

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-FLINT

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JUAN E. MESTAS

CHANCELLOR

What a joy it is to be in this distinguished company: my family, my friends—old and new—and friends of the University, which automatically makes them friends of mine. Among the guests from out of town are some of my dearest friends, from different stages in my life: from Puerto Rico, from New York, from Pennsylvania, from Portland, from Washington DC. I had a surprise guest from Kansas, and even two of my college roommates are here.

When I first spoke about the inauguration with Virgil Cope, the chair of the inauguration planning committee, I told him, "let's keep it simple, let's not have too much pomp-and-circumstance." I am glad that he did not take me too seriously, because this is fun. Many thanks to all the members of the planning committee and to others who have helped with the planning and execution of the various inauguration events. You have done more than I expected and much more than I deserve.

The director of today's production is Carolyn Gillespie, the chair of our outstanding Theatre and Dance Department. Carolyn told me that planning the inauguration was like planning a wedding. If that is the case, let me put an end to any lingering suspense: *I do*. Actually, this is better than a wedding. All these gifts and not a single toaster! And the gifts could not have been more thoughtfully selected: a bust of one of the most admirable men this country has given to the world, Martin Luther King, and books written by our gifted faculty and staff. They will always remind me that I am surrounded by excellence.

Speaking of the excellence that surrounds me, let me thank:

- Regents Maynard and McGowan, who are here today, and the other Regents of the University of Michigan, and President Bollinger for trusting me with the leadership of this university.
- The Executive Officers of the Ann Arbor campus, who have done

everything possible to make me feel as welcome there as I feel here.

- Bernard Klein, the Acting Chancellor of the Dearborn campus, and the large delegation from UM-Dearborn.
- The honorable state and local officials who came for this celebration, including Representative Jack Minore and Mayor Woodrow Stanley.
- Another honorable person—both in title and in character—Assistant Secretary of Education Norma Cantú, who is one of my best friends and one of the best persons I know. Her generosity was clearly demonstrated in her remarks about me.
- The students, the faculty, the staff, the alumni—and the leaders of their respective representative organizations. Every one of those groups has given me its wholehearted support, and I could not do my job well without it.
- The Provost, and the vice chancellors, and the other members of my staff, as well as the deans and other administrators, who keep this university healthy day in and day out.
- The university chorale and the university wind ensemble, who made the beautiful sounds we heard this afternoon. By the way, the fanfare that opened the ceremony was written by professor Mark Bolton especially for this occasion. Thank you, Mark.
- And the two students who read so well the poems by José Martí. Those of you who do not understand Spanish and had to read the translation in the program must have been disappointed. All translations are an act of betrayal of the text, and this one is no exception. That is why the Italians say *traduttore, traditore*: the translator is a traitor. In this case, I cannot shift the blame, because the traitor was I. Let that be a lesson for you: learn Spanish!
- Special thanks to former Chancellors Clinton Jones and Charlie Nelms, and former Acting Chancellors Larry Kugler and Beverly Schmoll. I have known Charlie for many years, and he has been a source of support from the moment he learned that I was a candidate for this position. Clinton could not be here today, because he had to be out of town, but he, as well as Larry and Beverly, have been generous with their support and

advice since I arrived. The main reason for my gratitude to them, however, is not what they do for me, but what they have done for this campus. I came to an outstanding university, and their leadership helped make it so.

Let me now recognize my family:

- My younger sister, Miriam. When I go to Puerto Rico, I am Miriam's brother, so it is only fair that today she gets to be Juan's sister.
- My nephew, Juan Manuel, who is a publicist, and his wife, Nuria—my niece Nuria—who is a psychiatrist. When the family learned that he was marrying a psychiatrist, we were elated. Now whenever we tell him that he's out of his mind, he can go to his wife for a second opinion.

What a joy, what a privilege it is to be a member of this family, and by that I mean all of you. My life has taken a roundabout course from the sunny bay of Havana to Flint's riverfront by way of Spain, Tennessee, Puerto Rico, New York, California, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and Washington DC. This is anything but a straight path, hardly the result of careful planning. Yet, now that I have reached this destination, it all seems to fall in place, it appears somehow to be the product of a design with method in its madness. I am precisely where I want to be. This is home.

And what a wonderful home it is. What a joy it is to live in a university environment, surrounded by university people, and in the center of a community that values the university for what it is, for what it offers, and for what it symbolizes. What a privilege it is to be in a place where ideas flow freely, where words are respected and so are people, where reading is the norm, where learning is a shared passion, where we find fulfillment not so much in the goods that we acquire for ourselves but in the blessings that we impart onto others. I realize that the university—this one or any other—is not always as I just described it. But that is the way the university is when it is as it should be. That is the way we make it when we are as we should be.

What a joy it is to be surrounded by books—and by people who read them. Erasmus is reputed to have said that, whenever he got a little money, he bought books. What was left he used for food and clothing. That is perhaps a little too intense for most of us, but the important point is that at a

university campus that statement is merely an exaggeration, not a joke.

I particularly enjoy being at a *teaching* university. Not that teaching is the defining activity of our institution—learning is. And research is certainly a very important part of our mission. But I enjoy the company of students, and teaching is, by its very nature, a learning activity that requires the company of students. Even when it happens through the magic and trickery of the Internet, the students are still present as figurations, as written voices, as sensed intelligences with discernable or imagined personalities. I confess, though, that, eager as I am to embrace the infinite possibilities of distance learning, I prefer to see the faces of my students, to hear their voices, to shake their hands, to feel their warmth... in the intimacy of a small classroom.

The classroom paradigm, however, is turning into one of many options for the delivery of a university education. Soon it may not even be the preferred option. The emergence and expansion of information technology is rapidly creating alternative learning environments. Today we say that the one indispensable element of a university is the student. The day may come when the one indispensable element of a university will be the computer, or whatever instrument of information transmission prevails at the time. Even the faculty may become dispensable... perish the thought.

We should open our arms to the wonders of new technologies. We already have in so many ways. Many of the most bothersome administrative processes, from class registration to the posting of grades, are regularly conducted on-line. We can access from our computers at home or at the office, not only our library's catalogue, but the catalogues of the best libraries in the world. Digital libraries and digital archives and digital museums provide instant access for scholars and would-be scholars to vast sources and resources of knowledge. Our university is offering courses on-line, and the students are eagerly enrolling in them—some to bridge the distance to the campus, some to adjust the class time to their own schedules, and some to complement the face-to-face experience in the classroom. We will make more, many more courses available through the Internet, and we will make better educational use of another valuable technological resource that we have but have underutilized: our public television station, WFUM.

We should open our arms to the wonders of new technologies, because we choose to do so, but also because we have no choice. Our students are bringing technological expectations that my generation—and a couple of generations after mine—did not bring to our university experience. These are students—of whatever age—who have become accustomed to the

convenience and freedom they find in the world behind their computer screens. When they walk through that electronic looking glass, they find themselves in a land of virtual wonders, where time has no space and space has no time. In this virtual world they are not passive recipients of knowledge. They interact with their learning environment at their own pace, in their own terms. And when boredom or exhaustion sets in, they can exercise the ultimate control with a click of the mouse. Fortunately for us, they cannot do that in the classroom yet.

We certainly should open our arms to the miracles of new technologies, so that, when the students roam through cyberspace, we will be one of the wonders in their wonderland. And yet, we should be careful not to be strangled in an embrace with this brave new world. There are several virtual institutions already out there, disembodied entities that brag of being universities without a campus, without a permanent faculty, without student life, without a palpable human presence. They don't even have students, in the sense of members of a community of learners, but customers who know exactly what they want, buy it, and leave. No commitment, no institutional loyalty, no love for the alma mater, no sentimentality. Transaction completed... log off. I do not dismiss those institutions. In the vast and varied universe of higher education, there is a place for them. But that place is not ours.

The trend toward the disembodiment of learning received a powerful push recently when a very rich man announced that he would invest \$100 million to create a completely cybernetic university, buying the best courses from the best professors at the best institutions to make them available to the public, presumably free of charge. I take it seriously. Any idea with \$100 million behind it has a fighting chance to succeed, especially when it fits the ethos of the times, as this one does. And I even find myself drawn, as a spectator, to the sporting allure of fielding an academic "dream team," that would compete in some cybernetic Olympics for the good, old USA. Yet, a voice inside my soul tells me that something essential to education is lost when distance learning becomes more about *distance* than about *learning*.

Our course, then, should be guided neither by technophobia nor by technomania. We should approach our future conscious and proud of what we are, an excellent educational institution grounded in the liberal arts and adept at preparing students for the professional world, an educational institution that cares about its students, not as an abstract human conglomerate, but one by one. Let us then approach our future with, both, visionary audacity and humanistic sensitivity, understanding that—as one could say, turning T.S. Eliot around—information is meaningless without

knowledge, and knowledge is worthless without wisdom. Let us look at the future boldly in the face. But let us see it refracted through the prism of the social and natural sciences, of the arts, of the humanities. If you want to see the face of the future, search the Net... or send in the poets.

Education is a sacred trust. For a public institution, education is a sacred *public* trust. Our primary responsibility to the students is to provide them with a good education. Our primary responsibility to the public is to provide our students with a good education.

In deciding, on a day-to-day basis, what programmatic or administrative decisions lead to a good education for our students, we must be ready and willing to respond to changing needs and available opportunities; that is, we must be aware of the challenges and imperatives of the educational market. (And pronouncing the words *education* and *market* in the same breath does *not* fill me with shame—only with slight discomfort.) But we must do so without abandoning our core principles, without losing sight of our mission and purpose, without undervaluing education by reducing it to *just* training for jobs, *just* career preparation, *just* transference of a database of facts, *just* pleasing the customer. A university education includes all of that, of course, but it does not stop there. The educational responsibilities of a university—of our university—are much greater, go much farther.

The university has the responsibility to create a learning environment that encourages the pursuit of excellence and the joy of engaging in that pursuit; an environment where learning does not end when a skill is acquired, a class is completed, or a degree is obtained, but goes on forever, as inevitable as breathing. John Dewey was right when he said, famously, that “education is not a preparation for life. Education is life itself.” And H.G. Wells was only exaggerating, not lying, when he described human history as “a race between education and catastrophe.”

We have work to do—much work to do—on our campus to make it more diverse, more reflective of our surrounding community and of America as a whole. Diversity is indispensable to have a full, rich learning experience at a university. Learning requires multiple perspectives—the multiple perspectives that come from the interaction of diverse points of view, diverse cultures, and diverse life experiences. We have much work to do to make the composition of our student body, our faculty, our staff, and our administration as diverse as it should be. We have much work to do, but we have the means to do it, and I believe that we have the collective will to do it soon and to do it well, to do it right and to do it for the right educational

reasons.

The university has the responsibility to create a learning environment that values and rewards honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, and commitment to the welfare of others. The university has the responsibility to contribute to the formation of capable professionals and able leaders, yes, but also of good, solid citizens who contribute to the well being of their communities. We exist as public institutions because the public believes, accurately, that a well-educated citizenry is essential to the health and prosperity of a democratic society. Thus, a public university cannot hover ten feet above the ground, casting a shadow but not leaving a footprint. Our commitment to the search for knowledge and truth transcends our time and our space, but we engage in that search for knowledge and truth here and now—and that entails a duty, a civic duty.

The university has the responsibility to be a wholehearted participant in the efforts to improve the educational, cultural, and social conditions of the community it serves. This is part of our accountability as custodians of the public trust, but it is also a matter of neighborliness—good, old-fashioned neighborliness. A community of scholars exercises its civic responsibility best when its members act as *citizen scholars*, practicing what Ernest Boyer called the “scholarship of engagement,” connecting the resources of the university to the most pressing problems, needs, and concerns of the community that surrounds it. And these connections emerge almost naturally, almost effortlessly, if we create a climate in which, as Ernest Boyer said, “academic and civic culture communicate continuously and creatively with each other.” We can exercise our civic responsibility through the design of the curriculum, through community-based research, through service-learning activities, through outreach efforts, through partnerships with civic and cultural organizations, and through individual acts of neighborliness. And we must do it in the context of our commitment to excellence—after all, there is no virtue in being generous with our mediocrity—but we must do it as a shared moral duty.

I have expressed to you some of my views, my principles, my values, my *sense of the university*—or, if you prefer, what George Bush the Elder called “the vision thing.” And I present this sense of the university to you with the purpose of initiating a family conversation about the future of the University of Michigan-Flint. This conversation will involve the students, the faculty, the staff, the administrators, the alumni, and our good friends in the community—the extended family, that is.

To inform this conversation, we have commissioned a study that will help us determine what is our capacity for enrollment growth, where potential new students would come from, what programs we could offer to

attract them, and what role student housing should play in our institutional future. The last consideration—student housing—has been pondered for a while, and now we are approaching the time to make decisions, perhaps risky decisions. When making risky decisions, by the way, we should take heart from Winston Churchill’s definition of success as the ability to move from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.

But we should keep the risks at a minimum. We will not make decisions based on a vague feeling that “if we build it, they will come.” We will decide on the basis of facts, projections, and good judgment. And we will consider, not only whether the students would come to live with us, but also whether they would stay. This is not just a matter of enrollment growth; it is a quality-of-life consideration. Residential students would want to be safe in their homes and in the streets of downtown Flint. They would want restaurants and coffee shops, supermarkets, pharmacies, bookstores, movie houses and other places of entertainment—or at least one of each. They would want *life* in downtown Flint day and night, Monday through Sunday. That means that the very decision of building student housing and bringing university students to live downtown would create a responsibility—as well as a challenge and an opportunity—for the entire community: for the government, for the private sector, for the civic organizations, for the philanthropists, for the concerned citizens, for all of us. I tell you, my friends, it takes a village to raise a university.

We have some serious talking ahead of us. And we must sit at the table—a figurative kitchen table, perhaps, since that is where the best family conversations take place—to converse as family members with equal dignity, without pretenses, without suspicions, with respect and consideration for each other and for each other’s ideas, with generosity of spirit, with tolerance for our little but annoying imperfections, with enthusiasm, with imagination, with optimism, with collegiality.

I will lead that conversation, but I do not come here with a pocketful of solutions in search for a problem. I will listen and observe, I will express my views at the appropriate times, and I will try to articulate our shared sense of the university, but this will be truly a family conversation. We will not reach unanimous agreement on every issue—families seldom do—and I cannot promise that my decisions will please everybody. I could hardly expect anybody to agree with me all the time when even I don't agree with myself all the time. But I can promise that every voice will be heard, every idea will be considered, and every decision will be made with only one purpose in mind: to do what is best for the university, what helps this institution fulfill its mission, now and in the imaginable future. I will lead the conversation, but all of us must converse, in the best tradition of

collegiality.

A couple of weeks ago, a graduate student came to see me—a bright, concerned young man with well-conceived suggestions for new academic programs. But he had spent some time in the service and was inclined to make military analogies. He came to see me, he said, because I was “the commander in chief of the University”. All I had to do was issue an order, and it would be obeyed... immediately. For a moment, I dreamed. Then I thought it was my sad duty to reveal the truth to him: when the Chancellor enters a room, nobody snaps to attention. *And that is good.* There is too much intelligence, too much experience, too much wisdom and good will in this community, for anyone, including the Chancellor, to exercise leadership as a solitary vocation. I do not fly solo, my friends; you are my co-pilots. So, fasten your seat belts.

Let me conclude my remarks as I started them, by telling you how proud I am to be a member of this family. I am proud of my affiliation with the University of Michigan, and I am proud of my affiliation with the University of Michigan-*Flint*. Now that I have reached that age at which—as Tom Wolfe put it, rather generously—we hang to our youth by a thread, I am grateful that the meandering path of my life has brought me here, to this hospitable place of learning. If it is true that we only get old when we cease to learn, then I am grateful for the blessing of your company, for the joy of being in this community of learners, where we will all remain forever young.

Thank you for your trust. I will honor it. Thank you for your support. I will need it and will treasure it. And thank you for sharing with me your passion for knowledge and learning—your passion for education, which is to say for freedom, for education has the power to deliver us, not only from the oppression of ignorance, but also from the oppression of bigotry and social injustice and human indifference. Thank you for sharing your passion for education with me. I will nourish it in my heart. Thank you. And for the Spanish-speaking among you, *gracias de todo corazón.*