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HEADLINE: U. **Michigan** president backs **higher education** proposals

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BODY:

Following the release of a report by the commission headed by Lt. Gov. John Cherry that recommended increased quality and participation in **higher education** in **Michigan**, University of **Michigan** President Mary Sue Coleman has backed the report's ambitious proposals and indicated that she will be pushing the state to increase educational expectations.

"I certainly endorse the report. It seems like to me we've given the governor very, very good advice," she said of the recommendations the commission has made to Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

Coleman was chair of a work group inside the commission tasked with finding a way to maximize the economic benefits of **higher education**.

The Cherry commission was created at the request of Granholm and its report says the state is in dire need of education reform, without which **Michigan** faces a future "characterized by ever-diminishing economic opportunity, decaying cities and population flight" and risks becoming a "stagnant backwater in a dynamic world economy."

In an attempt to prevent this from happening, the commission has called for an educational environment that expects all students to obtain a high-quality college education, and the report recommends that the state and its public universities facilitate that goal by removing financial barriers to enrollment, as well as improving high school education. It also calls on the state to double the number of residents that obtain a college degree.

"The University of **Michigan** will play a big role," Coleman said about the future of **higher education** in the state. "Both our Flint and Dearborn campuses have a lot of capacity. We could add thousands more students at those campuses. That's the way I would see expanding enrollment. Another way we could help is by encouraging non-traditional students like women and minorities into science," Coleman said.

The goals of higher college quality and enrollment are important to the commission because the state's educational and economic performance has been well below the national average.

Michigan is ranked 44th in states whose 25 to 34-year-old populations have a bachelor's degree or higher -- an age group that will bear the state economy's continuing transition from manufacturing to technology and service jobs. The commission said the traditionally manufacturing-heavy economy gave residents a high-standard of living directly out of high school, but at the cost of devaluing the importance of a college education.

The state is behind not only in degrees but income, as it is below the national per capita average income. This link between education and wealth is evident in **Michigan**, as its residents with bachelor's or master's degrees earn nearly twice as much as their neighbors with high school diplomas.

"I certainly believe there is a direct link between educational attainment and economic development," Coleman said.

In order to increase the quality of **higher education**, the commission recommended that the state require universities to report their progress, including the progress of minorities and women.

"Overall the commission was saying that we want to make sure that institutions are paying attention to things like graduation rates. We want to continue to do a very good job at retaining students and graduating," Coleman said.

But Donald Heller, a former education professor at the University of **Michigan**, said the school's constitutionally protected autonomy prevents the governor from limiting its independence from the state.

"Realistically there's very little to force the University of **Michigan** to be more accountable," he said.

Heller said the Legislature and the governor should work cooperatively with the university rather than being confrontational, adding that many of the best universities in the country, such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Virginia and the University of **Michigan** have a great deal of autonomy.

"There's no evidence that states' efforts to hold institutions more accountable leads to greater quality institutions," Heller said. "I think states start off with very grand ideas that these things will improve **higher education**, and there's no evidence that it happens."

Heller said it is also important to ask how many world-class universities a state needs.

"I would suggest that [Granholt] concentrate her efforts on regional institutions like [Western **Michigan** University], [Northern **Michigan** University] and even Wayne State and improving the quality of education there. It's going to come down to better funding for them. If the governor's going to get the bang for her buck it would be to focus on those institutions," Heller said.

Granholt has time to weigh the commission's recommendations and other ideas, but she already acted on one of its proposals Wednesday when she replaced the high school **Michigan** Educational Assessment Program test with an exam similar to a college entrance exam.

While Granholt has not taken a position on the report's other proposals, she may do so in her state of the state address, which will take place in February.

"The governor welcomes the recommendations, but we have not endorsed any particular one of them beyond the MEAP," Granholt spokeswoman Liz Boyd said. "I think you can look to the governor, even as soon as the state of the state address, in regards to the Cherry commission."

If Granholt endorses the proposals, it will be at a time when there is a projected \$260 million shortfall in the state's \$8.8 billion general fund and the opposition party controls the Legislature. Still, Boyd said Granholt will not shirk from the commission's recommendations.

"It will not be a report that will sit on the shelf. You will hear more from the governor about the commission as the year goes on," Boyd said.

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