

POINTS OF VIEW

# Education is the best investment state can make

admit it. I'm a sucker for ceremonies like weddings and graduations. I suppose it's mostly because the ritual makes concrete and intensifies the emotion of the event.

I like university commencements best of all. I never fail to be moved at the sight of a young person — often the first in the entire history of the family — receiving a college degree and thereby entering "the community of educated men and women." The grin of the newly minted graduate turns incandescent, and nobody minds when the family's whoops of joy punctuate the decorum of the ceremony.

There were a lot of grins throughout Michigan last weekend. Something like 46,000 graduates and their families piled into Michigan Stadium for the University of Michigan's ceremonies, while President Bill Clinton spoke on Sunday to a packed house at Eastern Michigan's commencement exercises in Ypsilanti.

So when I was invited to say a few words at the commencement of the College of Natural Resources and the

Environment at U-M, I was happy to put on my academic robe and proceed down the aisle to the tune of Jeremiah Clarke's fine air for trumpet.

Sitting on the stage and listening to the awards being handed out and the speeches being given, I found myself reflecting on what is really going on at the core of this gigantic enterprise that takes adolescent high school graduates and over four years or so turns them into educated men and women.

I had no idea what would become of the kids sitting before me, only partly solemn in their black robes, some with flowers stuck to their academic hats. Some would become landscape architects, while others would challenge the captains of industry as leaders of the environmental movement. Some might not even have a career in natural resources; they might go off to law school or become teachers.

But each would have received while at the university an enormous injection of what might be called "human capital." And the value added



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to each graduate — value for society, value for the graduate — by the university experience is perfectly enormous.

The dry data in the Digest of Education Statistics sum up the value added in cold, hard cash.

In 1997 (the last year for which statistics are available), men with less than a ninth-grade education earn on the average \$10,291 per year. Average annual earnings for male high school graduates rise to \$31,215. But the average BA graduate earned \$48,616.

The earnings gains are even more

remarkable as the years of investment in human capital increase. At the master's level, average earnings jump to \$61,051, while those who go on to a professional degree earn an average of \$85,011.

I'm not certain measuring human worth in dollars and cents is the best ways of doing it, but the facts possess a certain solidity. Investing in human capital through college education pays off better than any other investment I can think of.

Those in Lansing who preside over the allocation of taxpayer dollars might bear this fact in mind, especially when they consider the trade-off between appropriating money to educate young people at Michigan universities and warehousing criminals in prisons.

In my experience, universities don't make this point very well when they lobby the legislature at appropriations time. A. Bartlett Giamatti, the former president of Yale, understood the issue when he wrote in his book, *A Free and Ordered Place*: "Of all the

threats to the institution, the most dangerous come from within. Not the least among them is the smugness that believes the institution's value is so self-evident that it no longer needs explanation, its mission so manifest that it no longer requires definition and articulation."

It's no loss of dignity for university presidents to point out that their institutions add more value than any other. And it's hardly crass to point out that a dollar spent in developing young minds pays off better than any other investment that the state can conceivably make.

*Phil Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper and served as a regent of the University of Michigan from 1987 to 1998. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.*

# Academic All-Stars are best of present, promise of future

They seem flush with optimism. They've come of age in a time of unprecedented prosperity and technological advancement, and when they look into the future they see their generation continuing mankind's march against poverty, despair, disease and ignorance.

They are The Observer's Academic All-Stars and they have every right to believe that they and their contemporaries will make a better world and build on the wonders that have so recently transformed our lives.

In today's Observer we present these wonderful young adults and honor their hard work, their idealism, their intellectual curiosity, their stamina and, yes, their optimism. The Academic All-Stars are the best of the present and the promise of the future, and that's why it has become so important to The Observer that we take time to call attention to these young people, who sometimes in the pecking order of high school society take a back seat to the athletes.

We understand that. We also honor the athletes for their hard work and

physical strength and grace. And, as you'll see when reading about these young people, many of them are both athletes and scholars, bookworms and social butterflies, artists and mathematicians.

In fact, their long lists of school and civic activities suggest how rich, varied and complicated their lives already are. Their activities also suggest what kind of intelligent, active, productive citizens they will become.

When the young people featured on our cover arrived to have their picture taken, their conversation included discussion of some really neat books they had been reading, recent math competitions and plans for college. They were uniformly warm, enthusiastic and willing to share.

The All Stars are Paul Schultz of Catholic Central, Teresa Elizabeth Elsey of Farmington Harrison, Daniel Freeman of North Farmington, Michael Levy of North Farmington, Laura Portwood-Stacer of Livonia Churchill, Luke Williams of Plymouth-Canton, Jeffrey Grossman of Farmington Harrison, Qian Zhang of



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Livonia Churchill, Nicholas Demek of Livonia Stevenson, Sarah Ernst of Mercy High School, Timothy Bodnar of Plymouth-Salem, Ryan King of Plymouth-Salem, Marya Link of Farmington High, Alexis A. Black of Clarenceville, Ross Ian MacKenzie, Martina Moro of Wayne Memorial, Christina Chan of Plymouth-Canton, Eva-Marie David of Mercy and Joseph Colombo of Redford Thurston.

Much of the credit for these young people belongs to their parents, of course, but also to the many teachers who have inspired them. Each year we ask the All-Stars to tell us about some of the teachers who have left

their mark. This question gives some insight into what matters to a young scholar and helps to explain how optimism grows under the right conditions.

Paul Schultz of Catholic Central writes of English teacher and track coach Gene Grewe: "In my mind, Mr. Grewe is what a teacher is supposed to be: supremely educated, thoroughly prepared, always accessible and having a genuine care for the education and welfare of his students."

Pretty good definition and one echoed in the praise of other teachers.

Michael Levy of North Farmington High School writes of his computer aided design teacher Bruce Sutton: "He helped me move away from the concrete thinking of right and wrong that I developed in early education and showed me that there are many ways to solve a problem, and the best way is not always the most obvious."

Qian Zhng and Laura Portwood-Stacer of Churchill High School both praise math teacher Mary Buda for her dedication, her challenge to be the best and for her kindness. Laura

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writes, "It is obvious that she loves to teach and that she takes great pride in each one of her 'children.'"

These and the other teachers named have a right to be proud of these great young people. And, so do we all.

*Hugh Gallagher is the managing editor of The Observer Newspapers. He can be reached by phone at (734) 953-2149, by e-mail at hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net or by fax at (734) 691-7279.*

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