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Feedback Sought on Possible Partnership

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Dear Colleagues:

As we move forward as a research university, we must remain alert for promising ideas that will allow us to further enhance our institutional profile and add even greater value to the degrees our students earn. In this vein, a unique opportunity has surfaced. About three years ago, I began informal discussions with Don LeDuc, president and dean of the Thomas M. Cooley Law School, which is based in Lansing. What began as a casual conversation has evolved into something with the potential to further elevate our institutional image and reshape our future as a comprehensive research university.

Consistent with the University’s Strategic Plan, specifically Goal 3.0 (WMU investigates, develops and offers new professional programs), we are exploring the possibility of a formal affiliation between Cooley, a private nonprofit law school, and Western Michigan University.

Such an alliance would provide WMU the benefits of an established and respected school of law—one of the hallmarks of a world-class university—without changing the University's financial picture. Cooley would remain a private and independent entity with separate governance and fiduciary responsibilities. Cooley would become the Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Law School, continuing as an independent, nonprofit 501(C)(3) entity. The arrangement would be somewhat similar to the University’s relationship with our new School of Medicine.

The result of such an affiliation with Cooley would make our University one of fewer than 90 universities in the nation to have both a law school and school of medicine. The benefits that accrue from that distinction would pay dividends to our students, faculty and staff for years to come. The opportunity is made even more intriguing by Cooley’s noteworthy student profile and the common mission and values of our two institutions.

Cooley is the largest and most diverse law school in the nation. With an enrollment of more than 3,000 students on five campuses (Grand Rapids, Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Auburn Hills in Michigan and Tampa Bay in Florida), Cooley has established itself as a school focused on offering diverse and inclusive opportunity in a rigorous academic environment. Its alumni are found in the nation’s and Michigan’s leading law firms and in state governments around the country. Academically and financially strong, Cooley’s interest in the alliance is pegged on a desire to move its school to the next level through a partnership with a research university. Cooley recognizes the premier reputation WMU holds in our state and nation.

We have had strong ties with Cooley for more than a decade—since 2002 when that school opened its Grand Rapids branch in our Graduate Center-Downtown location. Currently we offer three joint graduate degree programs with Cooley—JD/MPA public administration, JD/MBA business administration, and JD/MSW social work—with several graduate students on track to earning dual degrees.

More joint programs, research collaborations and enhanced opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students are among the benefits WMU could see from the proposed alliance. If various
matters under review, such as accreditation and governance, can be answered favorably for both institutions, the next step would be to consummate a formal agreement. For WMU this would mean asking our Board of Trustees to officially approve the affiliation. The board has been aware of my ongoing discussions with Cooley and supports a thoughtful, thorough and expeditious evaluation of the proposed affiliation and its potential benefits for WMU.

Because of the sensitivity of two independent schools discussing an alliance of this nature, we have not shared this important opportunity broadly on campus before now. The initial exploration has yielded very promising results. Next steps would be taken with the full knowledge and affirmation of both extended campus communities. That could happen as early as summer.

I invite you to add your input to the decision process and pose questions you might have. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful feedback.

Best regards,

John M. Dunn
President