

**Collaborating for Success: The Role of Urban Universities,
Foundations & Corporations in Community Revitalization**

Chancellor's Distinguished Lecture Series

University of Michigan—Flint

October 19, 2020

Charlie Nelms, Ed. D.

**Chancellor Emeritus, North Carolina Central University
Chancellor Emeritus, University of Michigan-Flint
Chancellor Emeritus, Indiana University East**

No horse gets anywhere until he is harnessed.

No steam or gas drives anything until it is confined.

No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled.

No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined.

One of the widest gaps in human experience is the gap between what we say we want to be and our willingness to discipline ourselves to get there.

--Henry Emerson Fosdick

Living Under Tension, Sermons on Christianity Today

Thank you for that kind introduction Chancellor Dutta. I want to begin my comments this afternoon by congratulating you on the recent one-year anniversary of your appointment and commending you for launching the Chancellor's Distinguished Lecture Series. It is truly an honor to be invited to give the inaugural lecture. I shall endeavor not to disappoint you or the listening audience for the trust you have placed in me. The eloquent words from Henry Emerson Fosdick capture the essence of my remarks today. They challenge us to create the community we say we want by taking the proverbial bull by the horns!

Twenty-six years ago, this past July 1st, I commenced my duties as the fourth chancellor of the University of Michigan-Flint. I assumed my responsibilities with enormous optimism and enthusiasm after being hired by President Jim Duderstadt. He was one of the most authentic,

committed, and effective university leaders with whom I had the privilege of working during more than four decades in the academy. President Duderstadt's charge to me resonated profoundly: I was to help the campus transition to a more urban institution. I saw Flint as an ideal place to apply the lessons I had learned as a faculty member and college administrator in the urban environs of New York City; Gary, Indiana; and Dayton, Ohio. Those experiences, combined with my twin passions for excellence and equity and a tireless work ethic honed in the Arkansas Delta, convinced me without a doubt that I was up to the Herculean challenge presented by President Duderstadt. Little did I know that there were strong pockets of resistance within the faculty ranks to increasing the University of Michigan-Flint's urban character in terms of the profile of the student body, the composition of the faculty and staff, its curricular offerings, research agenda, and community outreach, among others.

While I suspected that many members of the University community did not share these views, they were reluctant to publicly support a strategy that would catapult the campus into a position of leadership with respect to university-level urban education. Regrettably, the vocal minority controlled the narrative—a narrative centered on the assertion that the chancellor did not support the liberal arts, that increasing student diversity would lead to the lowering of academic standards, and that chancellors come and go, but faculty are constant. Even today, such issues continue to be all too prevalent in many circles in the academy.

The above issues notwithstanding, I developed an enormous affinity for the citizens of Flint and the UM-Flint. I became friends with some wonderful people, and those friendships have withstood the test of time. Thanks to generosity of the C. S. Mott Foundation, the Charlie & Jeanetta Nelms Scholarship Endowment has a market value of more than \$200,000 and provides 10 scholarships annually to first-generation and minority students at UM-Flint. As a member of the Mott

Foundation Board of Trustees for over a decade now, it is an honor to support grantmaking, not only in Flint and Genesee County, but around the world.

Based on my last count, I had given more than 2,000 speeches over the course of my career: a few I remember, but most I do not. In fact, the sheer number of speeches I have given over the course of my career did not register with me, until I gifted my professional papers to the Indiana University Archives in 2019, and a university truck arrived to pick up the boxes.

As the inaugural speaker of the Chancellor's Distinguished Lecture Series, my aim is not to give a lecture that will simply entertain you. Rather, I want to bring a *message* that enlightens and encourages you and that compels civic, corporate, university, and philanthropic leaders to act.

In **Part One** of my remarks, I want to spend some time reflecting on three watershed times or initiatives that literally changed the face of

higher education and serve as the basis of my optimism about the role urban universities can play in community revitalization.

In **Part Two**, I will discuss five prerequisites for community revitalization and identify concrete examples of the kinds of programs and activities I believe urban universities like the University of Michigan-Flint should offer, and in which I am convinced corporations and foundations must invest if they have a genuine commitment to community revitalization.

Watershed Events and Issues

Passage of The Morrill Act of 1862 was arguably one of the most important pieces of education legislation ever approved by the United States Congress. Also known as the Land Grant Act, it was named for its lead author, Congressman Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, and signed into law on July 2, 1862 by President Abraham Lincoln. The Act gave each state 30,000 acres of public land for each member of Congress the state had, as of the census of 1860. States were permitted to sell the land and put the proceeds into an endowment fund which would provide perpetual support for land grant colleges.

Because of legalized segregation prohibiting Black and White students from attending school together, Black Colleges were excluded in the 1862 Act. However, attempts at corrective action were undertaken nearly three decades later with passage of the 1890 Land Grant Act, which included Black Colleges and Tribal Colleges. The most striking difference between the 1862 and 1890 Acts, respectively, was the substitution of meager sums of money in place of land in 1890, compared to the 30,000 acres of land in 1862, which was sold and produced major funds for the endowments of the all-white cohort of 1862 land grant schools. More than 125 years after passage of the 1890 Land Grant Act, Historically Black Colleges and Universities and American Indian Colleges are still suffering from the cumulative effects of legalized racism, which resulted in inadequate funds and the inability to implement high quality competitive academic programs. Yet there are those who would argue that systemic racism is the figment of the imagination of Blacks like me who have tried unsuccessfully to make the case for reparations in higher education.

Through higher education association mergers and name changes, the original group of Land Grant Colleges and Universities has morphed into an association of 79 land grant universities, 216 campuses, and 26 university systems, enrolling more than 5 million undergraduates and 1.3 million graduate students; awarding 1.3 million degrees annually; employing over 1.3 million faculty and staff; and conducting nearly 50 billion dollars in university-based research.

I cite the Morrill Act as a watershed event because it helped transform agriculture, engineering, and technical education, not only in the United States but in North America more broadly. Also, I cite it as a watershed event because it not only increased educational access for working-class Americans, it also expanded the college curriculum to include disciplines beyond the liberal arts and classical education.

Furthermore, the Morrill Act was an example of what could potentially happen in urban universities and communities if university leaders, trustees, and local, state, and federal leaders were to come together to pursue a common agenda around community revitalization.

What is vital to urban communities is strategic and sustained investments in public education for historically disenfranchised people, health and wellness support services for the most vulnerable populations, safe and affordable housing for seniors and other low-wealth citizens in the community, relevant and responsive workforce development training, and access to high quality associate and baccalaureate degree level postsecondary education, which can be successfully leveraged in an increasingly technologically oriented job market. While short-term grants have their place, what is needed now more than ever are long-term interlocking investments. It is past time for collaborative grantmaking involving the City of Flint, the state of Michigan, Genesee County, philanthropic partners, and the federal government. The issues facing urban communities have been a long time in the making, and they are unlikely to be successfully remediated in one or two multi-year grant cycles. A perfect example of the significance of long-term strategic funding is the unquestionable quality of both the facilities and the programming of the Flint Cultural Center.

Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act

In the midst of writing my memoirs eighteen months ago, there were moments when I found myself experiencing a range of emotions: sadness, anger, and disappointment in reading and reflecting on the irrational yet consistent history of apartheid and racism in America. I was reminded of how far Blacks and other historically disenfranchised people had come, but also just how endemic and prevalent American style apartheid and racism still are in 2020. I was reminded of the disconnect between what people in the majority culture say they believe about people of other races, and how those beliefs play out in the opposite way of what they say they believe. But I digress! I want to return to discussing why I think the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Higher Education Act of 1965 were watershed events in American life.

Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA) is clearly one of most sweeping pieces of federal legislation impacting Blacks and other low wealth communities since Reconstruction. Enacted June 2, 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Civil Rights Act was a concrete

outcome of years of agitation and demonstration under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many social scientists and political analysts underestimate just how much collaboration and cooperation took place between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Urban League on the one hand; and a plethora of other organizations, such as the National Council of Negro Women, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Anti-Defamation League, and the National Council of Churches, among others.

While the 1964 Civil Rights Act *outlawed* discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origins, it did not *end* discrimination. Its passage created a legal basis for challenging discrimination and for the creation of programs at the local, state, and national levels designed to increase opportunities for women and ethnic minorities. Countless lawsuits have been filed by both individuals and organizations alleging reverse discrimination. Several of those lawsuits have made their way

to the U. S. Supreme Court, including a current case filed against Harvard University, alleging discrimination against Asian-American applicants. The case is eventually expected to reach the Supreme Court. Let us be clear about one thing: the hard fought anti-discrimination solutions won by Black civil rights organizations benefitted *all* minority groups and women, yet it seems that the group most likely to be adversely impacted by court rulings are Blacks.

Passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965

Prior to passage of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964, it is estimated that approximately 95 percent of all Black students attending college were enrolled at one of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which with few exceptions are located in the South. While the 1964 CRA outlawed racial discrimination and segregation, it was passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that enabled Blacks and other low-wealth students to attend college. The legislation created the nation's first Federal need-based grant program, originally named the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants. These are now known as Pell

Grants, renamed in 1972 for the late U.S. Democratic Senator from Rhode Island Claiborne Pell, who was a relentless advocate for educational opportunity. In addition to making grants available to students, rather than giving college and university financial aid directors the authority to determine who receives a grant, the 1965 HEA created the TRIO Programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound and Student Support Services, all of which have had a stupendous impact in increasing college access and success. Today, more than six million students benefit annually from Pell Grants.

While Pell Grants provide access to more than 5,000 colleges and universities nationally, it is the collective impact of federal grants and subsidized loans that have increased the probability that students will avail themselves of opportunities that many had no idea even existed. There are currently 45 million borrowers who collectively owe nearly \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt in the U.S., according to the Institute

for College Access and Success. In 2018, 39 percent of undergraduates received Pell grants, down from 41 percent just four years earlier.¹

The reason for citing these three watershed initiatives is to emphasize the point that there is evidence to support the view that with the confluence of leadership, resolve, will, and focus, the American people have succeeded in tackling some of the seemingly most intractable social issues imaginable.

Using these three watershed moments in higher education, I want to turn my attention to the central premise of my talk, which is the belief that Flint can become a model for economic development, educational attainment, and improvements in the quality of life for all its citizens, especially those from marginalized and historically disenfranchised populations. I would posit that there are at least five prerequisites for capitalizing on Flint's potential.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/01/30/use-of-financial-aid-continues-to-grow-though-fewer-students-are-borrowing-for-college/>

Although reprehensible, I believe the water crisis made Flint a more resilient and unified community---a community poised to triumph like a phoenix. It revealed the strength of the community and reminded me of the words of my favorite reggae artist, Bob Marley, who proclaimed “You don’t know how strong you are until being strong is the only option you have.” The question is this: Does the community recognize its strengths and how best to leverage them in becoming the kind of community it envisions?

Core Assets

I believe the first step to becoming a more vibrant and self-reliant community is for its leaders to take stock of its assets and to work collaboratively on leveraging them. Without being exhaustive, I have identified nine core assets I believe can serve as a foundation for Flint’s revitalization.

1. In 2019, four colleges and universities in Flint — Kettering University, Mott Community College, Michigan State University

and the University of Michigan-Flint — collectively enrolled more than 17,000 students and employed nearly 5,000 faculty and staff. Offering a total of more than 100 academic degree programs, these four institutions provide educational opportunity while contributing to the local and regional economies.

2. While the number of automotive manufacturing jobs in the Flint area has declined significantly since the 1980s, General Motors currently employs more than 9,500 workers in Genesee County, with many holding high-wage, high-tech jobs.

3. Since 2015, Lear Corporation, Peckham Incorporated, C3 Ventures and more than a dozen other businesses have established or expanded operations in the Flint area, bringing nearly 1,500 new jobs to the community.

4. With its airport and proximity to major freeways, railroads and seaports, Flint is a key gateway in the I-69 International Trade Corridor. Nearly 11.5 million tons of freight are transported through the area each year, providing a significant economic boost to the greater Flint community.

5. Few other communities of comparable size can claim the range and quality of cultural amenities found in Flint. The Flint Cultural Center attracts more than 650,000 visitors each year, and its member organizations have long provided educational outreach to schools in Flint and beyond. Collectively, the endowments of the Flint Cultural Center institutions are valued at nearly \$161 million.

6. Area residents have access to high-quality health care via three hospitals — Hurley Medical Center, McLaren Flint and Ascension Genesys Hospital — and such providers as:

- Genesee Health System;
- the Greater Flint Health Coalition;
- Hamilton Community Health Network;
- Mott Children’s Health Center; and
- the Flint campus of Michigan State University’s College of Human Medicine.

7. Flint is home to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, one of the world’s most well-respected philanthropic institutions. Since its launch in 1926, the Mott Foundation has made nearly \$3.5 billion in grants, including more than \$1.2 billion in support for the greater Flint community.

8. The Community Foundation of Greater Flint works assiduously to help improve the quality of life of area residents. Thanks to the generosity of the Mott Foundation and more than 19,000 other

donors, the Community Foundation currently has assets of more than \$262 million.

9. In addition to the Mott Foundation and the Community Foundation, Flint is home to more than a dozen other philanthropic institutions — including the Ruth Mott Foundation and the United Way of Genesee County — whose funding supports positive impacts for area children and families. The significance of such a vibrant philanthropic sector in Flint is further evidenced by its swift response to local needs sparked by the city’s water crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

I think even the most subjective person would agree that these are core assets that any community would love to have. So, here is the question: how can these assets be leveraged to the greatest advantage of all members of the community? I want to share with you five prerequisites that I believe are essential for community revitalization.

Consensus on Community Vision

During my leadership journey, I have come to believe that values drive vision, and vision drives focus. No matter how extensive a community's assets, if there is not a consensus around the community's values and aspirations and priorities, those assets will lie dormant, untapped and unused. The vision of which I speak is not the sole domain of the local chamber of commerce, city council, county commissioners, concerned pastors or any other entity that exist for serving the commonweal. The vision of which I speak is not only shared by all but is one to which each makes a commitment to do what is required to make that vision a reality.

Without going into a detailed discussion of what is involved in creating consensus around a community vision, suffice to say that I believe essential elements include the engagement of a broad spectrum of participants, including elected officials and neighborhood residents; stakeholders listening to each other; developing and prioritizing goals, and articulating concrete but flexible timelines for achieving them. I

have discovered that any plan is little more than a desk document, unless there is a commitment to implementing it, and there are clear metrics for evaluation.

Elements of a comprehensive community-centric plan

- Exemplary P-12 schools that serve the needs of all students.
- Safe neighborhoods no matter which side of town you live.
- Accessible and affordable cultural arts opportunities for all.
- Relevant, high quality workforce development initiatives.
- Postsecondary education programs responsive to local and regional and state needs.
- A network of communities willing to work collaboratively across municipal boundaries.

I could go on, but I hope you get my point about the importance of keeping people at the forefront, indeed the center of the vision for the community.

Distributed Leadership

As a student of higher education and an activist, one of the most important lessons I learned on my 50-year leadership journey is this one: No matter how much vision leaders espouse, vision is *not* an acceptable substitute for action or achievement. Distributed leadership is generally defined as a conceptual framework to understanding how the critical elements of leadership interact among the people given the complexity of an organization, and the contextual framework of the issues being addressed. In distributed leadership, the collective empowerment of individuals is just as critical, if not more so, than the formal role of the leader, or the largesse of a wealthy donor. Some managerial experts opine that the reason why many organizations and communities achieve so few of their stated goals is because they are

fixated on the influence of leaders, rather than the collective power of the people served.

In his book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting for: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*, Peter Levine, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and the Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs in Tuft University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship, advocates for a new citizen-centered politics capable of tackling problems that cannot be fixed any other way. Although he did not create the phrase, Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States, used it as a rallying cry for mobilizing millions of people across racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic boundaries, which led to his election to the highest office in the land, not once but twice!

I cite distributed leadership as a critical prerequisite for community revitalization because there are a handful of communities and neighborhoods that have found their way back from the precipice, and they might serve as examples of the arduous challenges involved in

creating sustainability and community wholeness, which urban communities like Flint and others in mid-Michigan face.

Flint is a community with a respectable number of emerging and mature leaders, who have demonstrated a consistent and transparent willingness to lead, rather than simply preside. Equally, they are vested in the community's well-being and have made a deliberate decision to remain in the area.

The point is simply this: if we want excellent schools, safe neighborhoods, justice-centered police departments, great hospitals, and a vibrant local economy, among other things, *we the people*, must become part of the distributed leadership team that delivers more than platitudes and promises. We must be prepared to stay in the battle for a lifetime of leading, collaborating, pausing, and starting over, rather than waiting for the next bailout or the leader who will deliver us from ourselves.

Governance Reconsidered

If one were to look across the boundaries of local government throughout the United States of America, you would find more than 19,000 incorporated cities, towns, villages and more than 13,500 school districts, just to cite two examples. In Genesee County alone there are 11 cities, 17 townships, and 5 villages.

While there may have been a time when such governance structures worked, I would argue that that time is very much in the distant past. I would go even further and suggest that these superficial boundaries are deterrents to collaboration and long-term community sustainability. Consider for example, the issues like economic development and transportation systems. Typically, workers come from multiple metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) and not just the community in which a business may be located. Similarly, expressways do not end at one city or county boundary and pick up at another. Consider the case of the I-69 International Trade Corridor, which spans not only city and county boundaries, but state and country boundaries as well.

Regrettably, it seems that race and the socio-economic status of the inhabitants of various municipalities has taken on a larger than life meaning than it should when important decisions such as K-12 education surface. Is it not time to consider a univ-governance structure rather than individual, duplicative, and expensive governance structures? Even if it is rejected, why shouldn't communities give themselves the courtesy of considering other more effective and responsive governance structures? Just imagine the cost savings and potential effectiveness of a consolidated P-12 educational system.

New University Programs to Address New Needs

As a student of higher education, I would argue that today's American system of higher education is based on an antiquated model, namely the Harvard Model. Founded in 1636, Harvard University is still viewed by many trustees, educators, accreditors, and administrators alike as the pinnacle of excellence. The closer an institution conforms to the Harvard ideal, the more acceptable it is. To be sure, there are concrete

examples of exceptionalism, namely Community Colleges, Technical Colleges, and for-profit providers of postsecondary education. Time does not permit me to delve into detailed explanations relative to the observations immediately above---perhaps I will be invited to make an in-person visit to UM-Flint when the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us. Let me quickly pivot to what I believe institutions like UM-Flint can do to aid in community revitalization.

1. The Board of Regents must empower UM-Flint to offer redesigned or new programs that address the needs of the region, without subjecting the campus to lengthy, traditional periods of review.
2. Collaboration with Michigan State University Division of Public Health, College of Human Medicine, and the Mott Community College, must take on new levels of specificity and urgency.
3. Building on existing collaboration between UM-Flint and the Flint Community Schools in Early Childhood Education, consideration

should be given to expanding into other areas such as STEM, special education, alternative teacher education and licensure, and the training of paraprofessionals and of principals, to ensure availability of a cadre of teachers who are ready to teach and administrators who are ready to lead.

4. The politics of Charter Schools aside, they exist, and their effectiveness must be enhanced. In fact, I wonder aloud if it is time for UM-Flint to consider establishing a K-12 charter school.
5. The recently established UM-Flint College of Innovation & Technology reflects the kinds of programs that respond to regional economic development needs and have relevance for other areas like health care, social work, entrepreneurship and small business development, environmental science, nonprofit management, and arts administration, among other areas.

In a word, it is time for urban universities to stop mimicking traditional research universities in their quest for relevance, responsiveness, and

excellence. It is time for urban universities like UM-Flint to stop complaining about minority students not possessing the prerequisites for success in various academic programs at the collegiate level and to start creating the precollegiate pipeline programs to address student academic deficits.

Strategic & Collaborative Investments

As an activist and advocate for equity and excellence, one of the most important lessons I have learned is this: everything is important but not everything is of equal importance. Thus, corporations and philanthropic entities must be willing to invest in at least three types of initiatives that strengthen and sustain communities:

1. Those that address basic human survival needs.
2. Those that incentivize people to thrive.
3. Those that allow organizations to experiment in their quest to find more effective approaches to community sustainability.

Finally, it's not enough for urban universities to be engines of opportunity for teaching, learning, and service, they too must be engines of applied research seeking solutions to a plethora of challenges that stymie the quality of life for its citizens. Two current examples include assessing the long-term effects of lead poisoning on the learning needs of students and assessing the impact that a lack of technology has on learning for low-wealth populations in general and students of color.

At the University of Toledo in Ohio, scientists are searching for new ways to address the growing threat to drinking water in Northwest Ohio. The early work was supported by the Ohio Department of Higher Education's Harmful Algal Bloom Research Initiative and the Ohio Sea Grant. The success of the early project helped the University of Toledo receive a 1.1 million grant from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to expand and continue to develop new technology.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) formed a venture with the state of Virginia and the city of Richmond to create the Virginia Bio-Tech Research Park. VCU's Business School contributes to the development of the companies by providing business-planning advice. The Center has sparked new businesses and jobs. Twenty-six companies have been born - 75 percent of those from VCU faculty research - a powerful tool in attracting the best faculty and brightest students. These are just two examples of what universities can achieve through innovation and collaboration.

While there will always be more areas in which to invest than resources available, I contend that the philanthropic and corporate communities must be willing to engage in long-term collaborative grant making if they wish to receive a return on investments commensurate with their expectations. Equally important, they must be willing to lend their expertise to helping grantees achieve mutual goals for the community.

As I bring my remarks to a close, I want to return to the quote from Henry Emerson Fosdick:

No horse gets anywhere until it is harnessed.

No stream or gas drives anything until it is confined.

No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled.

No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined.

One of the widest gaps in human experience is the gap between what we say we want to be and our willingness to discipline ourselves to get there.

I leave you with this one question: does the greater Flint community have the will to envision a more vibrant future for itself and the energy to achieve it? Let us respond with a resounding “YES!” that will echo across this land, and around the world.