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Building Vibrant Lives and Communities Through Higher Education

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Abstract

This essay examines the powerful impact that higher education has on changing lives, communities, and the world; how it creates opportunities, inspires new ideas, spurs innovations, and is the great enabler that allows people to create better futures. The essay provides illustrative examples from the University of Mississippi across a broad spectrum of areas. First, the essay examines how higher education offers a range of opportunities from inspiring and challenging the most prepared students to providing an accessible and affordable education to all qualifying students. The essay then describes how a modern university's vision transcends the intellectual development of students and assumes the role of being an agent of change in the greater community. This change takes many forms including healthcare, economic development, education outreach, community service, and entrepreneurship. It also describes the key role that higher education plays in bettering communities through the nurturing of diversity. Finally, the essay emphasizes the importance of continually striving to make learning environments greater and educating students — tomorrow's leaders — to prosper in a global society. It concludes that one of the greatest callings in life is to make the lives of others better and that higher education is uniquely positioned to transform lives and communities — from across the street to across the globe.

The following essay contains excerpts from Chancellor Vitter's November 10, 2016 investiture address at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi.

In a 2003 speech, Nelson Mandela succinctly captured the empowering nature of education when he called it “the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” Higher education creates opportunities, inspires new ideas, and spurs innovations that drive our economy and society forward. Most importantly, higher education is the great enabler that allows people to rise above their circumstances and create a better future — there is nothing more important to the continued growth and success of our society than higher education.

Twenty years ago, Chancellor Robert Khayat envisioned that the University of Mississippi would become a great American public university. UM has achieved it and more, having reached the status of a great public *international research* university. And while all great institutions share many fantastic attributes, none is more primary than the

many areas, and chief among them is academic excellence. In that regard, the University of Mississippi is flourishing. The value of a University of Mississippi degree continues to increase, as demonstrated by the continued growth of the student body, which has doubled in size over the last 20 years. UM is the largest university in the state, with the largest freshman enrollment, the highest average entering ACT score and grade point average, as well as the highest retention rate. On a national level, UM's unique academic programs and learning experiences, such as the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, the Barbour Center for Manufacturing Excellence, the Lott Leadership Institute, the Croft Institute for International Studies, and the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, stand out among the nation's very best.

And for the first time in school history, in February 2016, the University of Mississippi achieved the pinnacle of research excellence: a designation of “R1 highest research activity” by the Carnegie Classification

of Institutions of Higher Education — a stature afforded to a distinguished group of 115 institutions representing the top 2.5% of colleges and universities nationwide. The R1 designation strengthens the transformative impact that universities such as UM have in a number of areas, including the vital economic role that a world-class research institution plays in the state and region.

Higher education offers a broad range of opportunities from inspiring and challenging our most prepared students to providing an accessible and affordable education to all qualifying Mississippi students. UM has established programs that enable students to succeed and thrive. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, created 20 years ago, attracts the highest-performing students. The SMBHC provides a vibrant center of academic excellence to encourage students' transformation to citizen scholars, committed to the public good and driven to find solutions in their fields and for their communities and the world.

To ensure the intellectual and personal growth of students from all backgrounds, in 2010 UM implemented the Ole Miss Opportunity program — the first of its kind in Mississippi — to provide full need-based scholarships to all qualifying Mississippi students for their entire education. UM is committed to extending a quality education to the broadest range of deserving students, regardless of circumstance, embodying the OMO program motto, “From here, it’s possible.” Additionally, through the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent mentoring program, UM matches incoming students and high school seniors with upperclass mentors to help guide and support them through the admission process and first year at the university.

A wonderful example of the transformative power of higher education upon an individual life is the late Marion McManus, who grew up on a small farm in Mississippi, one of nine children. His parents’ home had no electricity or running water, and every day he

and his siblings were expected to pick cotton after school to help make ends meet. McManus’ son noted that, “Growing up with that hardship gave him a lot of drive and ambition to make a better life for himself, and he realized that having an education was an important part of that.” The business degree McManus earned from UM in 1950 planted within him the seeds for success, and he nurtured that education to go from his very humble beginnings to become a highly successful businessman.

While academic excellence is at the heart of the university’s mission, a modern university’s vision transcends the intellectual development of students and assumes the role of being an agent of change in the greater community. The University of Mississippi promotes economic and community development through its many forms of community-engaged scholarship, such as partnerships, collaborative projects, and entrepreneurship. A key part of a flagship institution’s mission is to build healthy and vibrant communities — a mandate that takes many forms. The University of Mississippi embraces its responsibility as a flagship, sea grant, space grant, and Carnegie R-1 university to address our country’s most pressing issues.

Universities must make a commitment to keep our communities — and the people who live in them — healthy. As the state’s only academic medical center, the University of Mississippi Medical Center, is uniquely positioned to lead healthcare strategy for the state and the region. UMMC receives over one million patient visits each year and is a national leader in telemedicine. It is the preeminent complement to local hospitals and sustainable community healthcare, providing the leading venue in the state for trauma, pediatrics, transplants, and telehealth. And efforts to improve the health of Mississippians are continuing with the new Bower School of Population Health and its Department of Data Science. Only the third of its kind in the country, the Bower School will transform healthcare practice and delivery in Mississippi and beyond.

Aside from health, universities impact communities through educational outreach. Consider for example that each year UM graduates a new cadre of students from the School of Education's Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program. These students are among the best and brightest anywhere, and they commit to staying in Mississippi to teach Mississippi children, impacting future generations of Mississippians.

Every day, we see the positive impact universities can have on issues facing our state, nation, and world. Take, for example, the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement. Through programs like the CEED (Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development), the Institute works with communities across Mississippi to increase entrepreneurship and promote economic development in rural communities.

Institutions of higher education also impact communities through economic development and contribute to new businesses and technology. At UM, FNC is our most recent and biggest success story. Co-founded 20 years ago by four UM professors, FNC sold last year for more than \$400M, creating 45 millionaires overnight. It represents the largest acquisition of a technology company in Mississippi in recent history. But not all success has to be on such a large scale. UM also works with start-up companies — currently 17 of them — that license UM-created technologies across a broad range of industries. These endeavors are realizations of innovation and collaboration as well as the research-to-commercialization continuum that drives economic development. They also illustrate the important role that higher education plays in our state by providing access to unique talents and innovations that have the ability to transform the economic status and quality of life of all Mississippians.

Through community engagement and service, Ole Miss touches lives and communities from across the street to across the globe. A great example occurs each spring when Ole Miss students volunteer all over Oxford and Lafayette County as part of *The Big Event*, the

university's largest community service project with thousands of students participating in hundreds of services projects.

The transformative power of higher education can also be felt on the international level. The UM campus Feed the Hunger Pack-a-Thon campaign was launched seven years ago to provide meals for impoverished children in Kenya, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Jamaica, and rural Kentucky. UM was the first university in the nation to partner with the nonprofit organization in conducting pack-a-thon events. Over the course of the last seven years, the UM Pack-a-Thon has packed 1 million meals.

There are other instances of UM impact upon international communities, such as a group of UM student-athletes who have visited Haiti for the last three years to help bring fresh water to a community in order to provide crop irrigation for farmers, as well as digging wells to provide locals with fresh water. And the UM Engineers without Borders work in Togo in Africa to build schools, develop wells, and clean water supplies, as well as bring clean water to a new children's hospital.

Consider the impact of UM's community service programs. In the 2014-2015 academic year, the UM community served over 620,000 hours of community service, contributing \$12 million to the state economy.

All this service at the local and global levels is key to keeping our communities vibrant.

Another way UM will embrace our role in building healthy and vibrant communities is to channel the talents of the entire university and partner with towns and cities around the state — one at a time — to enhance every aspect of community life. The needs in Mississippi's communities are great, and UM is committed to collaborating with them on joint projects harnessing the full range of university expertise — from medicine and population health to policy and law, science and engineering, business and entrepreneurship, education, arts, and culture.

Going forward, UM will continue to

envision new ways to capitalize upon resources and make an even bigger impact on the state of Mississippi. One way will be to accelerate and inspire solutions to some of society's grandest challenges through the establishment of innovative, high-impact multidisciplinary research and creative achievement clusters, as part of a new program called the Flagship Constellations Initiative. Flagship Constellations will comprise clusters of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and partners to address compelling challenges for which no single discipline has all the answers — where only collaboration and deep insights from multiple points of view will provide solutions. Flagship Constellations will serve as an avenue to excel by attracting stellar personnel to UM to work with the incredible talent already in place — bringing together people and ideas in fresh and unique ways to boost innovation, grant funding, scholarly visibility, and international prominence.

Another key role that higher education plays in bettering our communities is through the nurturing of diversity, which goes hand in hand with academic excellence. Diversity — in ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, academic training, and scholarly discipline — makes communities more vibrant. Diversity makes our ideas better, our approaches more effective, our results stronger, and our relationships deeper. Embracing the unique ideas and perspectives represented on our higher education campuses makes us more imaginative and innovative communities. Diversity in higher education prepares students to become engaged citizens, fosters mutual respect and teamwork, and helps build communities whose members are judged by their character and their contributions.

We live in an increasingly complex world with many pressing problems. We must continually strive to make our learning environments greater, and we must educate our students — tomorrow's leaders — to prosper in a global society. We will accomplish these goals through our people. People are our greatest asset. Universities must continue to invest in

people, reward them, and appreciate them. Nothing higher education seeks to accomplish will be possible without great people. As Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, observes, “great vision without great people is irrelevant.” At UM, our people are the comprehensive enabler for all that we might do in achieving excellence and building healthy and vibrant communities.

All of us will ultimately be defined by what we leave behind. And I believe that our greatest calling in life is to make the lives of others better, which is why I so passionately believe in the power of higher education to transform lives, communities, and the world. Through 37 years in higher education, I have seen that there is no better way to help people lift themselves up and create meaningful and rewarding lives.

Jeffrey S. Vitter is the 17th chancellor of the University of Mississippi, as well as Distinguished Professor of Computer and Information Science. He is a renowned computer scientist, and a passionate advocate for higher education. His 37 years of experience at noted universities Brown, Duke, Purdue, Texas A&M, and Kansas culminated in his “dream job” when he became chancellor of Mississippi's flagship university in January 2016. A New Orleans native, Dr. Vitter holds degrees from Notre Dame, Stanford, and Duke. **Chancellor Vitter** can be reached at chancellor@olemiss.edu.