Dear Colleagues,

As the academic year comes to an end, I thank you for your outstanding work in the classroom, on campus, online, and in the community. UM-Flint is fortunate to have such a talented and committed faculty and staff and I applaud your dedication, flexibility and service to the university.

I have spent some time in the last few weeks reflecting on this academic year, my first at UM-Flint. Aside from the tumultuous few months since March, this year has been one of listening, learning, and making plans for our future. I am appreciative of everyone who took the time to speak with me about their ideas and aspirations for the university. I have enjoyed meeting faculty and staff during my office hours, in small group meetings and in brainstorming sessions about entrepreneurship, economic development and numerous other topics. The commonality we all share is that we want the best for our students, our university and the greater Flint region.

The summer months will be busy. There is much to do to prepare for the next academic year. At the Board of Regents meeting this month we will finalize our budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Despite our deep commitment to our students and low tuition, our total enrollment has declined, now six years in a row, seriously eroding our financial stability. Even without the historic pandemic, we would have to take strong action to address the situation. Modest changes to current practices will not suffice, and have the potential to make a bad situation even worse.

To meet the needs of our students and to confront the significant financial challenges, we have to make structural changes and chart a new course as outlined in our Action Plan Project 2020. What matters, however, is not just making plans, but acting decisively and expeditiously to execute the plans while there is still time to save our university. I consult with President Schlissel regularly and provide updates to the Board of Regents; they fully support our plans outlined below and have strongly encouraged us to move with urgency.

Improving recruitment, retention and graduation rates, a major initiative in Project 2020, is underway. With funding from the President’s Office, the digital marketing team in the Office of the Vice President for Communications in Ann Arbor is developing a digital platform needed for a comprehensive marketing campaign for use by the UM-Flint Admissions team. The hiring of the first cohort of additional advisors to reduce our advisor-student ratio has been completed, and more advisors will be added in the next academic year to align with the new enrollment numbers.
A key feature of Project 2020 is the exciting concept of a new School of Technology (SoT), one of the few schools of its kind in Michigan. Community leaders, federal officials and industry executives have expressed their support. Lansing legislators are enthusiastic about the SoT, knowing it will prepare students for career opportunities that meet the evolving demands of the 21st century workforce in the state. We are appreciative of the interest and support of many faculty and staff across the university to create the SoT. Discussions with faculty committees have been valuable. Their constructive suggestions will be considered and addressed as we move forward. Multiple sources of support are being pursued and work will soon begin on the next steps. We will share updates as we reach progress milestones on this new venture.

Despite moving as quickly as possible, the new SoT will take time to develop and build. However, our work to address other important structural changes needs to begin immediately. The precipitous decline of high school graduates in Michigan is slated to continue through 2030 putting downward pressure on in-state enrollment that comprises 92% of our student body. As the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee for Budget and Strategic Planning (CAC/BSP) noted in its last meeting, the current 13:1 student to faculty ratio is not sustainable. Single digit class sizes do not generate the revenue margins necessary. Teaching less than established nominal teaching loads should be a rare exception. Finally, the importance of scholarship must be elevated above committee and service work. The reputation of our university is reliant upon the scholarly works of our distinguished faculty. The Block M conveys academic excellence, and it is our collective responsibility to uphold this important ideal.

Without these structural changes UM-Flint will remain vulnerable with an uncertain future that none of us want to see unfold. That is why I am grateful to the interim provost, deans, and their unit leadership who are working to address these issues. They have my full support as they move forward with this transformation.

I am mindful of the fact that each of you is under your own strain of dealing with the impact of the pandemic in your personal lives. On top of everything else that is occurring, our university is on the precipice of more tough decisions. However, I am committed to truth and transparency, because the only way to face these realities is with clarity of the tasks ahead. We can’t ignore the challenges, but instead, we will face them with the certitude that timely action and determination will secure our destiny. The next few years will be difficult, but I have confidence that together we will make the changes necessary to strengthen UM-Flint in the years to come.

There are also many activities underway, with several nearing completion:

- The search for the next Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs is close to reaching a conclusion. The Search Advisory Committee has approached this
process with commitment and diligence, recommending a slate of finalists that will enable UM-Flint to meet its needs at this pivotal moment. Their work has been exceptional and Co-Chair Chris Waters has done an admirable job leading the committee. I am confident that soon we will attract a strong academic leader to our campus.

- I would like to thank the Faculty Council and the various faculty committees for their work this year. The Shared Governance Task Force is working to develop a set of bylaws that, once approved by the Regents, will form the basis of shared governance at UM-Flint. We must create a framework for decision making that is attuned to the urgent needs of our institution and promotes a culture of excellence, trust and efficiency. It is my hope that early in the academic year we will have the new bylaws, followed by assembling the associated committees and proceed with the important work that lies ahead.

- The UM-Flint Women’s Commission is to be commended for their work over the years, and their thoughtful contributions to the improvement of the campus climate for all members of our community. This crucial work will now continue under the charter of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee. Like you, I am saddened by the recent tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. Regrettably, there are too many more examples of racism and violence against people of color across our nation. Let us honor the memory of those lost lives by resolving to fully engage with the important work of DEI on this campus and in the community. I am reviewing the draft Strategic Action Plan from the DEI Committee which will also be reviewed by the Office of General Counsel, and then posted on the DEI website for public comments. I encourage everyone to review this important document when it is posted, then pledge to engage in a search for solutions together.

- Excellent work is being done by faculty and staff to develop public health informed steps to eventually reopen the campus. The Reopening Committee along with various working groups are looking at a wide range of issues that must be considered in order to safely operate our physical campus in the COVID-19 era. UM-Flint will look and feel very different, but we will have in place strong protocols to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus. I appreciate the conscientious work of the Reopening Committee, and updates from this team will be shared periodically.

This spring, in spite of so much hardship, we still found ways to celebrate. This includes our Class of 2020 graduating students who became our alumni in May. Dedicated faculty earned promotion and tenure through outstanding scholarship and exceptional teaching. We honored the decades of service of steadfast, loyal employees to our campus. These are all noteworthy accomplishments, but more than that, they are all central to our purpose and mission as an educational institution, one of three campuses of the University of Michigan, all united in the pursuit of academic excellence. We have so much to take pride in, and that will help to sustain us as we face the challenges ahead. I know our students,
staff, and faculty will continue to do all we can to strengthen our institution, and that we – The University of Michigan-Flint – will continue as an enduring pillar of the community.

With good wishes for a productive, healthy and safe summer,

Deba Dutta, Ph.D.
Chancellor