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## Grand Rapids Press Response with President Haas of GVSU

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Grand Rapids Press Response  
With President Haas of GVSU  
John M. Dunn  
Sept. 3, 2010

Should the State of Michigan form its own city management board to relieve the need for individual city managers and zoning commissions to do their own municipal planning?

Michigan citizens would not tolerate such an assault on the vibrant and independent nature of our cities--no matter that such a measure might be seen as cost efficient. What we would lose in the bargain would outweigh any gains.

Yet, The Grand Rapids Press, in a recent editorial, suggested something very similar for Michigan's constitutionally designated public universities. The independent, competitive, innovative, and entrepreneurial nature of higher education in Michigan, the Press editors say, should give way to a state higher education system that relies on a Lansing-based centralized board to make decisions.

The Press proposal and others like it that have surfaced this summer, would replace competition and free market forces with a centralized command and control "system." Instead of university presidents and boards sitting down with key business and state and local community leaders, those key leaders would be heading to Lansing to plead with an education czar and state board for the programs and resources they need. Our universities might come to resemble our state highway system--centrally controlled, bureaucratically managed and still chronically underfunded.

University autonomy, which limits the intrusion of politicians and bureaucrats into the operation of our 15 public universities, is a Michigan tradition that dates back 175 years and is part of our state Constitution. It has allowed the individual university boards to meet the needs of Michigan's students and communities, particularly businesses, in a nimble fashion. It's worked well. Around the nation, no state boasts such a diverse group of high-quality public universities.

In west Michigan, the Michigan higher education tradition has meant the growth and success of our universities--each with very different missions, goals and resources--and allowed us to meet the needs of a wide variety of students while we also respond to the individual priorities of the communities we serve.

Why would The Press, usually supporters of competition and the entrepreneurial spirit, suggest that we move away from what has worked so well? Perhaps The Press thinks that a serious problem--rising tuition costs--can be addressed in some way other than attacking the root cause of the problem.

Tuition is rising not because we have too much competition and too many opportunities for our students. Rather, tuition is rising because the state has backed away from its commitment to higher education and made a conscious decision to shift the cost of educating young people from a shared obligation to one that is borne by students and their families. Taxpayers used to provide 75 percent of revenue needed to operate the universities; today, taxpayers provide just 25 percent. University appropriations have been cut by hundreds of millions of dollars. Tuition has become the user fee that replaces the money that used to come from taxpayers.

Should universities work together to fight cost increases? Of course, we should and we do. We've joined together to purchase energy, share insurance

expenses, develop compatible high-speed computer networking operations, discuss program offerings, and a myriad of other cost-saving programs. We look for new savings every day--both as individual entities and as equal, but separate, partners in Michigan's education tradition.

Autonomy has worked to make our universities among the best in the world. Both of us have served in states where such autonomy does not exist. Our collective experience is that state coordinating boards stifle innovation, increase costs and bureaucracy, and raise new barriers. Surely that cannot be the outcome desired by The Press.

We know well the inherent weaknesses of state systems and are committed to preserving the higher education quality that exists in Michigan. The entrepreneurship, competition and accountability brought about by autonomy is the right higher education model for Michigan -- for now and for many years to come.

Sincerely,

John M. Dunn, President  
Western Michigan University

Thomas J. Haas, President  
Grand Valley State University