

PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS

REGIONAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: BUILDING THRIVING COMMUNITIES, CREATING A STRONGER MICHIGAN

August 12, 2023

By Domenico Grasso and Ora Hirsch Pescovitz

EDITOR'S NOTE: This op-ed was published in Bridge, August 12, 2023

<https://www.bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/opinion-making-case-michigans-regional-public-universities> (<https://www.bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/opinion-making-case-michigans-regional-public-universities>)

No community in Michigan is the same.

Traverse City has its stunning bay. Detroit offers a re-energized and vibrant downtown. Marquette is a dream for outdoor enthusiasts. And Grand Rapids is an arts destination.

All these unique characteristics make our state an attractive and exceptional place to live and work. Equally importantly, one-of-a-kind environments provide Michiganders with impressive choices for a college education.

Our state's regional public universities, or RPUs – places like Grand Valley State, Northern University, Saginaw Valley State, Central Michigan, Lake Superior State, and the campuses we know best, the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Oakland University – offer a deep connection to place that benefit students, local communities, and the state's economic well-being.

In late June, our institutions joined the Brookings Institution and several other RPUs from across the nation for a Regional Public Universities Roundtable, hosted at UM-Flint. At the gathering, Brookings shared a compelling finding: Children growing up in counties with a regional public university achieve higher educations and better social and economic outcomes than those who are not fortunate enough to be co-located.

Michigan has 12 regional public universities, touching all corners of the state. They play a fundamental role in helping to achieve the goal of increasing the number of working-age adults with a college degree or skill certificate to 60 percent by 2030. That means being laser-focused on the success of our students, the majority of whom come from Michigan and will remain here after graduation, contributing to our economy, neighborhoods, and collective future.

We are committed to being accessible and affordable as part of our mission to promote and facilitate upward mobility. Because of financial

aid, debt-reduction initiatives and programs such as the Michigan Achievement Scholarship, students are in position to graduate with either less debt compared to non RPU students or no debt.

Nationally, RPUs educate nearly 60 percent of African American students and 44 percent of Latino students. We fulfill a mission to provide a practical and broad-based education imbuing our students with skills for a fulfilling life and powering our economy

Locally, UM-Dearborn is the “home university” for our region’s Middle Eastern and North African communities. Meanwhile, Oakland University attracts about 90 percent of its students from the adjacent Oakland and Macomb counties.

At a time when affirmative action and diversity in higher education are under attack, RPUs continue to educate students from a broad range of backgrounds. At Oakland University, 42 percent of students are Pell Grant eligible, 36 percent are first-generation in college, 26 percent are URMs, and 16 percent are African Americans in a state where the corresponding African American population is 14 percent. [UM-DEARBORN ADD HERE]

As places of higher learning dedicated to the public good, Michigan’s RPUs share many of the same goals, especially when it comes to fulfilling missions as stewards of place, actively engaged in the education, public health, culture and economies of our local communities. What sets apart RPUs is what winemakers call *terroir* – the local demographics, culture, economy, and climate that give each of our campuses a unique character.

RPUs are responsive to local needs because we are at the heart of our communities. Subsequently, we design our teaching, service, and engage in research based on the needs and ethos of our communities. Furthermore, RPUs contribute in essential ways to educate the Michigan workforce, build diverse communities, and train tomorrow’s practitioners and leaders. A great majority of our graduates remain in the community, and contribute to the success of the local economies.

We are grateful to the Michigan Legislature and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer for increasing funding for higher education. And, we are committed to building vital partnerships with corporations, foundations, and other philanthropists who believe in the transformative impact of higher education to deliver long-term dividends that improve the quality of life in our communities.

A stronger Michigan is rooted in thriving regional public universities.

Domenico Grasso is Chancellor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Ora Hirsch Pescovitz is President at Oakland University.