



Dr. E. Gordon Gee
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I am honored to have the opportunity
to visit with you all today.

I thank President Bowen Loftin
for the invitation,
the hospitality,
and for that gracious introduction.

I also want to share with you
how pleased I am to have with me
one of the members
of Ohio State’s Board of Trustees,
Dr. Gil Cloyd,
who came over from his home in Austin
to join us today.

Dr. Cloyd was chairman
of our Board of Trustees
when I returned to Ohio State
four years ago,
and I will tell you

I learned a great deal about leadership
from his superb example.

I keep a framed quote in my office
on prominent display –
so that every visitor
can immediately be reminded
of my task and theirs.

The quote is not from Plato,
Thomas Aquinas, or John Dewey.

Instead, the philosopher in question
is a person with a good deal more
hands-on experience
in the matter of solving problems
and leading people.

There on an easel,
looming large over my conference table,
inserting itself in the proceedings every day,
are the words of General Eric Shinseki.

“If you don't like change,”
the general said,
“you're going to like irrelevance even less.”

The general's fuller context
was that the Army had to change
because the nation cannot afford

to have an Army that is irrelevant.

To that I would add,
educators and institutions must change,
because the nation cannot afford
universities that are irrelevant.

In fact, the general believes
that the pursuit of positive change
creates what he calls
irreversible forward momentum.

Irreversible forward momentum.

I like the sound of that.

Translate it into Latin
and I think you would have
a world-class university motto.

Firmus protinus progressio.

Irreversible. Forward. Momentum.

To me, that is the essence
of what we can do in a university.
It is the essence of what we must do.

Positive change in expanding
and improving

what we know and who we reach,
that is the physics of academic momentum
that flows from a university
to students,
to research partners,
to civic partners,
and to all constituents.

And from all those directly touched,
that irreversible force cascades outward
to the communities and workplaces
they inhabit.

We must use the latent force
within universities to maximum effect.

Indeed, raising our universities
from plateaus to peaks
will surely elevate our states and our nation.

To achieve that rise,
we must not fear
climbing out of the tautological trap
of doing things as they have always been done, merely because
they have always been done that way.

Ladies and gentlemen,
my central point today is this:
the most powerful limitations
on our universities are self-imposed.

And the time to break free is nigh.

Let me acknowledge that embracing change
is always an important, driving force
for universities.

Indeed, I could not have stood here
at any stage in my academic career
and kept a straight face
while making a case for sloth.

But, today,
today the urgency is palpable.

The great fortunes of the world
were once forged by muscle and sweat
in the mills and the fields.

Now, the great fortunes of the world
are amassed from products of the mind.

One hundred years ago
the three richest Americans
made their money in oil, steel, and timber, respectively.

Now, the three wealthiest people
in this country
derive their riches
from software, finance, and software.

Even with derricks pumping out oil

that retails north of \$85 a barrel,
the three wealthiest Texans today
made their fortunes in retail sales,
computers, and banking.

The economic expectations of a century ago,
a decade ago,
even a few years ago,
are no longer operative.

But this is not reason to lament.

The catalyst of virtually all future economic progress will be ideas.

And to our great good fortune,
that happens to be the stock and trade
of universities.

President Obama has said this nation
now faces a “Sputnik moment,”
in which our universities will be called upon
to accelerate our economic progress
past the limits of our imagination.

Governor Rick Perry has said
“improving higher education”
is essential for Texas
to “maintain a competitive edge
in the global marketplace.”

Indeed, my own governor in Ohio
and leaders of all political stripe agree
and are laying claim to a future
made brighter by higher education.

Rhetoric aside, budgetary pressures
in some states –
though Ohio is a happy exception –
have produced fiercely Spartan allocations
to higher education.

In fact, the phenomenon is international.

I was in Europe in July,
exploring new partnerships and opportunities
for Ohio State.

At Oxford University, I saw the effects
of government funding for the classroom
having been reduced by 40 percent,
and a university left to increase tuition
by almost 200 percent.

The University of Exeter's vice chancellor said
of the government's budget:
"we are being thrown out of the nest."

I sincerely sympathize with his plight.

At the same time,

I recognize that we must all learn to fly
on our own.

Indeed, longing for the comforts of the nest
has never been anyone's impetus to soar.

At a fundamental level,
we cannot allow our great universities
to be deflated by fads or formulas,
by partisan battles
or legislative bargaining.

Ladies and gentlemen, I assert to you
that the irreversible forward momentum we seek will be of our own creation.

And it begins when we see
past the old problems directly in front of us
and look toward new solutions.

In a time in which the U.S. population
has slipped from first to 12th
in educational attainment
among developed nations,
we must expand opportunity
in this country today.

The problem for those of us
running our nation's finest
and strongest universities
is that we simply do not have –
and in many cases will never have –

the capacity to increase admissions
by any significant degree.

Nevertheless, when your governor or mine
asks what we are doing to increase access, simply illuminating a ‘no vacancy’
sign
is woefully insufficient.

We are left, then, with the vexing puzzle
of how to reach more students
without growing.

As leaders here well know,
one of the most promising solutions
is strengthening our ties
with community colleges.

Community colleges serve as the front door
to the American dream.
Building our capacity
to attract more qualified
community college students
to top university campuses
puts us in service not only of the dream,
but the American reality.

Here at Texas A&M,
your TAP plan allows students
of partner institutions
to claim guaranteed admission

after successful completion
of community college coursework.

This year at Ohio State,
we launched a transformative partnership
with our neighbors
at Columbus State Community College.

Together, our two institutions now provide
a Preferred Pathway from the college
to the university.

We are not simply putting out the welcome mat, leaving on a light, and hoping
for the best.

Rather, we are actively working
to challenge, inspire, and prepare these students from day one.

Faculty and staff from both institutions
are collaborating to develop a curriculum
and advising program
that builds upon a natural progression
from enrollment at Columbus State
to success at Ohio State.

Two years ago,
we launched our initiative
to attract more community college students
to study in the health sciences at the University.
Working with The College Board

to create a national pilot program,
we are attracting more students
from underrepresented groups
and helping to address shortages
in certain health care specialties.

Young men and women who might not otherwise have had the means –
financial or otherwise –
to pursue such training
are now future doctors, nurses,
and other medical professionals.

The societal value created
in the process is simply incalculable.

Overall, we have increased
the size of our incoming transfer class
by 29 percent over the last six years.

The impact on access is akin
to compound interest –
since every slot occupied by a transfer student can produce multiple degrees
in a four-year span.

Like our peer institutions, we are –
and always will be –
dedicated to the full four-year
undergraduate experience.

But when we are presented with a problem – creating, for example, a \$10,000 degree –
we must be able to do more
than spin our wheels,
stymied by the impossibility of the task.

We must do more
than fail to create a single new idea.

Rather, we must start with the solution –
serve more students
and better serve our states –
and work from there
to produce opportunity.

Indeed, every student who enters A&M
through the TAP plan,
or Ohio State through the Preferred Pathway,
is a life transformed.

As we nudge the door open a bit wider,
we must also nudge open our minds
to recalibrate how we make progress happen.

Like any powerful institution,
universities compete for resources
and recognition
with unyielding zeal.

As well we should.

But we must not let our desire
to be first and best
impede the pursuit of our mission.

Constitutional scholars in the audience
can tell you that this nation's first years
after independence
were marked by a stifling insularity.

With no national economic oversight,
states regularly imposed tariffs
on their neighbors' products.

Surrounding states then replied in kind.

Trade that would have benefited both sides
was lost.

Natural complementary strengths
were negated.

And state and national economies
shrank within themselves.

In the process, all parties were made poorer
by myopic competition.

Ladies and gentlemen,
our universities must rise above
that same impulse

and take advantage
of natural complementary strengths.

That is precisely what Texas A&M has done
with its groundbreaking partnership
with the University of Texas
M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Combining minds and resources
in the search to create and test
new treatments for cancer
maximizes the impact of two great universities
in service of hope and healing.

At Ohio State,
we have reached across the great Midwest
to join in league with Colorado State University.

Together, we have assembled a 500-person team working on energy and
environmental research and economic development.

Our efforts are headed by former astronaut
Ron Sega
who serves as Vice President
and Enterprise Executive
in a unique joint appointment
between our two universities.

We must all acknowledge
that no one university

can match the depth of expertise,
research programs, facilities,
regional advantages,
and student talent available
at two or more universities.

In this era, when the Internet
has opened a virtual door to crowd-sourcing,
far-flung minds are being marshaled
to find unconventional solutions,
and universities must not be left behind,
trapped in old ways of thinking.

Even as we seek transformative changes
on campus,
I would be the first to admit that we do so
without knowing the precise challenges
our students will face in four or forty years.

We cannot know the state of the economy
or the state of the world.

But what we do know
is the burgeoning value
of preparing students
to think analytically and see expansively.
Toward that end,
both Texas A&M and Ohio State
have steadfastly worked
to bring a global perspective

to our campuses
and send our students out
to claim the world as a classroom.

Both our institutions rank
among the top twenty in the nation
in the size of our international student body.

And, both our institutions
are among the leaders
in sending American students to study abroad.

I firmly believe that as the world shrinks, opportunity grows.

In a time when actions taken on one side
of the globe
have an immediate and profound impact
on the other side,
we simply must break out of our own routines and reach out more fully and
effectively
to one another.

In fact, my commitment to this notion
spurred me to make Ohio State
the first comprehensive university
to ask all its students to acquire a passport.

I believe a passport is a tool
for the imagination
and for thinking big thoughts.

It has become what the driver's license
once was:
permission to explore
our most relevant surroundings.

Imagine what it means
for a first-generation college student
from Johnstown, Ohio, or Hubbard, Texas,
to hold a passport in his or her hands.

Imagine the possibilities;
the world conjured in his or her mind
that suddenly has no borders, no limits.

As universities, we must ensure
members of the next generation
are citizens of the world,
living a life made larger
by a world made smaller.

I am happy to report
that among our sophomores,
members of the first entering class
to bear the brunt of my polite
but firm suggestion –
two-thirds
now hold a passport –
about double the proportion
of Americans overall.

Ladies and gentlemen,
there is irreversible forward momentum
in broadening the horizons of our students,
in collaborating on tasks of outstanding import, in widening the path to our
campuses.

Whether headlines celebrate or enervate
our efforts,
we must remain steadfast
in moving forward in these and other ways
that help move our students, state,
and nation forward.

Study after study show
that the difference in lifetime earnings
between holding a high school degree
and holding a college degree
is about one million dollars.

That is the greatest return on investment
modern society offers.

But, my friends,
let us never become mere bean counters
in assessing our work.

We must never arbitrarily speed up
the assembly line,
for we are not in the business

of producing widgets.

And let us never,
never pit the study of classics
versus the study of commerce
in an equation filled with numerators
and devoid of nuance.

Let me be clear:

All of us who have devoted our lives
to the noble purposes of public higher education must resist ill-conceived calls
for artificially quantifying the per-student,
per-hour value of teaching history,
biochemistry, or law.

To counter these unproductive calls,
we must be much more assertive
in talking about what we do
and how we view our role.

Because, of course,
the value of a degree is good bit more
than one million dollars.

The value of a college degree is truth.
And beauty.
And depth.
And purpose.
And hope.
And meaning.

And connection.

And sustenance.

And possibility.

I want to leave you today
with the results of an experiment
that took place some two decades ago
on this very campus.

It is an experiment that tells us
a good deal about where positive change
is to be found.

David Jansson and Steven Smith,
a pair of Texas A&M engineers,
asked an experimental group
to design a fairly mundane product –
a bike rack for the roof of a car, for example.

Participants were told
they must overcome specific design problems others had encountered
when creating the same product.

The control group in the study
was asked to design the very same product,
but without any instruction on potential pitfalls.

By every measure, the control group shined.

The control group created more designs,

better designs,
and designs less likely to replicate
the very flaws that others had found so vexing.

The experimental group, by contrast,
was fixated on the problem as described to them, and had trouble seeing any
way around it.

Two randomly composed groups
of talented engineers,
asked to design the very same product,
produced markedly divergent results.

Yet the only difference between the groups
was this:
one knew the problems they would face,
and the other knew only of an opportunity.

By simply removing the seed of doubt
from the mind,
Professors Jansson and Smith
unlocked the possibility of design.

Ladies and gentleman,
it is time we in higher education
see past our difficulties.
It is time we see past our limitations.

Of this I am sure:
A university is not defined by problems,

but by solutions.

Remember that in how you think
about these times.

Remember that in every task you pursue.

Remember that every single time
you set foot on campus.

For that is surely the path
to irreversible forward momentum.

I thank you for the opportunity
to be with you today.

And I look forward to hearing
what is on your minds.