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## Nurturing the Entrepreneurial Culture



Everyone is well aware of the economic challenges facing Michigan and the Great Lakes Region in general. The massive loss of manufacturing jobs in the region has painted an image of pessimism about the region and has destroyed the hopes of many who have been tied exclusively to an old economy.

I came to this region less than three years ago, and you can't imagine how many folks questioned my wisdom in making such a move – not just people I knew elsewhere, but people from this region who questioned if I had done my homework, and then, when finding out I had, would ask “and you came anyway?”

Well, I came because I am optimistic and I saw an opportunity to help couple a unique regional resource to the new economic needs of the region. You see, I am the chief executive officer of a university with long standing ties to the manufacturing sector, and one that is highly regarded for supplying this region with outstanding talent and leadership ever since 1919. My institution, now known as Kettering University, is an independent, private university, which was known as General Motors Institute prior to the early 1980s. Our alumni run companies that range from Gibson Guitar in Tennessee to Harley Davidson in Wisconsin, as well as numerous companies in the automotive industry throughout this country and several others.



Every day, as president of an institution that provides the nation's most advanced professional, cooperative education program, I observe students who are integrating work-based learning with classroom and laboratory learning, and rapidly developing the skills and knowledge essential to the infusion of innovation into the products and processes that will sustain our competitiveness in the “knowledge economy.”

Our concepts of products and systems have been moving from mass production to mass customization for some time now. The implications on technological needs in the plant and on the skills of the workforce are obvious. “Touch labor” – the tradition of North American manufacturing – is fading away. We all know that manufacturing in North America is going to be less labor intensive, more automated, and consist of ever increasing high “value-added” activity conducted by a highly trained and educated workforce.

Additionally there are products and processes out there - in the not too distant future - that we haven't yet imagined. We in higher education have to prepare our students for jobs that don't yet exist and to manage processes and design products that haven't yet been conceptualized.

I want to emphasize my belief that the successful construction of a new economy in this region is going to be based substantially on a strong commitment, with an accompanying shift in the culture of the region, to science and technology based entrepreneurship. The solution to our economic problems is a “back to the future” scenario. We need to remind ourselves that even General Motors was – one hundred years ago – a small technology start-up company.

Rebuilding, cultivating, and nurturing that entrepreneurial culture in this region requires a lot of collaborative effort among government, higher education, and industry; and it will require a lot of changes in the way we think about policies, the way we educate, and the way we innovate and compete. One key to accelerating this phenomenon is to find ways to increase technology transfer within the region.

And that sounds like a good topic for my next column.

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