

President Mary Sue Coleman
Expanding the Role of Universities in a Shrinking World:
The University of Michigan in South Africa

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It is an honor to be with the University of Pretoria community today and to be part of your university's centennial celebration.

I want to thank Vice Chancellor Pistorius for his warm words. The vice chancellor is an alumnus of Ohio State University, and it's not often that a Buckeye embraces a Michigan Wolverine! Think of South Africa versus New Zealand in rugby, and you'll have a sense of the rivalry between our universities.

But great universities like Michigan and Pretoria are about much more than athletics. We embody cutting-edge scholarship and research, a commitment to service, and students and faculty eager to engage with the world.

When our university delegation made the decision to travel to South Africa to explore new partnerships, my first thought turned to the Sankofa. It was in 2002 that I became president of the University of Michigan, and I told our community that the West African symbol of the Sankofa would characterize my presidency. The Sankofa signifies the importance of looking to your past to claim your future, and that philosophy established the perfect tone for advancing the work of the University of Michigan.

I never would have imagined that one day I would stand before an audience of African people and share that story with you.

But that is the power of universities – to make the unimaginable a reality. I see the Sankofa representing the perpetual quest of higher education to create and advance knowledge, while always drawing on our roots and our experiences.

There has never been a greater time for higher education to seek out new knowledge in new communities, because whether we are based in Pretoria or Ann Arbor, we share the language of ideas. In this rapidly changing world, we have never had so much to learn from one another.

If Sankofa is one ideal for the making of new knowledge, then so is Ubuntu, the way of life educating individuals through the work of entire villages. In the 21st century, that village is global.

This semester, as often is the case, several students from the University of Michigan are studying in South Africa.

One of those students is Jamie O'Malley, who is studying sociology and global change at Michigan. "I chose to come to South Africa," she says, "because it is one of the most unique places in the world." Unique, she said, because of your diversity of people, cultures and ecosystems.

Another student, Kimberly Chou, wants to experience firsthand how a nation recovers from segregation of the worst possible kind, and to learn from those politically and culturally challenging lessons.

Our shrinking world is pushing us closer together and making us more aware of what makes each of our nations and cultures unique, while also revealing the bonds we share. As a leading research institution, the University of Michigan aspires to engage at the global level through the personal experiences and contributions of students such as Jamie and Kimberly.

Scholarship knows no borders. By our very nature, universities are at the forefront of globalization and cooperation. Collaborations among our universities draw on the strengths of diverse perspectives to encourage the sort of cross-fertilization that is the basis of creativity and innovation.

I am so pleased to be sharing ideas and plans with Vice Chancellor Pistorius and University of Pretoria faculty, as well as vice chancellors and faculties of other leading South African universities, because to truly be engaged at the global level, we must continue to connect one-on-one and build genuine, reciprocal partnerships.

The University of Michigan has been developing partnerships around the world for a long, long time.

In 1880, University President James Angell visited China for the first time. He was our university's first genuine ambassador. Although he had come to China to negotiate on behalf of the American government, he went home convinced that his university and China had something to offer each other – something vital to the future of both.

James Angell opened Michigan's doors to Chinese students as the world around him changed rapidly and beyond recognition. Telephones and radios, automobiles and steam-powered ships broke down the barriers between nations and people. Through travel and trade, the world was more closely linked than it would be again for two generations.

This new world was unsettling. Americans, fearful of foreigners, closed their borders to immigration. Chinese rose in rebellion against foreign domination.

And yet the bonds between Michigan and China helped educate a generation of young people unafraid to lead in unsettled times. From the 1850s to the 1950s, more students from China attended Michigan than any other American university.

Here in South Africa, our University's engagement began in 1987 with the awarding of an honorary Ph.D. in absentia to Nelson Mandela, who was then confined on Robben Island.

Over the years, University of Michigan leaders have met with their counterparts to discuss common educational challenges, recognizing the parallels between the United States and South Africa to overcome racial disparities in educational opportunity. We established a South Africa Initiatives Office to prioritize our exchange with South Africa, and from the outset this office has been committed to strengthening the homeland colleges, or previously disadvantaged institutions.

We also have established a shared three-year training program in quantitative social science, and a joint economic demography program. The latter program has been complemented by a Fogarty Grant in Population Studies, and joint teaching at the University of Cape Town. These projects name only a few of the extensive engagements by U-M faculty and students in South Africa today, which range across disparate fields, disciplines, and professional schools.

We have known since the days of James Angell that for the great public universities to thrive in a rapidly evolving environment, we must forge the connections and the mutual understanding that can allow our citizens, and our nations, to flourish. It is both an exhilarating and daunting challenge, and today I want to share with you the aspirations of the University of Michigan to promote this global discourse.

Michigan students, scientists and researchers have been engaged with Africa and African communities for decades.

Today, we have astrophysicists in Namibia logging images of the sky to understand the spectacular nature of gamma ray bursts. Psychologists doing fieldwork in Ethiopia are observing the social skills of gelada monkeys. Linguists are working to understand the structure of languages in Mali. Historians are researching the oral histories of Ugandans. Anthropologists are studying the history and politics of polio eradication in Nigeria.

But nowhere do we have deeper ties than here, in South Africa.

We are very proud of the depth, breadth, and mutual productivity of our friendships and partnerships here, and have been enlightened by this week's discussions about expanding our work in areas of academic study, scholarly exchange and health care.

We are honored to work with the leading universities of South Africa because your institutions have made impressive contributions to scholarship at a global level.

I also see the connections between us at a very human level. When Michigan students like Jamie O'Malley and Kimberly Chou tell me they are studying in South Africa to see firsthand the accomplishments and struggles of a nation in transition, they represent the hunger of our students for global knowledge.

Our young people are more valuable than gold or diamonds or platinum, and we are committed to providing them with the critical thinking tools they need to succeed in a world that grows ever more connected and complex. The more our students can draw from the world, the better they can contribute to their communities.

Let me share some of our plans for furthering the ties between our university and the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg and other South African institutions. We are looking at several overall areas, including the humanities, social science research, and information technology.

The University of Michigan is a large research institution with a rich diversity of academic disciplines. That includes more than 120 faculty members engaged in an array of teaching, research and service in some 40 African countries.

To give our work greater emphasis, we are establishing an African Studies Center that will harness the work of these scholars. Michigan is a highly decentralized university, and our multi-disciplinary nature is what gives our academic programs such strength – it allows us to feed on tremendous intellectual energy.

Another great strength is our rich complement of area studies programs that explore specific regions of our world. These range from the Center for Japanese Studies and Armenian Studies Program to our Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program and European Union Center.

By crossing geographic and intellectual boundaries, these centers provide an academic home for students and faculty alike, both from our university and institutions from around the globe. They allow for a cross-fertilization of ideas and expertise that advances our understanding of the world around us.

By establishing the African Studies Center, we want to make the whole of our African intellectual activity greater than the sum of the parts. And we look to the universities of South Africa as partners.

Nothing is more important to me than expanding the spirit of reciprocity that has been a hallmark of our relationships over the years. We want to learn as much as we want to teach.

To do so, we are expanding our Moody Scholars Exchange program that has been underway between the University of Michigan and South African universities since 1996. Where the exchange program currently supports two scholars annually, we will now fund up to 10 academics each year. By growing this program and extending it to more South African institutions, as well as Ghanaian universities, we want to encourage a robust exchange of faculty between our institutions.

The program is designed for junior faculty, post-doctoral fellows, and advanced graduate students. Once in Ann Arbor, these South African scholars will have the invaluable gift of time – time to explore one of the world’s great academic libraries, time to interact with fellow faculty who share their interests, and time to complete a journal article or book chapter.

In turn, Michigan students and faculty will benefit through the experience the teaching and insights of South Africa’s brightest young academics.

Our African Studies Center also will explore the complex and often emotional issues of heritage.

What do we mean by heritage? The beauty of the question is that it provides so many different answers. History, archaeology, art, music, politics, anthropology, the heritage of language, of culture, of struggle – each of these provides us with a lens through which to document and explore human identities in Africa and America.

As you mark your centennial, the University of Pretoria exemplifies the importance of heritage not only to Pretoria and South Africa, but also higher education globally.

In the United States, the month of February is Black History Month, which explores the African diaspora. Teachers dedicate lectures and lessons to important African-Americans, museums mount exhibits about art and culture, and television programs showcase the accomplishments and challenges of black America.

But black history is American history, and one that bears examination every month of the year. And it is a history with parallels here, in South Africa.

In America, we continue to wrestle with the legacy of slavery, the reality of racial discrimination, and their effects on education, housing, health care and personal identity. Many would argue your country has made greater strides addressing equality since the end of apartheid 18 years ago than the United States has accomplished in the 143 years since abolishing slavery.

Our two nations share a common and complicated bond in our respective struggles for civil rights, and we have much to learn from each other’s accomplishments and ongoing challenges.

Questions of African heritage engage many Michigan faculty, from issues of museum studies and monumentalization in South Africa to architectural work on the slave sites of Ghana. We have organized the archives of the African National Congress at the University of Fort Hare, and we have musicological projects involving the preservation and study of traditional instruments and performance practices across the continent.

We want to build on this activity through further projects with South African colleagues already deeply engaged in these issues. This will include collaborative scholarly projects, as well as annual colloquia, rotating between South Africa, Ghana and Ann Arbor. By drawing on multiple perspectives, we aspire to build new pathways to knowledge about who we are as people and as nations.

Collaborative projects and rotating symposia are features of a second topic of our conversations this week, that being the critical and influential work of social science research.

The University of Michigan has no greater strength than social science research, and a gold standard for this work is our Institute for Social Research. The work of our social scientists informs and shapes public policy, health care, education and economies throughout the world. That work extends deep into South Africa, made possible, and enriched by, joint research programs on youth and families, social development, and the challenges and consequences of HIV/AIDS.

We want to expand opportunities for such shared endeavor for all South African scholars – but particularly young researchers – so they may have just as strong an impact with their research and data. Through summer programs, annual meetings and distance learning, we hope to mutually enrich research theory, methods and analysis in Ann Arbor, South Africa and Ghana.

Our final area of growing partnership is knowledge sharing. Of course, everything we have discussed with university leaders this week involves the exchange of ideas and concepts. This specific initiative combines the dissemination of knowledge with the immediacy and accessibility of global communication.

Medical education and research is so critical in today's world, and we want to collaborate with South African institutions to develop and provide open Internet access to educational materials in medicine, public health and the health sciences.

The soul of scholarship is research. From the current to the ancient, universities must make all information accessible to faculty, students, and the public.

After the University of Michigan was founded in 1817, our first recorded gift was a highly regarded German encyclopedia, donated by a fur trader who believed all children should be educated. We had yet to offer our first class when it arrived from the wilds of northern America.

We still have that ancient encyclopedia, and you can see and use it in our library. It is there because we place a premium on preserving and sharing knowledge. That is why we became the first public university in the world to partner with Google to digitize the 7 million volumes of our University Library.

We are proud of our long-standing commitment to share knowledge electronically. Using the technology of digitization and the reach of the Internet, connecting people with information creates a new demand for material that takes students and researchers in unexpected directions.

A point of pride for us is the creation of Sakai, the first global consortium of higher education institutions using the concepts and technologies of Open Educational Resources. Open Educational Resources encompass a range of information – such as textbooks, course materials, software and more – that can be accessed and re-used at no charge. Already, more than 150 universities around the world draw upon Sakai's resources.

We want to create the same level of exchange between the University of Michigan's health sciences schools – medicine, nursing, public health and dentistry – and medical students and faculty throughout Africa, so they can access materials to supplement their medical educations.

The key to this knowledge sharing is collaboration. And collaboration is imperative to all the work of the University of Michigan in South Africa. From heritage initiatives and social science research to sharing medical curricula, we want this expanse of intellectual and clinical activity to grow and flourish, for the benefit of South Africans and Americans alike.

That is why we are here. We do not have all the answers – and we never will. For us to conceive of what we can do as an institution demands exchanging ideas with administrators and faculty here, examining our past relationships, and looking to the future for new opportunities.

This brings me back to the messages of the Sankofa and Ubuntu, of looking back as we move forward and seeking to deepen our ties to the global village through which we may grow.

Our universities – in Pretoria, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Ann Arbor – have important histories, individually and as partners. The differences between us – those of

background, of experience, of culture, of perspective – are not a source of conflict, but fuel for creativity and innovation. They are, and can be, harnessed for the good of all.

As the University of Pretoria celebrates its first 100 years, the University of Michigan is nine years shy of its bicentennial. Through the contributions of thousands of faculty and hundreds of thousands of students over nearly two centuries, we have built a university that is known for a diversity of people, heritage, academic disciplines, and scholarly pursuits.

This panoply of individuals and intellectual activity is the very core of our academic excellence. We have 19 schools and colleges, and many are regarded among the best in higher education. As large as we are, we encourage strong, deep connections between the disciplines: we want the Business School to partner with our School of Natural Resources and Environment on issues of environmental sustainability. We expect our engineers to work with our physicians to create effective tools that apply the intricacies of nanoscience to human health. And we encourage our anthropologists to collaborate with social and cultural historians to explain what the past says about us.

The range of disciplines and their interrelationships throughout our campus are a mirror of the world we serve as a public university. The public we serve, and our students and faculty, expect the University of Michigan to meet society's needs.

To meet those complex needs and prepare our graduates for the challenges of a shrinking world, we must draw upon the perspectives of both faculty and students from around the world. At the same time, we must encourage members of our community to engage in scholarly activities throughout the globe.

In all this, we seek reflection, conversation and partnership with the University of Pretoria

That is our shared mission for the future, and it has never mattered more. I can think of no more important work than joining hands with you to transform and improve lives through the power and promise of global knowledge.

Thank you.