Corcoran, UMD and the Arts

February 20, 2014

Dear faculty and staff:

As you know by now, the Corcoran (Gallery of Art and College of Art + Design) announced yesterday that its functions would be taken over, respectively, by the National Gallery of Art and George Washington University, should the parties reach agreement on the details. According to the Washington Post, the 174-year old Corcoran will then cease to exist as an independent institution.

In April 2013, I informed you that UMD would explore a partnership with the Corcoran on ways to preserve, and transform, the Gallery and the College as a single entity. Our mutual goal was an artistic, educational, and scholarly collaboration among equals that would benefit the students and faculty of both institutions. We would sponsor joint arts and culture programming for the Washington community and the state of Maryland. With this partnership, UMD would also gain access to a landmark building, across from the White House, to magnify our presence in the nation's capital.

Over the summer, an 18-member task force of UMD faculty, staff, and administrators worked together with their Corcoran counterparts on how they could bring together art and science, technology and design, and education and scholarship, to spark innovation.

We met with directors of art museums from around the country, and with presidents of art colleges from around the world, to get their perspectives on how UMD-Corcoran might best thrive. We retained consultants on art museums and professional art schools. We sought counsel on the complexities of Federal, Maryland, and District of Columbia law and how to structure the proposed partnership.

We talked with several universities in the U.S. and Europe that had successfully partnered with professional art schools. The main lesson we learned was that it took at least one year -- often two or more years -- of conversations for these institutions to complete such a devilishly complex transaction, because it blends organizations of different scales and cultures.

We did comprehensive analyses of the budgets, management decisions, capital renovation needs, and fund-raising performance of the Corcoran. We made multi-year projections -- with the input of Corcoran staff -- on what it would take to turn around the Corcoran's finances and operations. We met with former supporters of the Corcoran, and potential new donors, to gauge their interest in re-engaging or engaging with the Corcoran if it partnered with UMD.

We sought feedback from our stakeholders. We met with senior elected officials, as well as community and business leaders, in Maryland and in Washington, D.C.; with faculty, staff, students, and University Senate leaders; and with alumni representatives and friends of UMD. We garnered majority support for this joint venture with the Corcoran.

Since last summer, at the request of the Corcoran, some of our academic deans and professional staff have worked on a pro bono basis to assist and/or consult with their Corcoran counterparts on admissions, enrollment, registration, information technology, and marketing and communications.
A special committee of the University System of Maryland's Board of Regents, as well as the USM Chancellor and his staff, oversaw and assisted in our due diligence. We appreciate their engagement and support.

Throughout this process, we stayed in continuing communication with the Corcoran. In December 2013, we formally proposed the following:

-- A true partnership (a "99-year marriage" of equals) with shared decision-making and shared responsibilities for co-management of the Gallery and the College under the continued auspices of the Corcoran trustees;

-- Immediate and substantial funding to erase Corcoran's persisting operating deficits;

-- Underwriting a substantial share of the cost of renovating the iconic Flagg building;

-- Joint fundraising to cover the balance of the renovation costs, with UMD providing the fundraising personnel and expertise that Corcoran currently lacks;

-- Professional and management expertise to help carry out needed administrative efficiencies at the Corcoran;

-- Future investments to grow the programming at the Corcoran, including hiring of a world-class museum director and a distinguished college president, each reporting to separate boards of the Corcoran.

Two weeks ago, we had a cordial and productive discussion with Corcoran trustees on aspects of our proposal. We were awaiting Corcoran's written response when they called us yesterday, shortly before their announcement that the Gallery and the College would be taken over separately.

We are, of course, disappointed that the Corcoran will be no more. We understand that a partnership is harder than a takeover, involving mutual and ongoing obligations and risks as well as potential. In the end, not all courtships are destined to end in marriage. We wish NGA and GWU well as they keep alive the venerable name and legacy of the Corcoran.

To our UMD colleagues and friends, thank you for all your steadfast dedication, work, and support for this attempted partnership and for the excellence of our state's flagship university.

The University of Maryland continues on its upward trajectory as a front-rank research institution propelled by STEAM -- science, technology, engineering, ARTS, and mathematics. We will continue to explore partnerships with arts organizations to further advance the eminence and impact of our arts and humanities programs.

Sincerely,

Wallace D. Loh
President, University of Maryland