president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, some years ago. After his tour of the University of Chicago, I asked President von Weizsäcker what he thought. He paused, for a moment, and then said simply, “I am delighted, before I die, to have seen a real German research university.”

Thank you very much for your dedication and support of the College.

April 30, 1996

Dear Faculty Colleagues,

No scholar comes to the University of Chicago without an awareness of its brilliant past. I write to you today to describe a course of action that I believe can lead to an equally brilliant future.

Excellence in research and education has been and must continue to be the source of our brilliance. But among the universities known for the outstanding quality and breadth of their scholarly contributions, what distinguishes Chicago is a fierce commitment to ideas and intellectual community. We draw strength from these values, and we represent them to the world. Faculty and students choose this university because they recognize the importance of these values for their scholarship and learning.

The task before us is to sustain and enhance the quality of our University in the long run. Beyond insistence upon excellence and adherence to our distinctive values, a critical ingredient in achieving this goal will be our ability to generate necessary resources. We must provide faculty with outstanding research space, materials, and equipment; pay top salaries; support new intellectual initiatives; build and maintain superb libraries and computing facilities; furnish teachers and students with modern classrooms and laboratories; and offer appropriate and competitive financial aid.

As you know from discussions over the last two years, our current path does not provide sufficient resources for these essential investments, either in the near term or in the future. As the Task Forces on Graduate and Undergraduate Education noted, we are the only university in our peer group in which the divisional and college faculty wage base (excluding BSD clinical faculty) exceeds net undergraduate tuition. Our smaller number of undergraduate alumni has led over time to fewer contributors to the University and fewer dollars for the endowment. A structure in which tuition does not cover salaries and in which endowment does not grow at a robust rate is not sustainable over the long term. In short, despite our hard and successful work to bring the operating budget into balance and to expand fundraising, it remains the case that faculty salaries and start-up packages, fellowship support, and facilities are not what they must be and we are not investing adequately in our capital base.
I am recommending a course of action that I believe will significantly strengthen the basis for long-term support of education and scholarship at the University. At the center of my recommendation is a heightened priority to collegiate education both inside and outside the classroom, with the objective of improving the quality of the education we offer and of making the College more frequently the school of choice for the most talented and committed students. Our success will allow us to effect a rather significant expansion of the College, from our current 3550 undergraduates to 4500 within ten years. I cannot overemphasize, however, that an increase in demand for the College must precede any growth in its size, and that we must continue to be known for the intellectual ability of our students and the seriousness with which they approach their education. I would leave open for now the number and mix of graduate students, but my strong presumption is that this number will remain larger than is the case at peer institutions. What matters most is that our graduate students be the very best and that we provide the support that this requires. In the near term, I envision a faculty that is slightly smaller, but I hope that the faculty can grow in the long run. The path I propose will require some redirection in the overall work of the faculty, but it will not fundamentally change what we are about.

Rather than proceeding directly to a discussion of how to implement this course of action, I would have us first consider whether this path is consistent with the values and history of the University and whether it will contribute to the betterment of society. I want us to consider if this is a course that we can embrace; one that deserves resources as opposed to one that simply requires resources; one that fits with our continued excellence in scholarship as opposed to one that simply furnishes financial support for such excellence. Success in improving the education we offer and in making the College more frequently the school of choice depends on our belief in the value of doing this work well. Hence I devote a considerable portion of this letter to discussing the value of such an education and to attract the most talented and committed students. This is important, not just because the very best students deserve the best education, but because when students who could attend any college or university choose the place that is known for providing the best liberal education, it is a victory for the cause of liberal education.

But I believe we can provide an even more outstanding liberal education. That faculty bring to this task a lifelong commitment to discovery and the perspective of their own disciplines. They carry with them the latest in new knowledge and techniques. They are broad enough in their interests that they delight in speaking together across disciplines. And they believe that their efforts to craft and implement curricula—in particular, curricula that fit new development in their own disciplines into a larger context—will be comparable in value to their efforts to advance specialized knowledge.

The benefit of liberal education to both the individual and society has never been greater. In an era of dynamic change in knowledge and technology, a liberal education remains the best preparation for a future we can only imagine. A world in which hope, respected leadership, and thoughtful citizenship are in short supply, and in which prejudice, fear, and the manipulation of public opinion are all too prevalent, has great need for liberally educated men and women.

The university that offers the very best liberal education has the opportunity, and I would argue the responsibility, to demonstrate the value of such an education and to attract the most talented and committed students. This is important, not just because the very best students deserve the best education, but because when students who could attend any college or university choose the place that is known for providing the best liberal education, it is a victory for the cause of liberal education.

I believe we are the university best positioned to offer a truly exemplary liberal collegiate education. In important ways, we represent the idealized picture: a well-deserved reputation, proudly confirmed by our alumni, for teaching students to think and for transforming lives; a faculty that is unsurpassed in making important discoveries; a faculty that is known for engaging in work that spans disciplines; a faculty that comes together to consider and implement curricular changes; a faculty that has crafted a Core that is a benchmark for a general education; and a significant number of faculty who consider liberal education to be among their most important activities and who give generously of their time to students.

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A poorly taught course hurts us all, while superbly taught courses, like outstanding research, enhance our reputation.

In thinking about how to improve all aspects of our students’ educational experience, I have found the report of the student life task force and my discussions with current students and alumni particularly illuminating. They are enormously proud of their Chicago education, but all too frequently they speak of unremitting academic pressure interfering with their ability to learn and to make the most of their time here. Some academic pressure is a natural and productive part of a serious education. But I am concerned that the sum total of our academic requirements (each of which may have considerable intellectual merit), compounded by the pace of our academic calendar, is too often unmanageable, even for our best students. This is not a call for less rigorous intellectual standards. It is a call for us to recognize that a student’s life encompasses more than course work, and to make sure that our students have time for other activities that lead to personal growth. Consider, for example, the remarkably talented mathematician-cellist who each week spends 20 hours in practice and five additional hours in lessons with the principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

As faculty we must convey to students that we respect the taste and maturity they have shown in choosing to come here and that we applaud their seriousness of purpose. We must also recognize that our College students will pursue many career paths – this is a normal outgrowth of a liberal education. We do not fall short of our aspirations as educators and our students do not fall short of their aspirations as learners when they decide to become bankers or film producers instead of professors. Our true measure as teachers is whether we have nurtured in our students a lifelong commitment to critical inquiry and learning. We should take pride in all students who demonstrate this quality.

Moreover, we must be dedicated to our students’ success both before and after graduation. Our curriculum – especially our concentrations – should offer paths – this is a normal outgrowth of a liberal education. We do not fall short of our aspirations as educators and our students do not fall short of their aspirations as learners when they decide to become bankers or film producers instead of professors. Our true measure as teachers is whether we have nurtured in our students a lifelong commitment to critical inquiry and learning. We should take pride in all students who demonstrate this quality.

Let me now address how I would have us begin to implement the course of action I am recommending:

- I endorse the recommendation of the graduate and undergraduate task forces that each department undertake a comprehensive review of its undergraduate program. I ask for these reviews to emphasize how departmental faculty, individually and collectively, can address the points I have raised in this letter.

- The current review of the Core by the College Council should lead to a broader discussion in a variety of fora about the content and role of general education in the College curriculum.

- I would like us to consider changes to our calendar that could improve the manageability of the educational experience, and perhaps offer faculty more flexibility in scheduling teaching and research.

I am asking the Provost, working with the deans of the divisions and the College, to develop specific mechanisms for accomplishing these tasks and to share their recommendations with me by early 1997.

The Task Force on the Quality of Student Experience has demonstrated the need for paying attention to our students’ lives outside the classroom and in particular the need to build a stronger sense of community. It recognized that much has been accomplished during the past year in career counseling and in enhancing space for student activities. However, more needs to be done. Accordingly:

- We will press ahead with improvements to our dormitories, food service, non-academic programming, and recreational facilities. These efforts will be lead by Vice President Arthur Sussman, who will report on these initiatives to the Council of the University Senate in the Fall.

- We must begin planning now the infrastructure that will be needed to accommodate a larger undergraduate student body, for example, classrooms and teaching laboratories. This must fit with our plans for the entire campus, including faculty research space. I am asking the Provost to launch the development of a comprehensive physical master plan for the University. This planning effort, which will require faculty involvement and leadership, should be completed by July 1998.

Progress along the path that I have described also requires that we be more successful in communicating the profound worth of what we have to offer. I am concerned that while the University receives the same attention for faculty scholarship as its peers, we are much less familiar to large members of prospective students or to the broader public. This must change. Therefore:

- We must devise more effective means of reaching potential applicants and convincing them to apply to – and then matriculate at – the College. Dean Boyer and I will report to the College Council in the Fall on our progress in this area.

The course I am recommending is not without risk, but the greater risk is to remain on a course that will not sustain excellence. Belief in the values that make the University of Chicago distinctive must be translated into actions that provide the necessary support for these values. I ask the faculty of the University to come...
together, as we have always done, to confront the challenges facing us. Consistent with that tradition, I welcome the robust debate that I know will follow about how best to proceed.

I am confident that the course I have described, when pursued with understanding, dedication and enthusiasm, will enable us to achieve our highest aspirations. I foresee a University of Chicago that is widely known for drawing the most outstanding undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, who come to it for the exceptional education that it provides; a University that is generating resources at a level necessary for long-run support of excellence and where this capacity is understood as a strength. When one adds to the mix an institutional culture that is truly dedicated to ideas, to discovery and to intellectual community, we assure our continued leadership in scholarship and education.

I look forward to joining with you to realize this promise.

Sincerely,

Hugo F. Sonnenschein

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