

A CONVERSATION WITH THE DEAN

“The world of universities is diverging,” says Dean Janet Weiss. “The wealthy private universities get richer and richer and the public universities struggle to keep up.”

Once upon a time, and not that long ago, private universities focused on the education of privileged elites, while the mission of public universities was to help level the societal playing field by providing comparable quality at affordable prices.

But, for a variety of economic and political reasons, public support for public universities began to decline as private support for private universities grew, increasingly allowing the latter to offer the kind of assistance to underserved and lower income students that was once the province of the former.

Thus was a paradigm stood on its head. Recognizing that student support is a key point at which to gain traction toward reversing this trend, President Mary Sue Coleman created a program that would make a statement and a difference. Last September, the President’s Challenge was born, under which every \$2 contributed for graduate student support will be matched by \$1 from the President’s Challenge Fund.

“We have always thought of ourselves as having the same level of excellence as private universities even as we remain proud of our public university mission,” says Dean Weiss, “but to continue simultaneously to serve the public mission and to maintain the level of excellence of the very best private universities, it’s become extremely important to us that we have strong private support. The amazing and wonderful thing about the President’s Challenge is that it puts a spotlight on assisting graduate students as one of the key priorities in the University and sends an important message to Rackham donors that the contributions they make reflect the high priority the university places on graduate education.”

The ball is squarely in the donors’ court. This year, for the first time in its history, the University of Michigan received more revenue from gifts than it did from the state of Michigan. And, says the Dean, “The state’s economy being what it is, it’s unlikely that state support will ever return to where it was a generation ago.” The focus of the President’s Challenge on student aid is especially significant, given that much private

support tends to go to construction projects and dedicated research.

Dean Weiss points out that preliminary findings from a national study of the quality of doctoral programs “suggest that we are struggling to keep up stipend levels for graduate student support. That’s been another wakeup call to us,” she adds. “We don’t want the most talented students to turn us down because some other university is able to offer them more money.”

“Recruiting the best graduate students also has a direct impact on the retention of excellent faculty. If the best students are going elsewhere,” says the Dean, “then this becomes a less rewarding environment for faculty to do their work and makes them more vulnerable to offers that might come from these same private universities that can also offer higher faculty salaries. We really are in a very competitive environment.”

Top faculty, in turn, attract more sponsored research, which has become a significant revenue source for the University.

Happily, Rackham’s friends are rising to the Challenge.

“Many members of our advisory board chose to increase their gifts this year because of the possibility of the match,” the Dean says. “Other donors have decided to give this year rather than in a future year, and that benefits all of us. And, of course, President Coleman and her husband donated her salary increase this year to Rackham. That’s another vote of confidence that we deeply appreciate.”

The Challenge will continue until \$40 million is committed in gifts to support graduate students, triggering \$20 million in Presidential matching money, or until December 2008, whichever occurs first.

“Money is certainly not the only factor in being an effective competitor, but it is *a* factor,” Dean Weiss says. “We don’t want to lose the best people because of money. We need to make sure that we’re in the ballpark.” ■

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