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TRADITION, THEN AND NOW

**CONVOCATION ADDRESS by Donald N. Langenberg
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA ST. PETERSBURG
October 28, 2004**

All of us here know that, contrary to popular opinion, the year really begins in September, not January. We call it the “academic” year to avoid confusion among our non-academic friends, but we know that the annual rhythm of the spheres starts a new cycle when our classrooms fill with students and our faculty begin organizing the new year’s first departmental meetings.

Unfortunately, the annual rhythm of our particular sphere also brings to us at the beginning of the academic year the beginning of the Atlantic hurricane season. This year Mother Nature has been unusually unkind to the citizens of Florida, and so we find ourselves celebrating the new year a little later than usual.

Nevertheless, this is an occasion to recognize new beginnings, a time to welcome both young and not-so-young newcomers to our intellectual community, a time to celebrate our past accomplishments and to plot our courses to future successes. Convocations like this are traditional hallmarks of each university’s new academic year. I am honored and pleased to be given the opportunity to share with you this beginning of your new year.

The context in which a university enters a new year is rich with tradition. This new year is but the latest in a succession extending back almost a millennium. There is no more

obvious a demonstration of that than the fact that those of us here on the platform are dressed in costumes originally designed to keep medieval monks warm in unheated drafty halls during a north-European winter. I think you will agree that a tradition that calls for such garb in tropical Florida in the twenty-first century is a powerful tradition.

I am fond of quoting lines from Clark Kerr's Carnegie Foundation study in the 1970s: "There are sixty-two social institutions in the Western world that have survived in continuous existence since the year 1530. Two of them are churches, two are governments -- and fifty-eight are universities." That speaks volumes about the durability and resilience -- and more important, the adaptability -- of universities. Universities are not static unchanging institutions. They do change, they do recreate themselves in response to the environments in which they find themselves, more successfully than any other major social institution.

It is true that the process of change in academe can be frustratingly slow from the perspective of the non-academic world. These days, especially, we find ourselves bombarded with media reports that this corporation has totally reorganized itself almost overnight -- or gone bankrupt -- and that government has precipitously reversed a long-standing policy. If they can do that, why can't the university? You know the refrain, "Why can't a university operate more like a business?" And you all will probably recognize the reality behind the light-bulb joke, "Q: How many professors does it take to change a light bulb? A: Whaddy mean, "change"?"

Well, universities are deliberate, and usually careful, in their changes. Their functions long ago earned the commonly accepted public status of “societal necessities and social imperatives.” They’re rather good at what they do, and they are rightly reluctant to change too much too fast. (I cannot resist noting that they are not alone among important human institutions in this respect. A colleague once pursued a question I had raised, and found that there are more than sixty breweries in Bavaria that have been in continuous operation since 1530, one of them since the eleventh century. I guess what’s really important usually survives!)

But, as I said, universities do change, and new universities like this one change more, and faster. I’d like to spend the rest of my time here suggesting how the exciting new directions this university is pursuing can be seen as both innovative and creative, even radical, and at the same time fit comfortably into academic traditions that are at least a century old.

First, a bit of history, as I see it. In my opinion, there have been just three watershed developments during the first millennium of university history. The first was the recognition in the eleventh century that there is value added in gathering different faculties together into a single institution called a “university.” Then those faculties were typically those of theology, law, and medicine. Thus, the mission of the earliest universities was viewed as preparing young men -- yes, just young men -- for the learned professions. Some of our colleagues today would call them “trade schools.” The notion that a university’s mission should also include education in what we would call the liberal arts and sciences did not emerge until about half a millennium later.

The second watershed event was based on the idea that a university should not only transmit and disseminate existing knowledge by educating and training the young, but should also discover new knowledge through scholarship and research. What is commonly recognized as the world's first true research university, the University of Berlin, was founded in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt in a brief but extraordinarily productive stint as a bureaucrat in Prussia's interior ministry.

The third – and my favorite – watershed event was the inspiration of an Illinois farmer – and teacher, newspaper editor, college professor, and Yale graduate – Jonathan Baldwin Turner. In the mid-19th century, Turner wrote an essay titled, “Plan for a State University for the Industrial Classes.” Turner recognized that his country was in the midst of a transition from an agrarian society to one that depended on what we would today call knowledge-based industries. He saw that if the United States was to navigate that transition successfully, it would need well trained and educated workers and leaders in entirely new fields. And that meant educating the “children of the industrial classes.”

Turner was both an academic and a practical man, and he realized that if his ideas were to stand any chance of practical implementation, he had to do more than publish an essay. So he found a patron, a New England congressman named Justin Morrill, whom he persuaded to introduce federal legislation mandating grants of Federal lands to the states to support the development of colleges that would educate the common people in “agriculture and the mechanic arts.” I need not tell any of you that major higher education issues are always

ultimately political, and so it was with Morrill's bill. It was first introduced in the 1850s, when it failed to pass because the congressmen representing the southern states were not persuaded that there was any value in educating anyone other than the sons of privileged families. When the Civil War removed those congressmen from the Congress, Morrill reintroduced his bill. It passed, and the Morrill Land-Grant Act was signed into law by President Lincoln in 1862.

I would assert that that event was a major contributor to the ascendancy of the United States to social and economic preeminence among the world's nations. It led to the foundation of most of our nation's great public universities. It created one of the best educated and most highly-skilled citizenries in the world. And it established cultural centers that have enriched the lives of individuals and communities with the fundamental values essential to a great nation.

For me, the case of agriculture is particularly interesting. In the course of the development of the land-grant universities (often bearing the name, "A & M," after "agriculture and the mechanic arts"), it was recognized that they needed research organizations focused on practical agricultural research, and also institutional mechanisms for translating the results of such research into action on the farm. Thus, subsequent federal legislation created Agricultural Experiment Stations and Cooperative Extension Services, jointly funded by the federal government and the states.

Early in my life, I saw the results of these actions “up close and personal.” My maternal grandfather was an Iowa farmer who had left school after third grade. One day when I was about ten, I was with him in a cornfield when a pickup truck pulled up on the gravel road outside the fence. Out jumped a man in overalls, and he and my grandfather had a conversation over the fence. I was old enough to recognize that, although some of it was just social, much of it was pretty technical. The man talked about “the professors” and what they said my grandfather should be doing with the new-fangled hybrid corn. My grandfather told the man about some questions he had, and the man said he’d come back with answers. When he left, I asked my grandfather who that was. My grandfather said, “Oh, that was Fred, the County Agent.”

Not until much later did I recognize that what I had witnessed was a consequence of the Morrill Act in action. “The professors” were faculty at what would become my undergraduate *Alma Mater*, the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. (It’s gone high falutin’ lately, and is now called Iowa State University of Science and Technology.) As a matter of family pride, I would note that my grandfather, with his third-grade education, was later recognized as Iowa Master Farmer of the Year.

What I saw that day was a vignette of how the Morrill Act and the universities it engendered created our nation’s first truly high-tech industry, agriculture. Among other things, it fueled a drastic occupational shift from a nation in which half the population was on the farm to one in which about 2% of our workers manage to feed all the rest of us and much of the world in addition.

The three watershed events I have described led to the academic mantra that we still repeat in almost every one of our universities: “Our mission is teaching, research, and service!”

Now, I suspect you may be thinking, “That’s all very interesting, but that was then and now is now. What’s that got to do with us here in our young university in St. Petersburg in the twenty-first century?” Let me spend the rest of my time trying to convince you that the academic traditions whose origins I have described are still vital, and apply here as much as they do in any university, whether it is decades or centuries old. But we must understand that those traditions can and do manifest themselves in new and different ways in modern circumstances. We must also understand that each of us, both individually and as institutional leaders, has a responsibility -- indeed an obligation -- to contribute to the continuous redefinition and transformation of those hallowed academic traditions to suit our time and our place.

How? Let me suggest an answer to that question.

I’ve just noted that the third watershed event in the history of universities, the Morrill Land-Grant Act, occurred at a time when most Americans lived and worked in small towns and on farms. Today, most Americans live in cities both large and small, and in the suburban communities that surround them. They live in metropolitan areas. And they work in offices and factories, in businesses that manufacture and sell things or provide services. The economic machinery of our society has changed drastically during the past

century. It depends less on exploitation of natural resources and more on the exploitation of knowledge, creativity, and ingenuity. And technology has become crucial to success for our nation and all its citizens.

Actually, that's not a fundamental change. Technology has always been key to the progress of humanity. I have argued elsewhere that technology is the defining characteristic of our species. Whether it is the invention of language and stone tools, or the domestication of animals and plants, or the invention of the steam engine and the computer microchip, technology has always defined the species *Homo Sapiens*. What has changed during the last century is the rate at which technology advances. And that acceleration of change has both been driven by -- and is driving -- education in general and universities specifically. It is directly traceable to the broadening of educational opportunity to the whole of our population, and the success of our universities in creating new knowledge and applying it. That is what has made education at all levels the key factor contributing to our societal and economic success and prosperity.

So how should we in academe respond to these circumstances? There is nothing to be gained by lamenting the loss of past glories. But we need not abandon our old traditions. We need only figure out how to adapt them to the new realities that confront us. We can remain faithful to our mantra, "teaching, research, and service."

But.....!

We need to teach new things, and we need to learn how to teach better, and cheaper.

The creation of new knowledge through scholarship and research has never been more important. That must be a continuing responsibility of the faculties of every university, not just those of a select few universities.

And, not least, the great tradition of service exemplified by Jonathan Baldwin Turner's vision of the land-grant mission must be reengineered and expanded. We long ago learned how to engage ourselves with agriculture in an agrarian nation. More recently we've become pretty good at linking our scientists and engineers to other high-tech industries. Now we must learn how to do that with every economic and social sector in our nation. And because good deeds begin at home, it is crucial that universities tend carefully to the communities in which they live and from which they draw their sustenance.

What do those communities look like? Not surprisingly, many of the original land-grant universities were located in the rural areas they were designed to serve. Some still are. Ames, Iowa, home of one of my *Alma Maters*, is not a bustling city. But many of the newer public universities created in response to the mid-twentieth century's enormous growth in demand for access to higher education were understandably located where the students were, i.e., in metropolitan areas. The home of one of those universities, another of my *Alma Maters*, UCLA, is undeniably a major metropolitan area.

For such universities, adherence to time-honored academic traditions means coming to understand their missions and functions in the context of their metropolitan environments. This is particularly true when it comes to understanding what the land-grant mission means in a place where much of the land is covered with asphalt and concrete rather than corn and soybeans.

Universities like this began coming together in the seventies to begin the establishment of a tribal culture based on their fundamental similarities. At first, they thought of themselves as “urban” universities, but later, in the eighties, recognized that this name was too limiting. For those that were actually located in the centers of cities, it suggested that their only concerns were the economic and social problems of their inner cities. For those that happened to be located outside those cities in the suburbs that surround them, it suggested that the inner city’s challenges were none of their concern. So, in the eighties, there developed an effort to “rebrand” these universities as “metropolitan universities.” Your university’s Regional Chancellor was “present at the creation” of the resulting missionary movement, as were your convocation speakers both last year and this. Over the past two decades this “metropolitan university mission” has earned considerable national credibility and acceptance.

That is true, I would assert, because the concept of a “metropolitan university” is self-evidently a proper and appropriate twenty-first-century manifestation of the land-grant university. I believe that we in universities like this are inheritors of Jonathan Baldwin

Turner’s nineteenth century vision and the great tradition it spawned. And I would urge all of you to embrace that tradition and put it to work in your academic lives and careers.

Let me illustrate with an example. In the mid-nineties university systems in Maryland and Georgia initiated “K-16 Partnerships” which brought together all sectors of the education system, from kindergartens to universities, together with businessmen and public policy makers, to address collectively major issues confronting education. During the past decade in Maryland, we have engaged hundreds of people in addressing important educational issues. These include -- to mention just a few -- redesigning teacher education, bridging the math gap between high school and college, developing a system of high school assessment exams, transforming high school science teaching, and taking on the looming expansion of student learning assessment from elementary and secondary schools into higher education.

We have also tried to propagate the K-16 gospel across the country. About half the states now have active K-16 partnerships. (I should note that the growing emphasis on pre-school education and on life-long education for adults has led some of those partnerships to adopt names like P-20. I have been known to refer to their purview as “*post partem to post mortem.*”)

In Maryland, we have found our K-16 Partnership enormously productive and rewarding to all of its participants. I think its most important achievement has been the creation of a widespread public perspective that spans the entire education system and views it as an

integrated strongly-interacting whole. To be sure, it still doesn't always work that way, but we've made strong progress toward that goal, and there's more to come.

What Jonathan Baldwin Turner taught us is that the medieval notion of a university as an isolated ivory tower within ivy-covered walls is obsolete, and that a modern university should see itself and function as an institution intimately engaged and integrated with its community – or, more accurately, its several communities. That engagement and integration can have manifold manifestations that include all three elements of our mantra, teaching, research, and service, often all together. Those manifestations are not always positive, of course. Intimate relationships can sometimes involve one in problems that are not of one's own making. But that's the price of the rewards that such relationships bring. If this university earns recognition as a keystone institution in all of its communities, its metropolitan area, the state, the nation, and the world, then it can expect the public support that is due a great metropolitan, state, and national university with an international reputation.

All it takes is constant thoughtful adherence to your new versions of the old academic traditions in everything you do, all the time!

Good luck, and Happy New Year!