

## **Opportunity and Purpose: Outreach's Changing Mission**

E. Gordon Gee

Remarks by the president of The Ohio State University at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference, Monday, September 28, 2009.

I am honored to speak at this 10th annual National Outreach Scholarship Conference, especially so since my university's incomparable Bobby Moser<sup>1</sup> helped to found this conference, along with colleagues from Penn State and the University of Wisconsin. The gathering and the work to create real change at our institutions have grown exponentially. I congratulate them on their initiative.

When I returned to Ohio State two years ago, it was clear to me that the time had come for us to reinvigorate and expand our commitment to communities. Doing so was one of the six strategic principles I set forth when I assumed the presidency in October 2007. I had left Ohio State 10 years earlier—first to lead Brown University, then Vanderbilt, where I often spoke of private universities with a public purpose. During my time away, Ohio State had matured in critical ways: better-prepared students; more accomplished faculty; more meaningful collaborations with community partners; and so much growth in so many other ways—research and health care among them. As our stature grew, so too did our responsibility to share our vast human resources with our communities.

Upon returning, I thought hard about first principles, about our land-grant institutions' founding ideals, and about this nation's particular moment in time. The sum of the equation was this: America's public universities, and particularly its land-grant institutions, must reach out as never before to fully understand the needs in our communities and to fully address them—as partners, together. That is the model of the new American university. It is not largesse. It is not charity. And it is not a transient act—vulnerable to the ebb and flow of financial realities or the whims of individual decision makers. Plain and simple, it is our moral duty. And never have we been called upon so urgently to act. The latest figures on income, poverty, and health care are bleak indeed:

- National unemployment has reached 9.7%.
- During the past two years, eight million Americans have lost their jobs.

- The official poverty rate has risen to more than 13% of the population.
- More than 15% of Americans do not have health insurance.

As we all know, our students and their families are struggling as never before. Federal student loan disbursements grew 25% higher during the past academic year. Additional double-digit increases are anticipated for the current year. We all understand these sober realities. And we cannot simply shrug our shoulders and look away. That is not who we are. It is absolutely antithetical to our founding principles.

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This is a galvanizing moment for higher education in the country.

Our profound purposes have never been clearer. We cannot

act as the Praetorian Guard, a chosen few fiercely encircling

our institutions, holding ground, and protecting our precious

resources. We are, in fact, guardians of a wholly different kind.

We are guardians of the uniquely American ideal and practice of

higher education: one that sus-

tains the world’s strongest and most diverse range of colleges and universities and one that prizes unfettered inquiry and debate, cultivates innovation and creativity, and aggressively seeks solutions to the world’s most pressing problems. Our task—at this defining point in history—is not only to protect and preserve our proud legacy; it is to extend it. Many of our institutions are doing just that, approaching the matter from a perspective of inclusion, expansion of opportunity, and true commitment to communities. Our colleges and universities must constantly be seeking out ways to apply knowledge to real-world problems, to enhance our neighborhoods and schools, to conduct research for the public good, and to fuel our nation’s economic prosperity.

Those ideas are firmly embedded in our land-grant institutions, of course. They were affirmed in the Kellogg Commission report of a decade ago. I was honored to participate in that effort, which called on our universities to broaden work to help solve

community, state, national, and international problems. The need to do so grows each and every day.

As we struggle to simultaneously balance budgets and expand programs to meet growing needs, we should remember the time in which the Morrill Act was passed. In the middle of the darkest days of the Civil War, President Lincoln had the wisdom and foresight to invest in young people and communities by establishing new colleges that would vastly expand education beyond the wealthy, the privileged, and those living in cities. With a nation on the brink of splitting apart, Lincoln could see that making higher education available to the so-called industrial classes was the best choice for growth, peace, democracy, and prosperity. It was a radical act undertaken in terrifying times.

Ladies and gentlemen, our task is to build on Lincoln's vision. We must reach out, as never before, to others of good will and common intent. We must initiate wholly new kinds of collaborations that extend our missions more completely and effectively to every corner of our nation and beyond. And we must start close to home, in the neighborhoods that surround our campuses. In the most practical terms, the relationship between the university and its neighbors is symbiotic. The health and well-being of one affects the other.

When I first assumed the presidency at Ohio State in 1990, the painful effects of that era's economic downturn were obvious—not so much on campus, but deeply so in the University District in general and in an adjacent neighborhood known as Weinland Park. As some of you may know, the university's long-term engagement with Weinland Park received a 2008 W. K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award, a recognition for which we are grateful.

But the University District of nearly 20 years ago was far from prize-winning. The descriptive term that is both most polite and legally accurate is "blight." It was a problem for the students and families who lived there, and for the businesses that were trying to operate in the area. More important, that disconnect in 1990 between the thriving university on one side of the street and the boarded-up shops and crime on the other meant—to me—that we were not fulfilling our unique land-grant mission. And so we got to work.

The first step was to build consensus about the needs of the area, and then to create—together with all of the various stakeholders—a viable plan of action. We worked with the City of Columbus, several neighborhood groups, Ohio State student groups, K-12 schools,

and local businesses. Once the consensus-building and planning were well under way, we began acquiring 31 separate properties on a seven-acre parcel. That process took three years, and I will add that all of the properties were acquired privately through negotiated relocation agreements with businesses. We accomplished this by forming Campus Partners, a nonprofit redevelopment corporation, which also served as the developer of the area.

Just as things were taking hold and moving forward, I left the university in 1997 to assume the presidency of Brown. When I returned 10 years later, I really did feel like a proud father, seeing what had become of that work. Now, it is a thriving area—full of restaurants, shopping, the arts, and apartments that even parents love. And each and every one of those successes compounds the other. New developers are coming in and adding apartments. New residents will support more businesses. And all of this increases the vibrancy of the area. The work continues, much of it led by students, in fact. In the past two years, we have opened a new joint policing station in the area. And thanks to our undergraduate students, working with the City of Columbus, substantial new lighting has been installed.

One of the most important developments was the opening in fall 2007 of the new Schoenbaum Family Center, a preschool and learning laboratory colocated with the Weinland Park Elementary School. It is a unique collaboration among Ohio State's College of Education & Human Ecology, Head Start, the City of Columbus, corporate partners, caring alumni and friends, and Columbus City Schools. Through this partnership, faculty expertise is put into practice, our students get hands-on experience, and children in a financially distressed area of the city get what they desperately need—a solid early education and a strong foundation for the future. And, as with all of our engagement activities, the benefits are thoroughly shared. In its first year of operation, 700 Ohio State students worked and studied at the center.

Campus Partners continues to carry through on our longstanding commitment to the Weinland Park area, refurbishing low-cost housing in the neighborhood. Further, it is assembling a coalition to bring additional investment and programs that will fully encompass education, workforce development, economic development, and safety and security. What I see happening there—and throughout the areas we are partnering to redevelop—underscores the university's larger purposes. Our mutual assured survival—to twist an old phrase—depends on new collaborations among our cities, our neighborhoods, our businesses, and our universities. The

University District development embodies the seamless connection that should exist between town and gown. And our current long-range campus planning activities further exploit the now-vibrant area, creating an arts and culture district that blends campus and neighborhood boundaries in additional ways.

Even as we focus on needs close at hand, we must also reach out much further—expanding in ever-broadening circles the areas in which our students, faculty, and staff contribute their time and expertise. For all of us—regardless of our institution's character or size—our obligation today is to apply our unparalleled resources to the world's immediate and pressing problems. It is a natural extension of our public purpose. For my own institution, these global roots are extensive and deep, and they started with agriculture. One long-standing partnership is with Punjab Agricultural University, in India. What began some 55 years ago with student exchanges and basic agricultural assistance has flourished. The partnership now includes private corporations, and its work has resulted in vastly more grain being produced with less burden on the environment and natural resources.

Ohio State has always been, and always will be, Ohio's university—fully dedicated to enriching our state and our citizens. What has changed since our founding is this: The future of Ohio is now irrevocably bound to a global strategy. And we are the vehicle for executing that strategy. We best serve the needs of Ohioans and our students with global engagements, ensuring that our students, our businesses, and our citizens compete successfully in the world economy. My vision is for Ohio State to become the land-grant university to the world. By that, I mean a dynamic, student-centered, and academically distinguished institution working on a global scale. Each of us—mathematicians, philosophers, poets, engineers, physicians, scholars of all kinds—must fully appreciate that our place in the community and in the world has changed profoundly. Every one of our institutions now serves a thoroughly shared, world community.

On our campuses, our faculty, staff, and students possess both the intellectual capacity and the compassion needed to help solve the growing food crisis; to develop physical structures able to withstand the ravages of cyclones and earthquakes; to preserve wetlands and prevent further destruction of our natural resources; to make concrete advances in human health care around the world; and—finally—to more fully understand the complex intersection of political boundaries, cultures, and citizenship. We must be aggressive in strategic expansion of all facets of our global engagement.

I spend a good bit of my summers traveling. This past summer, I visited family farms, county fairs, and small businesses in 44 of Ohio's 88 counties. I also visited Germany, Poland, England, and India, among other places. From all of those travels, I am convinced of one thing: Today's college students simply must experience the world firsthand. It is not just a matter of understanding the interconnections of the world, of appreciating other cultures and other perspectives—although those are all important. Learning to navigate in unknown territory challenges us in critical ways. We grow from it. We gain confidence. We learn skills that last a lifetime.

A week ago today, I welcomed 6,550 new freshman to campus. In my remarks, I challenged them, urged them, and cajoled them to make international experience a part of their degree program. Roughly 20% of Ohio State's undergraduates spend time abroad. That is good, but we can and must do better. And from a question I posed last Monday, I believe the students are—as usual—leading the way for us. I asked for a show of hands of those freshmen who possess passports. To my surprise and delight, roughly two-thirds of them raised their hands. Our students—yours and mine alike—are ready and eager to go out into the world. They are calling for expanded programs abroad. And their vision is no longer that of the old European Tour.

If we are to live up to our noble callings, local and global, there are substantial changes we must make within our colleges and universities. To meet the growing challenges of the day, our institutions must fundamentally redefine the nature of scholarship and the ways in which new forms of engagement are rewarded. If we do not properly and tangibly value those activities, our efforts to extend our resources more fully into our communities will be stymied.

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Without a doubt, this is a nettlesome issue. And I am surely not the first person to raise it. Ernie Boyer (1991) made the case nearly 20 years ago in his book *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Our campuses have long had faculty committees devoted to looking at

revising promotion and tenure standards. And yet, the status quo remains. Inertia is winning. When can we finally speak aloud the truth—that some arbitrary volume of published papers, on some narrowly defined points of debate, are not necessarily more worthy than other activities? What about the passionate faculty member who creates new electronic tutorials to teach literacy skills to kindergarteners? The comparative studies professor who incorporates fieldwork in remote Peruvian villages into her community development courses? Or the young music faculty member who develops year-long youth symphony programs in which graduate students gain valuable teaching experience and children learn the beauty of music, the challenges of public performance, and the traits of diligence and perseverance?

What university will finally dare to say, “No more,” to quantity over quality? When can we stop looking at the length of a vita and start measuring its true heft? Who, finally, will be bold enough to say, “We judge by a different standard”? To achieve our goals—to do good in a world that needs more goodness—we must think in new ways about how we acknowledge and reward nontraditional faculty scholarship. We must be brave and wise enough to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been leading universities for 30 years now. And I can tell you this: The young people who fill our classrooms are more compassionate, more caring, more entrepreneurial, and more generous than any I have ever known. They choose substance over spin. Principle over profit. Action over apathy. That is the very best news—a full and effective counterbalance to the headlines that are so grim as to paralyze many institutions. Our duty is to help refine our students’ direction, educate them for leadership, and watch them take the wheel.

Yes, today is very difficult. Yes, tomorrow is uncertain. Yes, funding streams are unpredictable. But we make our case for investment in our institutions by moral force. Taken together, our resources are enormous. Our capacity to adapt, to create, to chart a different course—those resources are truly without limit.

Quite honestly, this is the moment of truth for American higher education. We must maintain a singular focus on extending the transformative power of education to every person of willing heart. Now is not the moment for timid steps or staying within our comfort zones. We must know our mission and stick to it with unrelenting tenacity.

I will close by thanking you for joining me today, for thinking through these issues, and for working in partnership to resolve

them. We have much to do—in our own institutions and in collaboration with one another. The needs of the day are urgent. We must hasten our pace. We must move decisively. And we must be mindful always of the sacred trust that is ours to nurture and to pass along to those who will follow us on this earth. That, finally, is our common obligation and our common purpose.

### **Endnote**

1. Bobby Moser is the Vice President of Agricultural Administration and Dean, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University. He served as the director of Ohio State University Extension from 1988 until he became Vice President and Dean in 1991. From 2001 to 2008 he also served as Vice President for University Outreach. Together with James Ryan (Pennsylvania State University) and Kevin Reilly (University of Wisconsin-Extension), Moser was instrumental in founding the National Outreach Scholarship Conference in 2001.

### **Reference**

Boyer, E. (1991). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

### **About the Author**

**E. Gordon Gee**, among the most highly experienced and respected university presidents in the nation, returned to The Ohio State University in 2007 after having served as Chancellor of Vanderbilt University for seven years. Prior to his tenure at Vanderbilt, he was president of Brown University, The Ohio State University, the University of Colorado, and West Virginia University. Gee is a national leader in calling for higher education to undergo a radical reinvention or else face extinction.