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IN OUR OPINION

# Top schools can boost state with research power

JUNE 2, 2008

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Didn't think so, but certainly everyone in Michigan and much of the world beyond has heard of the state's three largest universities, Michigan State, the University of Michigan and Wayne State University.

Well, the URC is all three, working together in the University Research Corridor, creating through cooperation one of the big keys to Michigan's economic future. The universities have always mattered, but their combined effort can matter far more -- generating ideas that can become marketable products, drawing millions of research dollars, and attracting talent with the kind of limitless vision that Michigan so desperately needs.

This is not to minimize the substantial contributions the state's other universities make to their communities and the economy. All the institutions are turning out the workforce that can change Michigan's financial and cultural complexion.

But the Big Three combined are a powerhouse to be regarded on par with the industrial mainstays that built Michigan.

Their leaders spent last week stressing the collective value of the URC and its even greater potential for the Michigan business and political leaders who were gathered on Mackinac Island for the Detroit Regional

Chamber's annual policy conference. Together, the schools make a strong case, as evidenced by a report released Thursday detailing their contributions in just one key area, alternative energy.



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The URC -- which has some work to do to establish itself in the public mind as a consortium on par with, say, the university-based Research Triangle Park that has transformed North Carolina's economy and image -- garnered almost \$80 million in research grants for alternative energy projects in 2007. The report prepared for the URC by Anderson Economic Group said that more than half the grants the schools received were focused on fuels, propulsion or power, all integral to the future of the automotive industry.

These ranged from biomass conversion at MSU, to a U-M project to develop a solar film that can be applied like spray paint, to WSU efforts to combine wind, solar and fuel-cell technology into new power-generation systems.

"We think we are an asset that can be leveraged more," said U-M President Mary Sue Coleman. That's not just a plea for more money in an era of declining state support. It's a call for inclusion in all of Michigan's economic development strategies. Indeed, with these institutions around, why would the state consider investing in, seeding or offering incentives for any idea without bouncing it off the URC to see what role the schools can play?

The university presidents are trying to topple the ivory towers of academia and get their good, smart people on the front lines of Michigan's economic battle. They have the intellectual resources. They have a commitment that can be a model for the rest of Michigan to eschew turf battles in favor of working together for the common good.

To whatever extent the political will can be mustered and the financial resources marshaled, this is an effort that the state as a whole must optimize and encourage.

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