



**Boldness for the World:
Advancing the
Frontiers of Knowledge
in Times of Economic
and Social Turmoil**

By Lou Anna K. Simon

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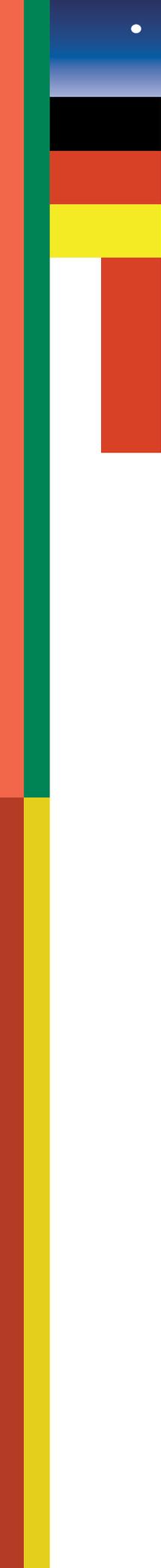
e live in a global community that is both “flat”¹ and “spiky,”² as well as economically and societally turbulent. Thomas Friedman and Richard Florida describe how it is possible either to compete or to collaborate anywhere in a flat world and how density ultimately prevails, as assets are concentrated into “spikes” of innova-

tion and economic growth. How colleges and universities thrive in this environment *and* contribute to addressing some of the world’s most wicked issues³ will mark the degree to which we move toward sustainable global prosperity.

At Michigan State University (MSU), the boldness to which we aspire is akin to Theodore Roosevelt’s call for “daring greatly.”⁴ We acknowledge the world as our arena and strive to make positive impacts as we globally push forward the frontiers of knowledge in ways that not only fight pressures to be risk-averse in times of economic and societal turmoil, but also reflect our responsibility to help create sustainable prosperity for the common good. In doing so, MSU is moving our land-grant values toward our *World Grant Ideal*—a vision relevant to a world that is both flat and spiky and pertinent across education, business, and government sectors.



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The World Grant Ideal

Succinctly, the *World Grant Ideal* is a 21st century–relevant way of thinking about how cutting-edge knowledge coupled with global engagement changes the world, the local community, and the lives of individuals.⁵ It is a call to activism, given that there is unprecedented potential for progress when colleges and universities work in collaboration and with local, regional, and international partners, including governments, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, individuals, and the community at large. In short, MSU's potential partners are anyone and everywhere—in relationships that are inspired by and hold to our values and a capacity to create shared goals.

Living the *World Grant Ideal* means that by engaging with other nations and cultures, working collaboratively and independently, we take cutting-edge knowledge and the best of the university to the world, simultaneously bringing the best of the world back to the university and our state. The resulting richness of new insight, enhanced understanding, and innovative solutions confers benefits to all parties, including communities, businesses, and individual citizens. In a world that is spiky and flat, our world's best colleges and universities cannot adhere to a protectionist view of knowledge while taking on the world's most wicked issues.

Michigan State University's International Presence

MSU's global reach extends into all seven continents through the engagement of our students and more than 1,400 faculty and staff who are regularly involved in international research and problem solving in more than 175 countries. Our students study abroad in more than 260 programs and more than half study in nontraditional destinations (outside Western Europe). MSU has almost 200 formal relationships with international universities and

other institutions. Our more than 41,000 international alumni live in almost 180 countries; MSU is a national leader in the number of volunteers serving in the Peace Corps. Our international students and scholars come from more than 130 countries, and we rank in the top ten for international student enrollment. We are truly an international university.

MSU's examples of bold innovation and impact span the globe, intriguing and inspiring others to follow in our footsteps. Joining with our international partners, Michigan State University is addressing issues at the forefront of local and international concerns—searching for new forms of alternative energy; addressing climate change and resource depletion; alleviating hunger, disease, and poverty; resolving escalating cultural, regional, and ideological conflicts; and dealing with increasing disparities between the haves and have-nots.⁶

When considering opportunities for new global engagements and assessing the continuous fine-tuning necessary for established partnerships, MSU uses a template of four interconnected strategic principles:

1. Embracing the vision of the *World Grant Ideal* and advancing its impact.
2. Our leadership role as an international university working throughout the world in programs that cut across the full scope of our education, research, and outreach missions.
3. Our commitment to growing study abroad participation and programs, even beyond our current leadership position, by diversifying opportunities that are cost-effective *and* maintain the quality and integrity of the total academic experience.
4. Partnering in research activities that match our scholarly strengths with the interests and needs of particular regions around the world.

MSU's experience in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is an example of these strategic principles in action and illustrates the core of a *World Grant Ideal* partnership—the capacity to change while sustaining the relationship and shared goals. The Middle East has long been and continues to be of interest to our faculty and students for developing stronger connections not only in the region but also beyond, into northern Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. There is a strong sentiment that the Middle East will continue to be a crossroads for the world's cultures and, increasingly, its economies. An expanded academic presence in Dubai was deemed attractive because of its location within a dynamic region and its status as a major cosmopolitan area with an academic, transportation, and corporate infrastructure offering opportunities for the development of a continental hub for engagement with

the region. In short, Dubai offers an environment uniquely conducive to a multifaceted partnership centered on a quality international academic experience accessible to students from the United States as well as the region. Dubai's interest in becoming a regional, and ultimately, global hub for excellent higher education fit well with MSU's goals, as did its interest in research collaboration and its enthusiasm about our graduate and undergraduate programs.

The unique partnership, including the government and public and private sectors, shared a vision of a comprehensive academic presence very different from the region's more common branch campus models—with their programs and admission standards distinct and isolated from their home campuses. The MSU–Dubai endeavor strove to establish an unusual extension of MSU into the region with permeable boundaries between East Lansing and Dubai and, eventually, other major U.S. universities, creating a genuine U.S. educational experience not located in the United States. The standards for admission and degree attainment and the quality of the academic programs would be equivalent to those in East Lansing. The vision for MSU–Dubai reflected a complex set of programs across the full scope of our teaching, research, and outreach mission.

In collaboration with our Dubai partners, an entrepreneurial model was used to advance progress toward this vision at an extraordinary pace. The fast tracking included not only undergraduate degree programs but also comprehensive academic support services and planning for a library, housing, and recreational facilities. The entrepreneurial model relied on a sound economy, growth, and assumptions about the popularity and marketability of the U.S. model of a four-year undergraduate education.

In retrospect, the unanticipated decline in the world's economy and its deep impact on the region, especially Dubai, placed unmanageable pressure on the project's economic viability, particularly during the sensitive and challenging start-up period. As we learned, foreign universities with more established programs, longer histories on the ground, and admission standards different from those on their home campuses were not so deeply affected.

It became clear that our shared aspirations had to change, but we would not change our strategic principles and rationale for why MSU was in Dubai. Our reasons for staying in Dubai remained solid because the same principles guiding our initial partnership prevailed. None of the partners was willing to abandon the core of a strong MSU academic presence in Dubai. Consequently, restructuring began around the pieces of the academic core that could withstand what was perceived to be a prolonged economic stress affecting all education in the region. Our

determination to remain in Dubai was reinforced by our understanding that if the MSU–Dubai academic core presence were lost, reestablishing it would be highly unlikely.

Simply put, the entrepreneurial model and the required growth rate for enrollment and programs were too ambitious given what happened to the world economy. Independent of economic circumstances, neither MSU nor our partners were willing to create an educational enterprise in Dubai that did not meet the educational standards of the East Lansing campus—meaning that a degree earned at MSU–Dubai was equivalent to one earned in East Lansing. The consequence of the global recession was that continuing the goals as originally envisioned required financial support that, at the time, was beyond the capabilities of MSU and its partners.



Dare Greatly, Fail Smartly

Part of pursuing big initiatives is having the insight and courage to take risks and then manage the consequences of those risks when “failing smartly,” that is, being bold enough to dare greatly in a shared-goal entrepreneurial mode. MSU and our partners are doing just that in Dubai. While the undergraduate initiative did not prove sustainable given the dismal economic environment, the strong relationships Michigan State established within the region now support a configuration of core activities that will be a part of the region's—and our—future. MSU's regional office in Dubai is a Middle East hub for study abroad and is especially critical for strengthening our study abroad opportunities in program areas, such as engineering, where student participation numbers and cost effectiveness have been difficult to achieve. Dubai is the home of a continuing graduate program in human resources and labor relations, and a regional research and outreach facilitation site. All of these core initiatives would have been challenging without the infrastructure and partnerships initiated

to support undergraduate programming. This new Dubai hub will provide dividends for years to come. New initiatives that were not in the original plan are already taking hold, such as a partnership with the University of Dubai for a program in logistics.

As our land-grant roots have deepened and become more far reaching and complex, MSU's work over the last half century demonstrates the need to continually adjust approaches and programs to remain at the forefront of advancing knowledge and transforming lives. The restructuring of MSU–Dubai to balance the realities of the economy, market issues, and our shared goals is one such example.

In Dubai or wherever MSU is present, working to make positive and sustainable differences in global well-being requires a vision beyond ourselves—bold entrepreneurship and “daring greatly.” At Michigan State University, we believe that the *World Grant Ideal*—coupling cutting-edge knowledge and global engagement—allows universities to work through their strengths and, with their global partners, toward shared goals. Initiatives based on the *World Grant Ideal* will bring both successes and failures—locally, nationally, and internationally—when institutions undertake big, entrepreneurial initiatives. But even in our failures, new knowledge, ideas, insights, and innovations emerge. In our successes, momentum and hope are created. Built upon our land-grant foundations and our *World Grant Ideal*, our successes raise aspirations and create spikes of asset

concentrations with far-reaching tentacles of unique connections.

Embracing both the challenges and the opportunities of a world that is flat, spiky, and turbulent requires courage and boldness born from our land-grant roots in daring greatly to address the world's most wicked issues. It also calls for pushing the frontiers of knowledge globally forward, regardless of economic or societal turmoil and aspiring toward the *World Grant Ideal*. In this era, through our institutional legacies of who we were created to be, who we are, and what we have accomplished, the world's best colleges and universities can move boldly beyond the fortunes and finances of any single institution, state, or nation as we together contribute to creating sustainable global prosperity for the common good. ■

Notes:

1. Friedman, T. L. (2008). *Hot, flat, and crowded: Why we need a green revolution—and how it can renew America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
2. Florida, R. (2005, October). The world is spiky. *The Atlantic Monthly*. 296(3), 48–51. See also Florida's “Density Series” published in 2009 and 2010 in several issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*.
3. Ritchey, T. (2007). *Wicked problems: Structuring social messes with morphological analysis*. Swedish Morphological Society; and Conklin, J. (2006). *Dialogue mapping: Building shared understanding of wicked problems*. John Wiley & Sons.
4. Roosevelt, T. (April 23, 1910). The man in the arena: Citizenship in a republic. Speech at the Sorbonne. Paris, France. Speech accessed at www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/speeches/maninthearena.pdf.
5. For more extensive details on the World Grant Ideal, see Simon, L. A. K. (2009). Embracing the *World Grant Ideal: Affirming the Morrill act for a twenty-first-century global society*. Online at www.worldgrantideal.msu.edu.
6. For more information and detail on MSU's involvement in the world, see Simon, L. A. K. (2009). *Michigan State University 2009 president's report: Spartan's will*. Retrieved from <http://report.president.msu.edu/>; Simon, L. A. K. (2008). *Michigan State University 2008 president's report: Powering and empowering prosperity*. Retrieved from <http://report.president.msu.edu/2008/>; and Simon, L. A. K. (2007). *Michigan State University 2007 president's report: Impact and innovation—at home and around the world*. Retrieved from <http://report.president.msu.edu/2007/>.

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