

# KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

August 23, 2012

Dear Colleagues:

I hope you've had a pleasant and productive summer and trust that you, like me, are ready for the return of students, colleagues, and that special, "back-to-school" energy and enthusiasm. I write with three intentions: to thank you for helping our university generate the powerful, positive momentum with which we will start the new academic year; to share some thoughts about several matters of growing gravity (freely admitting that a number of them have been keeping me up at night); and to invite you to share your ideas about how Kent State should face a growing list of challenges.

Much of our momentum is the result of faculty achievements from path-breaking research to inspired teaching to mentoring that makes a profound difference in our students' futures. In turn, these efforts have helped keep Kent State moving forward in areas from student retention to global initiatives to scholarship funding. An itemized list of recent faculty feats would fill many pages, so instead I note that your scholarship, artistry and university citizenship not only are sources of pride across the university; they are reasons for optimism among those who count on Kent State to provide educational excellence, economy-boosting innovations, and knowledge that addresses society's most pressing problems. Thank you for all you do.

A great deal of Kent State's ability to maintain and build its momentum hinges on the expertise and creativity of faculty members like you. Your continuing contributions are sorely needed at this time when public universities nationwide must come to grips with a number of 21st-century realities — some that have arrived on our doorstep and some that are visible on the higher education horizon. I'll reference a few of these realities now as a preface to open and collegial discussions I look forward to having with you during meetings I am scheduling with every academic department in the coming months.

Effective communication between faculty and administration can be challenging to achieve; there are many levels in our organization, different styles of communicating, and messages can get mangled along the way. With your help, I want to change that. I believe that we already are on a path to improved communication with leadership from a new provost who shares my unshakable commitment to the academic freedoms articulated more than 70 years ago in the American Association of University Professors' *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, and to the practice of shared governance. I see my upcoming visits to academic units as steps forward on that important path, and Provost Diacon also is committed to building strong, collaborative and respectful relations as he gets to know you as a faculty and leads an inclusive strategic-planning process for academic affairs.

Looking ahead, what are some of the issues we need to address together? I believe we must start by acknowledging that the environment in which public universities pursue their multi-faceted missions is in the throes of a major shift — one that compels us to reconceptualize an operational model that is rooted in the last century. The model for public higher education is rapidly losing



its effectiveness because it is based on the assumption of adequate state funding for higher education. As you know, that assumption is no longer valid. During the last decade, Kent State has lost 18 percent of its state operating support on a per-student basis. We've incurred this loss as costs for healthcare and energy have increased substantially; as we've maintained a commitment to providing competitive salaries and benefits to all employees; as a shrinking pool of high school graduates has necessitated increased investments in areas from recruiting to web development in order to keep us competitive with other schools; and as the gap between the quality and effectiveness of our facilities and the aspirations of our students, faculty and staff has widened. Even when you factor in higher education's growing success in raising private funds, it's plain to see why tuition now accounts for the majority of most public university operating budgets. That is true in Ohio and a growing number of states, and it is raising concern that the dream of higher education may be fading for many students and their families. Any way you look at Kent State's future — but especially our ability to offer academic excellence at an affordable cost — it's clear that we must develop new revenue streams.

I'm concerned about much more than dollars and cents. I don't have to tell you that the public has become increasingly vocal in questioning the return on investment of higher education, or that policy makers from all parties are pressing public universities for additional cost cutting — all at the same time they're demanding more graduates and more impact from our research and services, and debating faculty workloads, tenure and research relevance with skepticism. Even as America has dropped to 16th in the world in college graduates, many opinion and political leaders are questioning the economic value of a college degree and some have gone so far as to suggest that the focus on access is wrong-headed. And recent scandals—especially in athletics—have caused the public to question whether colleges and universities are sacrificing their values.

“Disruptive innovations” are changing the higher education landscape, with the rapid growth of online education and proprietary institutions, and some pundits are predicting student demand will decline as employers are more willing to accept certificates and other types of credentials in lieu of traditional college degrees. I am sure it is not lost upon you that elite private institutions are expanding their offerings of free online courses and they are trying to build a sustainable business model for marketing these courses and certificates to millions and even billions of people worldwide.

We're even seeing a chorus of academy members pose serious questions about what we do and how well we do it (stinging indictments found in books like *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*). If you follow trends in the academic arena, you've also observed that boards of trustees, whose members are vested with the legal authority of running their universities, are acutely aware of these calls for accountability and of the growing scrutiny directed at universities. As a result, many boards are taking a more active role than in years past — from demanding more say about curricula to dismissing presidents who do not share their views. Across the country some legislatures are becoming increasingly intrusive as they are slashing state funding. For example, the Illinois legislature recently banned the use of search consultants, but that could as easily have been targeting degree offerings or curricula.

None of these trends should come as a surprise to you. Truth be told, our profession has not made a sufficiently compelling case about the value of higher education. Most people understand the direct correlation between a college diploma and one's lifetime earning potential. But we need to do more to demonstrate our myriad and increasingly critical contributions to our



state, our nation and to society. I grant you that this is easier said than done in a culture that seems to take more interest in the escapism of reality TV than in the reality of deficits, defaults, and debt ceilings. Nevertheless, I believe that universities like ours must show the public we serve that we are willing and able to adapt to the kind of 21st-century realities I've just mentioned.

Perhaps more than anything, I believe that we must respond to the economy and pace of the 21st-century on our own terms. As a public institution, we are dedicated to advancing the public good, and we gain great value from engaging with our stakeholders in far-reaching ways. But with many outside the academy seeking to mandate our future, we must act now to ensure that we remain the architects of our own destiny. Kent State has, in fact, been proactive on a number of fronts. For example, we transformed our Liberal Education Requirements into the Kent Core with the goals of streamlining the path to graduation and fostering a common intellectual experience unique to Kent State. Due to the admirable efforts of many faculty and staff members, we've made good progress toward those goals. At a time when the state is mandating that we offer three-year degrees, some of our programs require students to take well over our 121 credit-hour minimum to complete a baccalaureate degree (Of our 20 highest credit-hour programs, the lowest is 131 credits and the highest is 159 credits). These exemplify areas where faculty members can drive change in ways that help students succeed and that speak volumes about Kent State's desire to be a progressive, responsive university.

I don't believe Kent State's responses to many challenges at hand should be prescribed by a president, provost, Board of Trustees, or a legislature. In the spirit of shared governance — and knowing the creativity and caring that abounds across our campuses — I'm eager to hear your ideas about Kent State's short- and longer-term future. Although there are no easy answers to the issues I've broached, I'm certain that we will be much better off if we address our challenges proactively. I'd like to hear what you see as challenges, as well. I believe that inherent in every challenge is an opportunity for improvement — including improvement in the way we work together for the common good of an uncommonly great institution.

So I ask you to begin thinking about the issues for public universities and about questions such as, "How can we protect the academic values we cherish and at the same time become more accountable, competitive and effective?" Even if we don't always agree on the answers, there is always merit in coming to the table. When I come to the table in your department, it will be with an open mind and with the knowledge that every member of the Kent State community is here with several noble purposes: to advance knowledge, to solve problems, and to enable future generations to build meaningful lives of their own.

Again, I look forward to hearing from you when I visit your academic unit. Since it will take me a while to make the rounds, please feel free to contact me any time at [lefton@kent.edu](mailto:lefton@kent.edu).

Sincerely,

  
Lester Lefton