

May 19, 2011

## **Comments by University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman regarding the Board of Regents' resolution**

I'd like to share a few thoughts of my own about this issue, one I feel passionate about personally and am deeply concerned about on an institutional level. I must respectfully disagree with the resolution. I am going to speak from my own experience, first as a graduate and doctoral student, then as a researcher working side-by-side with research assistants in the pursuit of new knowledge.

The most important thing I want to say is this: I do not see research assistants as our employees but as our students. These are among our best and our brightest students, who will learn from the researchers with whom they work and go on to even greater discoveries as they take ownership of their shared scholarly study and then build on it.

When I was a graduate student, I did not see myself as working for the university and I did not see my faculty mentor as my employer. Far from it. He was my mentor, my tutor, and my colleague as I progressed in my course of study.

As a PhD student, we were partners in the research enterprise, him helping me to understand the process more deeply through our shared academic interest. We were in it together for the long-term, and I had very specific goals: Do my best work and shine in the lab -- so that I could continue my work and, frankly, continue to be funded and successfully complete my educational path.

And when I became a faculty researcher and mentor, I realized the critical importance of recruiting research assistants with whom I could share that long-term interest and commitment. Unlike the hiring of a GSI -- who may work for several different instructors to address university needs -- research assistant hiring is done at the level of the faculty member, based on a matching process between the interest of the faculty and the interest of the student. I looked for specific research assistants who showed enormous potential and significant academic performance. And research assistants sought me out as someone they could learn from.

Progress along the path was not an employee evaluation, but a measure of progress toward degree completion.

I believed my most important role as an educator was to mentor and acculturate promising graduate students, and to bring them along with me as we envisioned new frontiers for our research. For me, this personal mentor and mentee relationship is the heart and soul of the learning experience for research-based graduate students.

I know I speak for Provost Hanlon as well when I express my concern about characterizing our research assistants as University employees. We believe it could

fundamentally alter the relationship between faculty and graduate students. Decisions about who a student studies with must remain with the two people who care most about the outcome – the student and his or her mentor. At highly competitive research institutions such as Michigan, students seek out faculty based on specialized research that aligns with their interests, and they choose the institution based on that particular faculty member.

This matching process, and the collegial relationship built on it, are the keys to the recruitment of the very best faculty and staff, and essential to the quality of our graduate education overall.

I also want to clarify a few facts:

A student's performance as a research assistant is really indistinguishable from his or her progress as a graduate student. In fact, a research assistant is *expected* to make and learn from mistakes. There would be far more efficient ways to operate a lab and experiment without involving graduate students who certainly take up quite a bit of time and energy as they are "learning the ropes."

Also, the funding structure for research assistants is not a work-for-hire approach, though assistants do earn salary as part of their funding package, along with financial aid and other forms of support. Instead, faculty researchers are concerned with raising funds designed to support the graduate student's total education – including their apprenticeship in the lab or in other research-based academic settings.

Our research colleague Steve Forrest described it powerfully this way: The money supplied by federal research funding provides the means for a student to pursue educational goals while fostering innovation for the country. This has been an extraordinarily effective strategy for more than 60 years, and it is a model used by every major research institution in the country.

I do need to make one more fact clear about financial support, especially for the University community: The University's standard and long-standing policy has ensured that research assistants receive earnings and benefits increases comparable to those provided to GSIs so they are not at a disadvantage when compared to teaching assistants.

I want to note that the University has enjoyed excellent relationships with the unions who represent some of our employees. I hope and expect we will continue those positive working relationships. If this resolution is adopted, the University and its administration will abide by the applicable election procedures. We will work to ensure that all individuals eligible to vote can make a full and fair evaluation of the issue.

And finally: I appreciate this board's concern for our students as well as your work to ensure Michigan's core academic quality. We have worked through many vexing issues together; and, although there is disagreement over this issue, I know we share an unwavering commitment to this great University.