

December 17, 2024

Dear Chancellor Grasso,

I appreciated our conversation a week or so ago, and I've since been able to speak with a number of faculty from UM-Dearborn. It's been an honor to learn more about the university. U-M Dearborn faculty have not, historically, been a subject of discussion in SACUA. This year is the first time that we're hearing from faculty with concerns from CECS and CASL.

My understanding is that, for many years, the four academic units of the University of Michigan-Dearborn served as a kind of mycorrhizal network, as exists with healthy forests. There, tiny "threads" of fungal organisms wrap around tree roots, connecting each tree together, enabling forests to thrive. Young samplings too small to reach sunlight receive sugar from older, taller trees through the mycorrhizal network. Seasoned trees detect those in poor health and send nutrients.

Over the course of my conversations, I have learned from those with some budgetary knowledge that prior to the period of enrollment decline that you cite in your letter, the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters (CASL) actually generated significant revenue for the university as a result of a period of pronounced enrollment growth. This revenue was vital in assisting the university's professional colleges who were struggling at the time (the College of Engineering, for instance, was, with CASL's assent, allowed to recoup a greater portion of the revenue available in the original budget model due to a recognition of increased costs for operating the unit). Indeed, I learned that CASL frequently contributed funds or resources to benefit the other academic units. When the College of Education, Health, and Human Services (CEHHS) was formed in 2013, for instance, CASL transferred its robust Health Policies Studies major and a recently hired faculty member to help build momentum in enrollment and to provide the college with much needed credit generation. Likewise, along with the Colleges of Engineering and Business, CASL agreed to allow CEHHS to receive, for a number of years, a higher return from the budget model, then in operation, to enable the new college to get on its feet. In 2017, when an anticipated gift for the College of Engineering and Computer Science's (CECS) new \$90 million Engineering Lab Building didn't materialize, CASL and the College of Business (COB) forcefully advocated that the project not be scaled back in the knowledge that this would mean that a greater share of the building's cost and debt load would fall on those two units. Additionally, the Business School Dean used a college surplus to buy a key piece of equipment for the new engineering building when CECS lacked the resources to purchase the piece on their own due to their increased investment in the building's structural costs. Joint faculty hires were made between CASL and CEHHS and new collaborative degree programs were developed in partnership between CASL and COB (Business as a Second Major and Actuarial Mathematics) and CASL and CECS (Cyber Security and Human Centered Design).

By most accounts, there was a symbiotic relationship between the colleges. Students from all colleges utilized the Writing Center, Science Learning Center, Math Learning Center,

and Foreign Language Lab, which, until a few years ago (in a move to trim CASL expenses), were funded by CASL. Students from all colleges took (and approximately 85% still take) their general education, including writing courses, from CASL. After the establishment of the new Dearborn Discovery Corp general education program in 2013 (which opened up the possibility of units beyond CASL offering general education courses to the university's student body), university administrators, keen to ensure that university resources were not used inefficiently, created the University Curriculum and Degree Committee (UCDC) to review and approve curriculum put forward by all the colleges to ensure that the curriculum was not duplicated.

But, faculty lament that this spirit of cooperation, of communicating vitality and vulnerabilities and sharing and exchanging resources, has declined in recent years at UM-Dearborn. I heard concerns that the Provost's Office has not sufficiently encouraged or supported such cooperation, instead permitting colleges to develop alternative pathways so that general education course credits in CASL have been diminished. A Center for Business Writing was gifted to COB with little input/participation from CASL Writing faculty who expressed a willingness to collaborate on the Center's development and implementation. CEHHS students have a pathway to a health and human services degree (particularly the pre-health professions track) that does not require a lab science course in CASL. Though advertised as a pathway to medical school, there is concern that it lacks a rigorous approach to lab work and the sciences, which CASL courses could provide. Even faculty hires in one college now may overlap with expertise in other programs, a disregard to the network of university resources. It seems that a non-collaborative ethos is shutting out mutual support, fostering a competition between the colleges, and facilitating a stigmatization of CASL as inefficient and as a drain on scarce campus resources.

Based on the history of the university, and what we know about ecosystems and resilience and regeneration, as well as what we know about the strength of diverse teams and their enhanced ability to address complex problems, the four colleges will be stronger and healthier, and will develop more creative solutions, if they work together. The liberal arts is a sort of "Mother Tree." We cannot educate quality engineers or good business leaders or effective teachers without a strong liberal arts curriculum, and the austerity measures that CASL is making undermine that goal. It was not too long ago that other units on campus needed assistance, support that CASL was willing and able to provide. Accordingly, we urge you to please rekindle the spirit of collaboration, and, at this moment when CASL's tree needs support, please explore with all four deans how UM-Dearborn will sustain its commitment to the liberal arts and humanities. Such a critical commitment cannot be the concern of CASL alone.

Sincerely,



Rebekah Modrak, SACUA Chair



Rebekah Modrak <rmodrak@umich.edu>

Re: CASL Concerns

Domenico Grasso <grasso@umich.edu>

Fri, Dec 20, 2024 at 1:17 PM

To: Faculty Senate Chair <facultySenateChair@umich.edu>

Cc: Gabriella Scarlatta <geschric@umich.edu>, Dagmar Budikova Persaud <dagmarp@umich.edu>

Dear Rebekah,

Thank you for your letter summarizing the key themes discussed at the recent faculty forum. I appreciate your concern for the UM-Dearborn community, and as an environmental engineer, I also found your ecological metaphor particularly interesting.

Since we last spoke, Dean Budikova has been holding regular office hours to engage with faculty, listen to concerns, and explore possible solutions to the challenges CASL is facing. I'm pleased to note that these sessions have been increasingly productive, and the conversations are moving in a positive and constructive direction. While we all recognize that this is a challenging time, I have full confidence in the Dean's dedication to listening with empathy and ensuring that both faculty and students are heard as we work toward a stable and sustainable future for the college.

Regarding the upcoming Winter 2025 schedule, as a courtesy, I want to provide you with some context on the scope of changes. Across the campus, there will be 1,773 courses offered, with 949 of those falling under CASL. Of those, only 16% will be impacted by enrollment boundary changes. The majority of CASL courses have seen slight increases in enrollment: 21 (2%) courses by fewer than 5 students, 103 (11%) by 5-10 students, and 30 (3%) by 10-30 students, with the average increase being only about 20 students per course.

Looking ahead, our CFO will be presenting a public budget update next semester. We believe this additional forum will foster even more dialogue, and help us move toward solutions that ensure the sustainability of our liberal arts programs.

I also want to acknowledge that there was a lot of information in your recent communication, some of which was inaccurate or misrepresented the current situation. We are committed to continuing to share clear, fact-based reasoning behind our decisions and actions, so that everyone in the community can fully understand our path forward.

While I appreciate SACUA's interest in our campus, I believe that the most effective way forward is to continue collaborating closely with our campus community, where we can address our shared challenges with insight and care.

Ultimately, the best solutions for CASL will come from those who truly understand our campus, our students, and the unique context we face in Dearborn. To paraphrase Shakespeare, *The past is prologue; the future is in our hands*. I want us to focus on the time ahead and am confident that, together, we are on a strong path toward creating an innovative and sustainable future that strengthens the humanities, social sciences, and all the programs within CASL.

Wishing you a peaceful and restful holiday season,
Domenico

DOMENICO GRASSO

Chancellor | University of Michigan - Dearborn

