

**Our Quantum Leap**  
**Becoming the Most Entrepreneurial Innovative Community-engaged**  
**Catholic University in the Midwest**

**I. Welcome and Recognitions**

Thank you. I'm truly honored to be standing here before you today. I appreciate everyone for coming to celebrate Detroit Mercy.

I'd like to recognize the Jesuits and Sisters of Mercy for your unwavering commitment to this university.

Thank you for your spiritual guidance and wisdom as we work together as stewards of this amazing institution of higher education.

Thank you to all our alumni, friends of the University, and donors for your unwavering support. So many of you have volunteered your time, talent and treasure. You epitomize what it means to be a Titan.

And thank you to our trustees and advisory board members for your continued leadership in guiding this institution forward and challenging us to be the best version of ourselves.

Thank you to our faculty, staff, University Leadership Council, and the President's Cabinet who continue to ensure that we provide a world-class education to our students. I appreciate your hard work and passion, and how you've welcomed me to the Detroit Mercy family.

Thank you to our students for bringing your energy, curiosity, and excitement to this university as you chart your own beautiful journey in this world.

I could not be more excited or honored to be your president.

And finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Lechia, and son, Seth, for all your love and support.

**II. Sisters of Mercy and Jesuit Mission/Why Explanation**

We at the University of Detroit Mercy have a rich tradition of Catholic intellectual inquiry.

It's grounded in our history in the city of Detroit, and the legacy shared with us by the Sisters of Mercy and the Society of Jesus.

Their founders, Catherine McAuley and St. Ignatius of Loyola, were passionate in their desires to share the gifts they were given by God.

Both Catherine and Ignatius relied upon education and faith to use their gifts to improve the lives of God's people.

With higher education under increased scrutiny, we hear the importance of developing our intellect and faith as we approach the complex realities of our time.

Our mission – as a Catholic university in the Mercy and Jesuit traditions – is a living reality felt among our faculty, staff, alumni, and students.

It is expressed through our religious celebrations and within our intellectual debates in the classroom.

It is our tradition to see the needs that exist in our community and put our gifts to use for the service of all.

The Sisters of Mercy and the Society of Jesus have shared with our university community the value of the human person, fully alive.

Whether we have been part of this community for one year, one decade, one lifetime — we must continue our work, to educate, to strengthen in spirit, to work for the common good.

As Catherine McAuley once said: “We can never say ‘it is enough.’”

Ignatius' counsel: “Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam,” – *“For the greater glory of God,”* was to encourage exactly what Mother McAuley names: ..... *We are to continue in the work.*

God continually calls our gifts forward for the service of others.

With the support of these two faithful founders, the University of Detroit Mercy community generously and passionately responds to that invitation.

### **III. Listening Tour Takeaways**

Throughout my career, one of the things I've realized is that you must learn before you can lead.

My tenure at UDM began with a comprehensive listening tour with students, faculty, staff, alumni, current and former Trustees, advisory board members, and influencers in the region to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a Titan.

I appreciate all the questions, criticisms, and ideas – they will help us move forward together.

What's been most inspiring to me is that nearly every single person I connected with asked: "How can I help?"

Everyone wanted to talk about how we can work together to tackle the challenges we face and make a difference in the world through big ideas.

One theme that was consistent in almost all of my listening sessions was that "we all need to work together to share the UDM story, and ensure that we speak with one voice about the impact Detroit Mercy has on students, and we will."

I'm pleased to announce that we have embarked on a multi-phase marketing study and will be launching a major brand campaign for the University of Detroit Mercy.

We'll be working with Marlena Peleo-Lazar, '72 and former Chief Brand Officer at McDonalds and other successful alumni assisting MarComm in a refreshed brand campaign for the University that will bring national recognition, increased alumni support, and more student applications.

#### **IV. Where We Are: 1 of 4 Top-Ranked Universities in Michigan**

As we embark on our next chapter, we must first recognize where we stand today.

We are a comprehensive university with tremendous undergraduate educational offerings, and terrific graduate and professional programs.

We continue to offer our students the high-quality education and career pathways to reach their full potential.

Nationally, we stand out in academics as one of four top-ranked universities in Michigan.

I've served at larger universities and I've served at smaller ones.

Detroit Mercy is at that sweet spot. We have big school amenities, but students feel like a part of a tight-knit community that values them. It's a place where everyone can make a big difference.

It's time to show the world what we already know – there's no better place to find your life's calling and impact our corner of the world than the University of Detroit Mercy.

#### **V. Where We Want to Be: The Most Entrepreneurial Innovative Community-engaged Catholic University in the Midwest**

Every major Midwest metro area has a great Catholic university. In Chicago you have DePaul and Loyola, in Milwaukee – Marquette, and in Cincinnati –Xavier.

In our city, you have Detroit Mercy and we're looking to live up to that role in a major way.

I've said this many times in my nine months here. We are on the cusp of going from really, really good – to great.

All the pieces are in place to make Detroit Mercy the preferred college destination of the Detroit Region, much like Marquette and Xavier are in theirs.

I'd like to thank my predecessor President Emeritus Antoine Garibaldi for all he did to position Detroit Mercy for success.

In taking that step, we'll be responding to the realities around us.

The world is in a state of flux and our society and country are experiencing unprecedented transformation as we adjust to post-pandemic life.

My vision is for Detroit Mercy to be the premier entrepreneurial innovative community-engaged Catholic university in the Midwest.

We must serve as a model for what the post-pandemic University can be.

## **VI. How We Get There: Build on Our Strengths to Solve Challenges**

The million-dollar question is: How do we get there?

I have to admit that I've done my share of pacing the floor at 2 a.m., unable to sleep, and mulling decisions we need to make.

As an independent Catholic university in today's world, we face challenges, **but I'm incredibly excited because we have so many more opportunities than challenges.**

The road ahead demands that we tap into our entrepreneurial side and put our God-given talents to work. We must build around our strengths.

Entrepreneurs, like scientists, solve problems ... so do Titans.

As I've said around campus many times, the world needs Titans now more than ever. So, let's talk about some of the challenges we are uniquely positioned to solve.

**Challenge:** We're all aware of the extreme staffing shortages in the health care industry. Three grueling years of the pandemic have increased burnout, and the need for nurses is extremely high.

Allied health professions, such as respiratory therapy, radiation therapy, & physical therapy, are also seeing major shortages, which is making it harder for people to get basic care.

I've had several health care executives contact me about the glaring staffing shortage. Open positions number in the tens of thousands and they are scrambling to fill them.

Our job is to help bolster the health care talent pipeline to meet these growing workforce development needs.

Our solution is to provide cutting-edge curriculum and programs that produce top-notch talent to fill these in-demand careers.

We have an outstanding nursing program with degrees for those just entering the field all the way up to the doctoral level.

Our physician assistant program was one of the first in the country and recently celebrated its 50-year anniversary.

We are also planning a second dental clinic in a Southeast Michigan community of need to allow our dental school to grow.

In doing so, we will help meet the demand for care and provide our students top-notch experiences as they enter their profession.

We have also responded to Macomb Community College's request for proposals to offer a bachelor's degree completion program in nursing on their Clinton Township campus.

Earlier this month Crain's Detroit Business visited our campus to report on our efforts to address the workforce development challenges facing our regions' health care systems.

We'll continue to look for innovative ways to define health care education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Challenge: Racial Inequities and Social Injustice**

Another major problem society faces is long-standing systemic racial inequities and social injustices.

There's a growing discrepancy between those who have a lot and those who have a little.

This widening wealth gap is not only unfair and immoral, but also hurting our society and holding our country back from reaching its full collective potential.

We have a unique role to play.

Education has long proven to be the best route for people to improve their lot in life and move up the social and economic ladder.

Institutions like ours must continue to provide a well-rounded education and career pathways for students of all skill levels, backgrounds, means, and experiences.

UDM's School of Law is leading the way by advancing social justice within metro Detroit by providing legal assistance to residents of Detroit and surrounding communities through 12 clinics.

Each year, students provide more than 35,000 hours of pro bono legal services to the community.

Nevertheless, Detroit Mercy must do more to help to create a more equitable community and workforce that offers economic and social mobility to all.

**Another challenge is that the State of Michigan and Detroit Region are lagging our peers in postsecondary educational attainment.**

Our region and state have a goal of having 60% of our adult residents with a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030 – this includes cutting the racial equity gap in education by half.

This goal is crucial for our region and state to stay globally competitive and offer vibrant communities and cities where our residents can lead quality lives.

Detroit Mercy is committed to helping Michigan achieve this goal by continuing to offer pathways to the post-secondary credentials and degrees demanded by today's workforce.

We are committed to meeting people where they are. To go to the local high schools, the community centers, the block clubs and other places to connect directly with Detroit residents and show them the career pathways we offer.

When you meet people where they are, when you show them a path forward and how you to access it – you create hope. There is not a more transformative energy in the world than hope.

It's our job to bring hope to the community we serve – one student and one family at a time.

Given Michigan's population challenges, reaching these attainment goals is going to require a balance of recruiting both traditional college-age students but also helping adults upskill or return to school to complete their degrees.

Detroit Mercy has programs for veterans and other adults returning for credentials or upskilling that we need to expand.

We must continue to build cost-effective, flexible pathways for adult learners who have completed some college credit to return to school and earn a degree.

**We also need an increased focus on first-generation college students.**

My father had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. He was street smart and worked hard. He wanted to be sure I had opportunities.

Because my mother was ill during my childhood, my father would drop me off on Saturdays at the library, and Good Samaritan librarians took me under their wing and looked out for me.

From the time I was five to 12 years old I spent an enormous amount of time at the library. It's a big reason why I was able to succeed in school and go to college when my parents hadn't.

As the first person in my family to go to college, I remember my first day at a large state school with 25,000 students.

I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be doing and almost left.

My wife Lechia had a similar situation. Neither of her parents went to high school, and our brothers were both high school dropouts who eventually went back to get their GEDs and went on to be successful.

These experiences instilled in us an understanding of what barriers are there for first-generation students and families.

Together, let's build the environment where students from lower socioeconomic standing can become the first of their families to attend and graduate college.

That's going to take a commitment of this entire institution from executive leadership to alumni to students and faculty.

It's going to require fundraising and new partnerships with foundations and state and federal resources.

It's going to take a lot of work, but we are uniquely positioned to lead, to provide opportunities to students that aspire to be the first in their family to attend college and graduate.

There are many people here in Detroit who deserve that opportunity – and Detroit Mercy should find ways to make that happen.

**VII. Strategic Initiatives to Launch Detroit Mercy Forward**

At Detroit Mercy, we're Catholic with a big C.

We embrace all Catholicism has to offer, its social teachings and intellectual traditions rooted in theology and philosophy.

We are the Sisters of Mercy. We are the Jesuits. We are also Catholic with a lower c, which means we cast a big tent.

We welcome all backgrounds, all religions and believe that interfaith and interreligious dialogue helps us learn from each other.

Under my leadership, Detroit Mercy is always going to be a student-centered university and the home for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. It's going to be a place where first-generation students feel at home and that they can and will succeed.

We need to continue to internationalize and diversify the campus and broaden our student population.

This can be achieved through several ways. In my previous role in Pennsylvania, we were the first college to partner with the [Dream.US initiative to provide scholarships to DACA](#) students.

That's something we can replicate at the University of Detroit Mercy as we build a broader, more inclusive community. We've already formed a partnership with the Michigan Hispanic Collaborative and the work of DTE's JoAnn Chávez. It's paying off as our applications from Hispanic and Latino young scholars has increased significantly.

It's one of many ways we can attract and retain more students.

### **Community Building Through Championship Athletics**

We also want to strengthen Titan athletics programs because of the role it plays in community building.

Sports are a great unifier; they transcend differences and bring people of all backgrounds together to rally around a common cause.

We need more of that in the world today – and I think having an outstanding sports program will go a long way to enhancing the Detroit Mercy experience and help further unite the city.

College athletics has been described as “the front porch of the university” because it is the most visible part of American higher education for many onlookers.

We carry the “Detroit” brand on our jerseys with pride, and we take that responsibility seriously.



The city is ready to rally around championship sports and as proud Titans, we should be at the center of that.

### **The Titan Guarantee: Experiential learning**

As part of our next strategic plan, we intend to launch a new program we will call the Titan Guarantee that will serve as a major differentiator in what we offer prospective students.

The Titan Guarantee is the promise that every four-year student who attends our school will have a high-impact, experiential education experience before they graduate.

Whether an internship or Coop with an employer in the city or some other hands-on experience relevant to their field [such as Clinical Practicum or UGRAD research] – the Titan Guarantee will ensure our graduates leave ready to enter the workforce and make an impact.

It'll also ensure they leave here plugged into Detroit's professional network, ensuring the odds they stay in, work in, and succeed in our region.

### **Advocacy: A Louder voice in Lansing and Washington D.C.**

Reaching our goals also requires a louder voice in Lansing and Washington D.C.

Like they say in many political circles – if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

We need to have a more robust voice at all levels of government – from the city of Detroit to Lansing to Washington D.C.

We cannot stay on the sideline as major policy decisions impacting higher education are made.

We need to bring our state and federal elected leaders to campus and see firsthand what it means to be a Titan and the impact we have on our students and community.

As a first step, we've partnered with McAllister & Quinn, a Washington, DC-based federal lobbying and grant writing firm to assist us with our governmental relations.

### **Titan's Innovation Fund**

During my listening tour many people I met with had an idea about how to make this university better. Many of these ideas had gone unvoiced because they didn't know whether the University would be able to fund them.

Today, I'm proud to announce the Titan Innovation Fund.

Thanks to a few generous donors, we are launching this fund to provide grants that empower faculty, staff, and students to try new things.

Such funds have proven to be a successful catalyst of innovation and change at campuses around the country.

For example: At a previous institution, there was a gap in the retention and graduation rate of male students of color.

After identifying this issue, a group of faculty and staff instituted living and learning communities for men of color to give these students increased social and academic support.

At Detroit Mercy, the Titan Innovation Fund will provide seed money to allow for out-of-the-box thinking, pilot projects, partnerships and new programs that will benefit the students and the University as a whole.

I am excited to see what our creative Titan community does with it.

**VIII. Call to Action: Detroit Mercy's Quantum Leap To Become the Most Entrepreneurial Innovative Community-engaged Catholic University in the Midwest and to Change the World**

It's been my experience that every institution has inflection points where you have the opportunity to make a quantum leap forward.

We have the foundation set by my predecessors, and the Jesuits and the Sisters of Mercy, as well as the faculty, staff, alumni and the students.

Detroit Mercy has everything it needs to take that quantum leap and we all have a role to play.

**Alumni:** Be brand ambassadors championing Detroit Mercy in social, political, and personal circles.

You have tremendous influence and can open doors for UDM and our students and create educational and professional opportunities for them.

**Faculty:** Continue to push the envelope, bring out your most innovative ideas to help mold the next generation of leaders. Design micro-credentials [badges & certificates] to serve adult learners and employers.

Schools can only be as good as those teachers who work with students every single day – and I have no doubt you'll continue to deliver. Nine months into the Presidency, our alumni and students constantly share with me the wonderful work you do in the classroom, lab, studio, clinic...

**Students:** Seek your role of service in the world using the talents God gave you to create a better world – and solve the big problems, so your children and grandchildren don't have to.

Use the liberal arts education you learned here to think broadly and from a place of compassion to leave your imprint on the world.

Take the advice of St. Ignatius of Loyola and continue to work for the greater glory of God.

Remember Catherine McAuley's wisdom – we can never say it is enough.

## **IX. In Closing: So Many Possibilities, One Goal – Taking the Titan Quantum Leap**

We have an exciting journey ahead and I'm honored and humbled to be part of it.

Our Jesuit and Mercy mission will serve as our compass as we work together to be the best possible versions of ourselves and help move this university, city, and region forward.

My feeling is best summed up by the words of student Samaiyah Abdur-Rahman. She has used her talents to start a clothing line that is guided by her spirituality and earning some much-deserved recognition.

Samaiyah's words so perfectly encapsulate where we want our students to be – but also where we are today as the University of Detroit Mercy.

Samaiyah recently stated: "There are just so many possibilities for me right now, once I accomplish one goal, I just keep asking myself: 'OK, what's next?'"

That's the same question we need to be asking ourselves for the rest of our lives.

What's next for us as Titans? What's next at the University of Detroit Mercy?

As your president, I'm telling you ....

What's next is us becoming the most entrepreneurial innovative community-engaged Catholic University in the Midwest.

What's next is serving as a beacon of hope and opportunity and making our city, our region, and our world a better place.

What's next is our quantum leap. Today is an **invitation** to all Titans to join the journey.

I couldn't be more excited to be taking that leap with you.

Thank you,

Godspeed,

Go Titans, the World Needs Us More than Ever!