



**Testimony Presented to the State of Michigan  
House Appropriation Subcommittee on Higher Education**

**University of Michigan-Flint  
Dr. Ruth Person, Chancellor**

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Good morning Chairwoman Bauer and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education. My name is Ruth Person, and I am the chancellor of the University of Michigan-Flint. You may be interested to know that 2,152 students at the University of Michigan-Flint come from the districts that each of you on the subcommittee represent, which is over a quarter of our total student body. This is my first time testifying before this committee, and I am looking forward to telling you about the fine work that takes place every day at the University of Michigan-Flint.

First, if you will indulge me, a little personal perspective.

I am at the University of Michigan-Flint because there is no other place I want to be. I made a conscious choice to return to Michigan—the state I have lived in and the university I love. I have no regrets, and I even feel this is one of the smartest decisions I have ever made.

I was lucky to be raised by parents who valued education. My mother was a teacher and my dad was an engineer. Early on, my parents impressed upon my brother and me that an education is an insurance policy. It was their bachelors degrees that helped both of them to weather the Depression, staying employed in their chosen professions while their friends and neighbors lost jobs during the worst economic crisis of modern times. Fast forward to today, and we find ourselves in an economic meltdown that has the potential to match, or quite possibly surpass, the downturn of the 1930's.

And yet there is hope. And the hope is based on education.

It goes without saying that these are tough times for our state, but everywhere I look I see hard work, determination and boundless opportunity. At the University of Michigan-Flint, we have much to celebrate. We welcomed the largest group of students in the history of the campus this past fall. We now have over 7,200 students enrolled. The highly anticipated First Street Residence Hall, the very first residence hall on campus, opened August 24. We wrapped up our capital campaign and raised funds to launch over 100 new scholarships for deserving students. Our campus is located in a city that boasts exemplary partnerships and promise. We have more than hope at the University of Michigan-Flint. We have tangible examples of the power of education to change lives and communities for the better. Today, I will share with you the true stories of our faculty and students—the stories that make up the University of Michigan-Flint.

I would also like to say a word about my new home, the city of Flint. In fact, I am going to disrupt the narrative about Flint, the narrative that says that Flint is a bad place to live. The Flint I know is the polar opposite of the Flint that everyone thinks they know. It is a community of compassionate, active people who care about one another. The city boasts the second largest art museum in the state, and a vibrant, thriving cultural center. You can't walk more than a few hundred feet down Saginaw Street without seeing exciting new construction projects that are bringing new offices, businesses, restaurants and apartments. At the center of all of this activity and excitement is the University of Michigan-Flint.

Universities need vibrant, modern cities in order to increase enrollment and attract the best faculty. Consider the fact that 80% of our alumni stay and work in the State of Michigan. That makes the case stronger than ever that a university must help meet the needs of not just the campus, but also the community. One way we do that is through spending dollars locally. The university is an economic heavyweight for the region, employing nearly 1,000 people with an annual payroll of 43 million dollars. In 2008, the university spent almost 3.5 million dollars in Genesee County alone, and released more than 35 million dollars in the form of federal grants, institutional support and scholarships to students in Genesee County. To use an automotive metaphor, the university is fueling the economic engine of the local community. Our city and county need a strong higher education core in order to continue this period of rejuvenation and growth.

Now, for some of those true stories I promised--true stories that symbolize the collegial, harmonious town and gown relationship of the City of Flint and the University of Michigan campus that shares its name.

Stephen Landon is a member of our Theatre faculty. He has a deep affection for both the university and Flint. Because of this, he has been a driving force behind a new course offering at the university. The course is called "The First Year Experience," and it takes freshmen into the city, exploring the rich history, communities and challenges. It is learning by doing. On our university You Tube channel, you can watch as Professor Landon leads a group of students on bikes around the city, showing them various landmarks. They stop at one of the historical homes in our community, and he shows them the original bank statement that recorded the \$1,000 loans that a local banker gave Billy Durant and Dallas

Dort so that they could start an automotive company that became General Motors. This extraordinary effort of taking students out of the classroom and into the world engages students in ways they will remember for the rest of their lives. It shows them that the narrow narrative that exists about their city does not tell the full story of innovation and determination. It shows how the university, city, students and citizens are all connected.

Regrettably, abandoned homes are still somewhat common in Flint. But here's a story about a completely uncommon use for an abandoned home. One of these homes near downtown Flint is being turned into an Urban Alternatives House, which will be used as both a classroom and laboratory to teach and explore better ideas for urban living. This Urban Alternatives House provides an example of an energy efficient building that can be monitored and used to illustrate the functioning of energy generating devices, storm water management systems and landscape management. UM-Flint faculty are partnering with the Genesee County Land Bank to rehabilitate this abandoned structure, and are even turning a vacant lot next to the house into a garden. We are in the process of planning special programs geared for K-12 students at the site, focusing on the scientific aspects of energy use and conservation.

Lamus Rush is a student who has been looking forward to his spring break. Not to party on a beach, but to start a revolution in his community. Lamus was one of the organizers of Alternative Spring Break in the city of Flint. For an entire week, students teamed up once again with the Genesee County Land Bank to clean up abandoned homes so they can be renovated, rented or sold. I am so proud of Lamus and the other students for giving so much to all of us during their spring break.

There are so many examples of our university and organizations working together for the future of our great city, and they all have happy endings. Due to the success of our new residence hall, the Uptown Reinvestment Corporation purchased a former hotel, and they are converting it into more housing opportunities for students this fall. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation is generously funding a feasibility study of the old Capitol Theater in the heart of downtown to see if it would be a viable space for our wonderful Music program. A re-opened stretch of road known as the Kearsley Corridor now runs through our campus, connecting our world-class cultural center with the campus and downtown businesses. All of these great things are being accomplished in a city that some have written off as a victim of a dying industry. Not true. Not even close. In these tough times, it is the city of Flint that is thriving, finding new life by rallying around education and culture. That is our stimulus.

Tough times call for tough choices. I understand that, and I know this committee and all of your constituents understand that. We know the tough choices our students and their families must make in paying for their education. Sacrifice is a common, recurring theme for our students. Our admissions counselors say that weekly, they receive a call from a potential student or parent, explaining that due to job loss, they have to re-think their plan for a college degree. The University of Michigan-Flint has as one of its core values the mission of accessibility to education. That is why for the last two years, our

tuition increases have been among the lowest in the state. That is why the number one priority of our capital campaign was adding student scholarships. We are all too familiar with these tough choices.

In making these tough choices, we must also make careful choices. That is why I am urging this committee to reconsider the proposal to eliminate the Office of King/Chavez/Parks Initiatives. At the University of Michigan-Flint, programs that are funded by this critical initiative make a difference in the lives of over 900 students in Genesee County. The Incentive Scholarship Program at the University of Michigan-Flint identifies high-achieving students beginning in 8<sup>th</sup> grade who are potential first generation college students. Full-ride scholarships to the University of Michigan-Flint are given to all students who complete the program requirements. Another program funded by the Office of King/Chavez/Parks Initiatives is the Bridges to Success Program. Bridges to Success is primarily aimed at students who come from educationally or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and provides them with strategies and processes that prepares them for college. In a state where we have far too many people who lack four-year degrees, these programs are solutions to that problem. I urge you to consider the consequences of cutting this important initiative.

When our students make the academic and financial commitment to the University of Michigan-Flint, they can be assured that our standard of excellence is high, our faculty is committed, and we have the resources they need to be successful. These things do not come cheap, and while I am willing to make the tough choices, we will not sacrifice our academic quality. A steadfast commitment to academic excellence is our identity. It is non-negotiable because it is the hallmark of the University of Michigan.

I believe firmly in accountability. It is our moral obligation to be the most scrupulous stewards of public dollars. That means that I will personally, along with members of my team, continue to scrutinize and analyze how our funds are spent. For instance, we will research opportunities for adding degree programs that have strong potential for growth in our state. According to a needs assessment survey conducted a few years ago by the University of Michigan-Flint, there was an interest and need in highly advanced professionals in the healthcare fields. In response to that survey, we launched our new Doctor of Nursing Practice, only one of three such programs in the state.

We will continue our efforts to invest in technology that will help our campus reduce energy costs. With energy costs continuing to escalate—our utility expenses are expected to increase by approximately 5% over last year—we have to do all we can to “green” our campus. Our Facilities Management unit has created an extensive plan for improving our efficiency that includes evaluating our heating and cooling systems to re-lamping entire buildings with the latest green technology. Their efforts have been recognized in the community, even winning a local award for their work in saving energy.

We will make requests to the state that have passed the most stringent internal and external guidelines, such as our request for capital outlay funds for the refurbishment of our Murchie Science Building. Knowing that there is a critical need for professionals in the

science, technology, engineering and medical fields, we are respectfully asking for funds to upgrade an existing building in order to modernize labs and expand classroom space so that we can meet the goals of our students and state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The remodeling of the Murchie Science Building will make it possible to invest in new energy efficient technologies for operating and maintain the building. We are nearing completion of the remodeling of French Hall on our campus with capital outlay funds, being ever mindful to stay within budget and to focus on improvements that make the facility an ideal learning environment for our students. Not only that, the remodeling has allowed us to implement new energy efficient technology, covering everything from new lighting to the latest in restroom facilities. We anticipate that the project will be finished before the end of the year.

An investment in the University of Michigan-Flint and other public universities in the state is an investment in more than a campus. It is a commitment to a city, a region, a state and its citizens. It means that we are competitive in the knowledge economy. It means that we believe education will drive the future. That is why that even in these tough times, investments in our public universities must continue. Having the best universities in the country, in the world, will ensure our children's future.

Flint is evolving. I have a prediction to make today. Before the year 2050, the city of Flint and the University of Michigan-Flint will be a top college town destination. The partnerships are in place, but more importantly, the passion and sheer will is there within its citizens. The basis of my prediction is found in the facts: there are currently over 30,000 people in Genesee County enrolled in one of our four institutions of higher learning. That figure ranks Flint, Michigan with Princeton, New Jersey in numbers of college students. And those numbers are growing with every passing semester.

Let us work together to make Michigan the number one state in the nation for support of higher education. If we make that commitment, new businesses, more jobs and stronger communities will emerge and prosper.

Finally, thank you for the work that you do on this very important committee. I know that each of you believes in the value of our public universities, and that you will do your best to ensure the future of one of our state's greatest resources: education.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.