**CLAS Start Up Meeting**

**August 26, 2021**

Good morning. I was very glad to have the opportunity to greet some of you this morning under the tent—I continue to delight in these moments when we can connect face-to-face.

I want to offer a land acknowledgment appropriate to our campus before we proceed. The language of the acknowledgement explains its purpose.

*I recognize the People of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples on whose land we are gathered. The Three Fires People are indigenous to this land which means that this is their ancestral territory. We are guests on their land and one way to practice right relations is to develop genuine ways to acknowledge the histories and traditions of the people who originated here first, who are still here, and who tend to the land always.*

So. Welcome back. It’s fall 2021, and over the last year we conducted a grand experiment together to surface our shared values and match our aspirations to those values. In CLAS, that is no small undertaking. This was shared governance at scale. I very much appreciate the 500 staff and faculty who participated in our visioning conversations, and particularly those who brought our thinking to the next level—the group that did the qualitative analysis of our Jamboards, the two strategic innovation groups, and the facilitators and PSS staff who made it possible for us to work collaboratively. If we were together in person, I would have this group of 55 staff and faculty leaders stand. Instead, you will have seen their names scrolling on slides as you joined the meeting today. You will be hearing about our draft vision and plan from some of them in just a few minutes.

It is fitting for a dean, especially a relatively new one, to tell you what she heard from all of these discussions. There were definitely some recurring themes.

The most overarching of these is that you continue to have a deep commitment to liberal education. I share that commitment, and I was pleased to hear it come up again and again and in many different guises. I can confidently say that we have high level agreement about this value.

As I noted in my remarks last spring, you are committed to a future of growing access, more inclusion, and greater equity for our students, our colleagues, ourselves. You are looking for relationship-rich opportunities that will empower our students, often delivered through experiences, including high-impact practices such as community-based learning, on-campus and off-campus internships, and undergraduate research. You are also looking for relationship-rich experiences in your own work: you seek a stronger sense of community on campus, and you wish to connect with one another, with alumni, and with communities in our city, our region and our world. Many of us who are faculty want to have the flexibility to pursue teaching, scholarship, and service in creative combinations that make sense for us and our units at different points in time, not in rigidly equal parts every year. Many of us who are staff seek more ample and equitable opportunities for professional development, growth and advancement. The pandemic has prompted self-reckoning, self-reflection—perhaps that is why we seem to be looking for new ways to realize our personal mission, fulfill our own sense of purpose, and balance our lives across the arc of our careers.

Activating these values will take some planning, and some funding, and some structural change. For instance, if students are to have real access to internships, lab work, field schools, community-based learning and other transformative experiences, we will have to eliminate the financial barriers to their participation. To teach collaboratively, we will require more flexible spaces and different ways of assigning faculty load and student credit hours. Not easy. But when we come together to define a vision, and to align our values with our resources and our development efforts, and to start critical conversations with colleagues in offices across the university, the changes we imagine become possible.

Some of you will be excited to dig into change-making. Some of you are probably thinking that this sounds like a lot of work, or that we don’t need to change anything at all. I suspect that most of us are feeling that this beautiful Michigan summer was not quite long enough for the recovery we needed. I want to reassure you that we are not launching willy-nilly into action. This year is for confirming our vision, refining our strategies and tactics, ensuring that we are aligned with Reach Higher 2025, and laying the groundwork for successful implementation of our plan over the next several years. Work on our priorities—our defined first steps—will begin in summer 2022.

As I promised back in April, today we are presenting you with a draft vision and plan that reflects the many conversations among faculty and staff that have occurred since January, and that offers a frame for our conversations this year. After the overview today, the draft vision and plan will be posted on the CLAS strategic planning website. These conversations will then continue at the unit level over the next month or two, and the plan will be refined in light of those conversations. Your wisdom will continue to shape our college’s way forward. While CLAS will have a shared vision and an agreed-upon set of strategies and tactics, not every unit will have identical priorities or be involved in every aspect of every initiative. This discernment of how best to be involved—and how to use this opportunity to build on your current work and expertise—will be part of the unit-level discussions.

We academics are known to question things. In fact, our liberal education teaches us that thinking critically and creatively lies at the core of our humanity. It’s how we live. Some of us have even been known to question the value of strategic planning. Fancy that.

If that thought has crossed your mind, I ask you to consider our process in another way. As a community of educators and scholars—as a group of people who have chosen careers committed to teaching, to learning, and to students—we must come together every so often to think critically and creatively about what we do. And now certainly feels like every so often. We are living in difficult times. We bear witness to the catastrophe of holding onto commonplaces that have become existential threats. We bear witness to the essential work of making community—and making change—through listening and acting. This is our time to think and to act, to align our future with our values.

I will now hand the meeting over to five faculty members who were part of the Strategy and Innovation Group work this summer to share our draft vision statement, our proposed five commitments, and the story of the process we’ve engaged in thus far. They are Andrew Spear from Philosophy, Sigrid Danielson from Visual and Media Arts, Mikhila Wildey from Psychology, Amy Ferdinand Stolley from Writing, and Chris Pearl from Biomedical Sciences. I appreciate their willingness to present, and I welcome your curiosity about what they have to say.