effort to eliminate the university's student disciplinary policy ("the Code"). Sometimes even their student colleagues would dismiss such efforts as nonsense.

Yet, on any campus, there are always those with agendas who utilize political mechanisms to seek personal objectives. Sometimes this is healthy, such as on those occasions when students simply view campus politics as a personal stepping-stone toward a political career after graduation. What better place to learn how to be an effective politician than in the safe, secure, no-fault environment of a university campus. However, more sinister were those who sought to use politics for personal vendettas or political gain at the expense of the institution. The real danger comes from those who take advantage of the

free, open, and tolerant culture of a university in order to advance their personal agendas, in full recognition that they are trampling over the values of the university and exploiting the good intentions of others in order to pursue their own perverse ends. In a sense, these mavericks become infectious diseases, poisoning the academic culture, which frequently is unable to identify their real motives, much less defend against them.

Particularly vulnerable to manipulation by malevolent purposes is elected faculty governance. While faculty governance at the level of academic departments and colleges continues to be both effective and essential for such academic matters as curriculum development, faculty hiring, and tenure evaluation, it is increasingly difficult to achieve true faculty participation in broader university matters through elected bodies, such as faculty senates, which are particularly vulnerable to takeover by single interest faculty groups. At Michigan, these faculty coups typically erupted from the Medical School, since its size (over 1,000 faculty), faculty stress level (due to heavy clinical loads), and top-down administrative culture frequently left disgruntled faculty members with little recourse but to look beyond the school itself to express their frustrations.

A second university component that is particularly vulnerable to political manipulation is the university's board of regents. Of course, every university governing board has its mavericks, members who are particularly outspoken with bizarre views, unusually self-serving, or occasionally even hostile to the university. This is particularly the case with public universities, since their governing board members are selected through a political process and usually come with particular political views. Most governing board members are able to set aside these political interests when the interests of the institution are at stake. However, there are always those who use their position on the board to push personal or political agendas despite the damage it could do to the university.

The Michigan governing board has always had its share of these mavericks—going back to the time of the first elected board, in which a particularly aggressive regent managed to take over the board as its chairman and then orchestrate a successful effort to fire the university's first president, Henry Tappan, despite the fact that Tappan was

viewed as one of the most effective and visionary university leaders in the history of American higher education. What has made this fact of life particularly difficult to handle has been the small size of Michigan's board, since with only eight members, one curmudgeon can have very considerable influence. This brings me to the last and most sensitive political responsibility of the presidency: reporting to, working with, advising, educating, and shaping the agenda of the governing board of the university.

THE PRESIDENT AND THE GOVERNING BOARD

In a formal sense, at least, the relationship of a university president to the institution's governing board has some similarities with that between a CEO and a corporate board of directors. The board has the legal authority and fiduciary responsibility for the institution. It can make policy and hire and fire the president just like a corporate board. However, there is one major difference. In contrast to corporate board members selected for their experience and knowledge of business practices (as is now required by law, e.g., the Sarbanes-Oxley Act), many university board members have little understanding about what really goes on in a university, since they have never been in faculty roles. Moreover, Harold Shapiro has noted, "Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, members of the board generally show little sustained interest in the needs and aspirations of the members of the academic community, and vice versa." Hence, the role of a president, beyond that of leading the university's management team to implement the board's policies and directives, is to educate the board sufficiently that it becomes a positive force for the university. Furthermore, the president both represents the faculty to the governing board and similarly represents the board to the faculty. Again I quote Shapiro: "A key leadership challenge for the university president is to ensure that the governing board, in both public and private universities, comes to view the education and research programs of the university and the internal intellectual culture necessary to support these as providing a very valuable social product—one well worth considerable investment despite many risks."⁹

Here, it is important to state once again that most university gov-

erning board members—whether elected, appointed, or self-selected—are conscientious volunteers, strongly committed to the welfare of their university. Yet they are frequently caught in a system of governance that is increasingly incompatible with the growing complexity and importance of the contemporary university. The lay character of boards, their vulnerability to disruption by renegade members, and their lack of accountability can put the university at some risk.

Put in somewhat more colorful language, many public university presidents believe that their first responsibility is to protect the university from its governing board, to keep it focused on those areas of policies where it has both responsibility and educable expertise and away from dabbling in management, campus politics, labor contracts, and the football program. This challenge is made all the more difficult by the deeply ingrained practice of end-running that characterizes the creative anarchy of a university. Physicians treating governing board members will lobby about Medical Center issues. Most trustees enjoy the celebrity treatment provided by the Athletic Department and present a ready ear to the concerns of the coaches and the athletic director. Even the most political of trustees exhibits a thin skin when it comes to treatment in the local newspapers, either on campus or in the community. Of course, some are not above leaking confidential information in an effort to ingratiate themselves with the press. Some will use their position to feather their own nest, by exerting pressure to admit the children of friends or procure the best football tickets for business or political associates. Perhaps of most concern are those trustees who develop a messianic character, believing they are the chosen ones with the duty to keep the university on the straight and narrow path. Sometimes this tendency can characterize an entire governing board, which comes to believe it is more important than the institution it “serves”—a somewhat different concept than “governs,” I admit.

Board discipline is a very important, yet delicate, process. Just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, a university governing board is only as good as its worst member—particularly in the case of the small, political boards characterizing public universities. The public antics of one regent are frequently viewed by the university commu-

nity and beyond as reflecting the quality of the entire board. All too often, governing board members, like politicians everywhere, rush to defend their colleagues regardless of how reprehensible their behavior has been. It has always struck me as odd that boards will circle the wagons to defend even the most outrageous behavior of their board colleagues, apparently not realizing that by failing to discipline inappropriate behavior by their colleagues, they are perceived on the campus and beyond as accomplices in the transgression. The president and other officers of the university are put in an awkward position when a board ignores inappropriate behavior by one of its members, usually with the rationalization “Well, a trustee has to have some latitude.”

The task of carrying bad tidings to the board should fall to the university secretary, who is responsible for maintaining both the activities and the relationships of the board. As is true of the secretary of a corporate board of directors, the role of a university secretary is absolutely critical and increasingly requires considerable expertise as well as skillful rapport (not to mention a thick skin). Presidents should beware of board secretaries who back away from the difficult relationships that sometimes arise between board members and faculty or administrators—or, far worse, who become more loyal to the board than the president, a situation that will likely lead to either the secretary’s termination or the president’s resignation.

Universities are very complex, and it takes even the most sophisticated governing board members years to begin to understand them, if ever. Hopefully the timescales for leadership within a governing board are sufficiently long that just as cream rises to the top, the more senior, respected, and knowledgeable board members will gradually move into roles where they can lead, influence, and educate their colleagues. Woe be to a president and university if senior board members disappear prematurely, leaving behind only inexperienced colleagues. Although this rarely happens with private governing boards (because of their process of self-selection), it is an all-too-frequent occurrence with public boards, due to political shifts triggered by a change in governor or electorate.

Many people believe that the deterioration in the quality of governing boards, the confusion concerning their roles, and the increasingly political nature of their activities pose a serious threat to the

quality and reputation of higher education.¹⁰ Beyond the dangers posed to their institutions, the burdens malcontent governing board members place on their presidents can be significant, including the amount of time required to accommodate the special interests of board members, the abuse presidents receive from board members with strong personal or political agendas, and the increasing tentativeness presidents exhibit because they never know whether their boards will support or attack them. While perhaps superficially reassuring government leaders, the media, and the public that greater oversight and accountability is being exercised, the long-term damage such rogue board members can cause to an institution are considerable and represent a very major challenge to effective presidential leadership and to their more conscientious colleagues on the governing board.

THE BROADER POLITICAL AGENDA OF THE
UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCY

The university president is both responsible for and responsive to the myriad and diverse political relationships both external and internal to the university. For example, much of the attention of my administration at Michigan was directed at building far stronger relationships with the multitude of external and internal constituencies served by and supporting the university. Efforts were made to strengthen bonds with both state and federal government, ranging from systemic initiatives (e.g., opening and staffing new offices in Lansing and Washington) to developing personal relationships with key public leaders (e.g., the governor, the White House, Michigan's congressional delegation). A parallel effort was made to develop more effective relationships with the media at the local, state, and national level.

The challenges faced in establishing our relevance and credibility to this array of interests and at the same time sustaining our fundamental values and purposes were formidable. This balancing act faced serious problems: the diversity—indeed, incompatibility—of the values, needs, and expectations of these various constituencies who all view higher education through quite different lenses; the tension between such responsiveness and the university's role as a center of

learning where all ideas can be freely questioned in light of reason; the increasing narrowness of the public's support for higher education—a “What have you done for me lately?” attitude—and an increasing sense of competitiveness with other interests and sectors and other urgent social needs for a decreasing pool of public and private dollars. Needless to say, balancing the university's relationships with these many different constituencies proves to be quite an acrobatic feat—a high-wire act, performed without a safety net. No matter how a university structures its external relations activities, the primary responsibilities eventually come to rest on the desk of the president. The management of this complex web of relationships requires clear goals, a carefully developed strategy, and an effective organizational structure.

Beyond the responsibility for managing the relationships of the university with a multitude of external and internal constituencies, university presidents also should play an important role as public figures who articulate and exemplify the values of higher education. This is particularly important during a period when higher education has become increasingly important to our society. In an increasingly knowledge-driven society, more and more people seek education as their hope for a better future—the key to good jobs and careers, to meaningful and fulfilling lives. The knowledge created on our campuses addresses many of the most urgent needs of society—for example, health care, national security, economic competitiveness, and environmental protection. The complexity of our world, the impact of technology, the insecurity of employment, and the uncertainty of our times have led all sectors of our society to identify education in general and higher education in particular as key to the future.

Yet in the midst of this growing importance—indeed, perhaps because of it—higher education has also become the focus of increasing concerns and criticism. Many see the contemporary university as big, self-centered, and even greedy, as it gouges parents with high tuition and inappropriately charges government for research. Some characterize our students as spoiled and badly behaved and our faculties as irresponsibly lazy. Our campuses are portrayed as citadels of intolerance, plagued by a long list of “isms”—racism, sexism, elitism, and extremism. Some have even charged us with an erosion of our most fundamental academic values, using as examples the faculty's

lack of concern for undergraduate education, numerous well-publicized cases of scientific fraud or misconduct, and incidents of political correctness.

While there is certainly much that is refutable in many of these criticisms, it would be a mistake simply to dismiss them. They do represent the genuine concerns of the American public—albeit characterized by a great misunderstanding of what we are and what we do. They also contain a good deal of truth about us. Hence, the role of the university president is to listen carefully to these broader concerns and attempt to address them, both by participating in a broader effort of civic education and by leading internal efforts to better align the academy with public purpose and accountability.

Much of my tenure at Michigan was spent in such activities, working closely with other university presidents at the local, state, or national level to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the body politic. For example, the treetops effort to build a leadership network across the state of Michigan on behalf of higher education was largely driven by the University of Michigan's leadership. Working closely with various national organizations, such as the Association of American Universities and the American Council on Education, several of us worked to build the Science Coalition, comprised of leaders of American industry, to defend the nation's research efforts against the budget-slashing mentality triggered by the Gramm-Rudman Act of the 1980s. One of our most interesting efforts was to convince the presidents of the Big Ten universities that they should commit the free commercial time they received in broadcasting their NCAA football and basketball games to promoting the benefits of higher education rather than simply their own institutions. Here, the prominent Chicago advertising company Leo Burnett contributed a pro bono effort to help produce several quite stunning 60-second commercials highlighting the importance of higher education to the nation, an effort that pushed this important message into hundreds of millions of households.

Yet this last example also illustrates the challenges of persuading university presidents to commit time and effort beyond the interests of their own institutions, since as several of the Big Ten presidencies turned over, the new presidents soon reclaimed these valuable broad-

casting minutes for promoting their own universities. More generally, while many university presidents provide important leadership for all of higher education, committing great time and effort, others look only for ways to advantage their own institutions, remaining aloof from such cooperative ventures. This insular tendency of some university presidents can be particularly damaging when it involves leading universities that have long been depended on to advance the cause of higher education.

THE HAZARDS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Today, many universities find that the most formidable forces controlling their destiny are political in nature. When you get right down to it, universities are victims of their own success. Our world has entered an era in which educated people and the ideas they produce have truly become the wealth of nations, and universities are clearly identified as the prime producers of that wealth. This central role means that more people today have a stake in higher education. More people want to harness it to their own ends. We have become more visible and more vulnerable as institutions. We attract more constituents and support, but we also attract more opponents.

There are many lessons to be learned from the experiences of my leadership team at Michigan. First among these is the importance of flexibility and agility in navigating through the ever-shifting winds of the political environment. The years of my presidency saw state government swing from a liberal Democratic governor and Democratically controlled legislature to a moderate Republican governor and a divided statehouse. This occurred at the same time that the opposite transition was occurring in Washington, from the Reagan White House and a Democratic Congress to the Clinton years, followed by the Newt-onian revolution (à la Gingrich) in Congress that led to Republican control. Each shift not only required rebuilding new relationships with new leaders and their staffs but accommodating the new philosophies that accompanied shifts in political stripes. Such transitions became even more frequent and complex with the introduction of term limits in many states (including Michigan).

Political earthquakes at the federal or state level also propagate

strong tremors into public universities. New governors appoint or influence the nomination and election of new governing board members. Woe be to the president who has been too closely associated with the outgoing political powers, particularly in those states where the tradition has been to regard public universities as just another component of state government, subservient to the political party in power.

To some degree, the changing political environment of the university reflects a more fundamental shift from issue-oriented to image-dominated politics at all levels—federal, state, and local. Public opinion drives political contributions, and vice versa, and these determine successful candidates and eventually legislation. Policy is largely an aftermath exercise, since the agenda is really set by polling and political contributions. Issues, strategy, and the “vision thing” are largely left on the sidelines. Since higher education has never been particularly influential either in determining public opinion or in making campaign contributions, the university is left with only the option of reacting as best it can to the agenda set by others.

Political leadership is both challenging and hazardous to the university president. For some presidents, the concern about stepping on a political land mine becomes almost an obsession, always on their mind and always dominating their actions. Each time the president stands in harm’s way, there is always a chance of a fatal blow. The political environment of the academic presidency is unusually unforgiving. Most politicians can make mistake after mistake without fear of consequence, since recalls are almost impossible (except in California) and since the next election is usually far enough in the future that missteps will be forgotten or forgiven. In contrast, university presidents usually serve at the pleasure of lay governing boards that are subjected to the continual assessment of the president by faculty, alumni, and the media. In a sense, the president must be engaged in a continuous political campaign to build support and avoid a vote of no confidence, since one step on a political land mine can bring disaster.

In the end, it is important for the president to recognize that politics is a contact sport. While truth, justice, and rational persuasion were the cornerstone of our efforts at Michigan, there were times when we had to take off the gloves to defend the institution—to stand up to governors who wanted to weaken the university’s autonomy,

legislators attacking our affirmative action programs, or congressmen launching yet another investigation into trumped-up charges for their political gain. This was never easy, since the natural tendency of most university staff is to immediately go on the defensive, to avoid making waves. One of my executive officers with extensive experience at other public universities lamented, "We just don't have enough folks around here willing to pick up a sword and fight on behalf of the university!" He certainly was willing, and so was I. But we were also well aware that the army of faculty and staff, friends and allies, that was marching behind us was inevitably modest and might quickly dissipate in the face of intense political pressure.

There were times when I thought of my political role as roughly akin to that of a tired, old sheriff in a frontier town in the American West. Every day I would have to drag my bruised, scarred carcass out of bed, strap on my guns, and go out into the main street to face whatever gunslingers had ridden in to shoot up the town that day. Sometimes these were politicians; other times the media; still other times special interest groups on campus; even occasionally other university leaders, such as deans or regents. Each time I went into battle to defend the university, I knew that one day I would run into someone faster on the draw than I was. In retrospect, it is amazing that I managed to perform this particular duty of the presidency for almost a decade with only a few scars to show for the effort.

Yet tentativeness in the face of such political threats can itself be a danger, since failing to take prompt action can make many situations even worse. Procrastination and, worse yet, avoidance can lead to disaster in the unforgiving political environment of the university. Hence, effective presidents must approach their task with a certain sense of adventure, since once a university leader begins to be concerned about mere survival as a priority, he or she rapidly becomes ineffective. It is only by taking chances, by doing things, that you accomplish anything. After all, if all one wants to do is to be king, czar, emperor, or CEO, there are lots of more enjoyable, rewarding, and secure opportunities than a university presidency.