

President Gee
Address to the Faculty
Wednesday, October 7, 2009
Thompson Library

“Right Here, Right Now: A Crystallization of Purpose”

Thank you, Professor McGraw. That was wonderful. I have heard you interviewed on public radio, read your book, and read about your book, and so I appreciate your taking the time to share your talents with us. For those of you who do not yet own “The Seamstress of Hollywood Boulevard,” we have some in the back of the room, and I hope you will take a copy after our talk.

Having one of our own gifted creative writing faculty members lead off our discussion seemed only appropriate as we gather in this newly opened Thompson Library.

Tim, I thank you as well for opening our session today. I am grateful for your friendship, as I am for your leadership of the Faculty Council.

Those of you who joined me in this room for my remarks last May will recall that the Library was still being renovated. Construction teams were putting the finishing touches on the building, it was still dusty and dirty, and the stacks had not yet been stocked.

Now, having officially cut the ribbon, we are back. I chose to hold this talk here, not just because I love the building – which I do, very much. But rather because it is both the heart of the University as well as a living, tangible example of this University achieving its potential. Taking a fresh look at the landscape, assessing the future, and succeeding wildly in the result.

Since the building opened in early August, it has been filled with students, faculty, staff, and visitors. Very quickly, it became the focal point for so much of University life. Here is a telling statistic: Two weeks ago, on the first day of classes, 11,800 people spent time in this library – 11,800! Four years ago, before the renovation work began, only one-quarter as many people were in this building on the first day of fall classes.

With autumn quarter very much in full swing, summer seems like a distant memory. Like many of you, I traveled. I visited faculty, students, alumni, and friends in Germany, Poland, England, and India.

I met with Jennifer Evans-Cowley, along with her students and faculty colleagues from the Technical University of Dresden. They are doing exciting cross-disciplinary work on issues of aging in urban planning.

I met with our Royal Shakespeare Company collaborators in Stratford-upon-Avon. Through that partnership, 20 Central Ohio public school teachers also traveled there this summer, for a one-week intensive workshop. They teach everything from third grade to twelfth, and subjects ranging from drama and English to math and music. Next month, we will welcome some of the company's actors and educators to campus.

In India, I learned the definition of hot. And I learned a great deal more, of course. I had the privilege of meeting with literally dozens of faculty members and leaders at India's premier universities, with the country's president, with Ambassador Roemer, with business leaders, alumni, and students and their families. They opened their homes and their hearts, and I will tell you that they are uniformly enthusiastic about the potential for expanded collaborations with Ohio State.

Also this summer, I traveled the highways and back roads of Ohio. Last summer, I visited all 88 counties; this year it was 44. This time, I took some of the vice presidents with me. It was one of those offers they could not refuse. Together, we put 2,400 miles on the odometer, visiting county fairs, family farms, high schools, research facilities, and businesses small and large. No resignations, so I count it a success.

Through it all, one thing was abundantly clear to me. At this moment, we at Ohio State have great privilege, great responsibility, and great opportunity. I will explain each of those in turn.

Our position of enormous good fortune was underscored by something I read a month ago, just after I returned from my last State Tour. Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, published an essay in the Sunday New York Times Book Review. Her essay – titled “The University's Crisis of Purpose” – refined my understanding of Ohio State's position and potential.

First, let me say that I respect Dr. Faust. She is, among other things, a fine historian. And her essay addresses some central issues regarding the value of higher education, including our role in raising difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable, questions having to do with ethics and social direction. The essay is an elegant one, but – in the final analysis – it is fundamentally flawed.

She sees various problems in the ways in which we are educating greater numbers of Americans – problems which are rooted in the Morrill Act.

While she sees a crisis of purpose in American higher education, I see a crystallization of purpose. A clarity of both need and direction. Never – never – has the role of higher education in this country been more clear.

The essay.

Dr. Faust writes that the current economic turmoil is particularly troubling because it has “reinforced America’s deep-seated notion that a college degree serves largely instrumental purposes.” By “instrumental purposes,” she apparently means the idea of better prospects for a satisfying professional life and a shot at the American Dream.

Dr. Faust correctly identifies the Morrill Act as the federal government’s first large effort to support higher education.

In 1862, when President Lincoln signed the Act, our nation had only a handful of public colleges and universities. Higher education was still very much the exclusive domain of the few, the white, the male, and the wealthy.

What Lincoln did was among the most radical acts imaginable, and he undertook it at a moment of great peril. He very clearly understood that making higher education available to the so-called “industrial classes” was the best choice for growth, peace, democracy, and prosperity.

The Morrill Act thoroughly democratized higher education in this country, expanding access and opportunity. To those whose parents had never considered the possibility of a college education. To those who could only now dare to imagine a step up, a better life. To those who had great ability – regardless of means. In many ways, our land-grant institutions have been the primary source of this country’s broad prosperity, its innovation, and its ability to sustain democracy through an educated citizenry.

And so Dr. Faust’s discussion of both the Morrill Act and of certain academic fields as “vocational” took me by surprise. I thought we had long since moved past that kind of discourse in our institutions and had developed a more thorough appreciation for the strength that comes from America’s great range and complexity of colleges and universities.

Surely this is not an either-or game.

In fact, the history of our land-grant institutions describes a much richer picture than colleges conceived only to provide “practical education for the industrial classes.” As Ohio State was being created, in fact, there was great debate in the state legislature about whether or not to include the liberal arts and classical studies as part of our curriculum. Fortunately, the right side of the argument won out, and the liberal arts are very firmly at the core of our University. That is true physically, as well as intellectually. The liberal arts were very intentionally placed around the Oval, with this Library at the apex.

We are proud of our land-grant heritage and its thoroughly democratic principles. We embrace it, and we treasure the enormous contributions made in agriculture, engineering, medicine, law, veterinary sciences, and so many other fields of study. They are rich and strong precisely because they are grounded in the arts and humanities and sciences.

Here, as at so many other public universities, we refine students' ability to think, to reason, to write, and to understand others. And we make no apologies for also working to ensure that our graduates have the skills needed to thrive.

Truly, the great universities of today and tomorrow will honor their histories while also changing for the future. That is always true, of course, but never more so than in times of need and challenge. We must always be moving forward, adapting with greater facility to a world that changes ever-more rapidly.

Dr. Faust's perspective may well stem, in part, from the ways in which the current financial turmoil is testing her institution as never before.

Harvard is not alone in its struggles. Private universities that rely on endowment earnings for as much as one-third to one-half of their operating budgets have been especially hard hit by the market turmoil.

At Stanford, more than 400 people have been laid off, with more to come. Faculty salaries have been frozen, open positions are left unfilled, and one of its libraries has been closed.

The difficulties in California's public colleges and universities are nearly without precedent. There, hundreds of faculty and staff members have been laid off. Others are enduring pay cuts and furloughs. Courses are being eliminated. Freshman enrollment has been reduced. And tuition and fees have risen, by double-digits for some students.

Similar, though less extreme, troubles exist in public universities in Florida, Arizona, and so many other states.

All of those examples serve as sharp relief against which we can see our own institution's position of great privilege.

We are blessed beyond measure to have in this state enlightened leaders who understand, as we do, the power of higher education to change individual lives and to help create Ohio's future.

Governor Ted Strickland, Chancellor Eric Fingerhut, and the bi-partisan legislative leadership have demonstrated exceptional political will during truly challenging times. Because of their strategic efforts, Ohio leads the nation in

holding down tuition increases at public colleges and universities for the past three years.

Saying that, I must add that we were not entirely immune from budget reductions, and we – like other states – are not out of the woods yet, financially. The next two years are likely to be difficult ones.

But we are prepared. We continue to seek efficiencies and manage resources prudently. We continue to build and expand in ways that directly benefit our faculty, our staff, our students, and our community. We continue to raise funds, through the Students First initiative, to help ensure that our students are able to press on with their studies here, in spite of financial difficulties. Doing so is both our great privilege and our great responsibility.

Today, higher education does not face a crisis of purpose, nor does it face a tipping point. This galvanizing moment of purpose is a full turning point. A permanent shift in the ways in which we engage with one another and with our larger communities. Our profound purposes have never been more clear.

We cannot turn inward. We cannot shrug our shoulders and look away. We cannot fall back on archaic notions of vocational education versus enriching education. And 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. And here, at this University, we are guardians of Lincoln's extraordinary vision.

High purpose, indeed.

The privilege of this moment extends well beyond financial stability. The list is a long one. It includes the excellence of your own work, and growing public acknowledgement of it. Our increasingly well-prepared students, who have made this institution among the nation's most selective in its admissions. Our staff, whose dedication and creativity contribute immeasurably to the University. Our flourishing external collaborations, including those with other colleges and universities, with Battelle, corporate partners, civic groups, and K-12 schools. An alumni base, nearly half-a-million strong, that carries the University's message throughout Ohio and around the world with unmatched spirit and passion. And a governing board, whose members guide the University toward its potential with vision, vigorous commitment, and a steady hand.

I want to talk in more detail about a few of these, starting with faculty excellence.

On my trip to India this summer, I was pleased to participate in a ceremony honoring Professor Rattan Lal of our School of Environment and Natural Resources. As many of you know, Rattan received the international M.S. Swaminathan Award. The award is named after the architect of India's Green Revolution. The enormous prestige of the award is difficult to describe, but I can tell you that the ceremony was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. During the event, Dr. Lal's world-renowned research in soil science was described as pivotal. He was cited as saving countless lives.

Rattan is quiet. He is entirely unassuming. And he is working, among other things, to rid the world of hunger.

Think about that most critical work: ensuring that human beings have enough food to eat. And then return to Dr. Faust's ideas about our land-grant institutions' focus on "instrumental purposes." The disconnect is so profound as to be difficult to comprehend.

"Human beings," she writes, "need meaning, understanding, and perspective as well as jobs." That is surely true. And they also need food.

Rattan's example is one of many here at the University.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many giants among us.

Faculty who are not only tackling hunger, but are also writing the great American novel, as we are reminded particularly today, thanks to Erin. Colleagues who are helping to create stability in the world by partnering to draft constitutions of newly sovereign nations. Entomologists working to understand the insect responsible for the sleeping sickness epidemic throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Legal scholars who are shaping a more just approach to disability law in this country. Mathematicians whose theoretical models are charting new courses for cancer therapies. Pioneers in understanding the link between emotional stress and immune system responses. And so many other remarkable faculty who assure that our students are fully prepared for leadership in a global context.

Instrumental purposes, indeed.

And your life-changing – and life-enriching – work is gaining broad recognition.

I am on record as a critic of the national college rankings, but with so much good news lately, I am re-thinking my position.

In July, the Medical Center was named to U.S. News & World Report's prestigious "Honor Roll." Out of the nearly 4,900 hospitals considered for the rankings, ours is one of the top 21. And in August, U.S. News released its

annual best colleges rankings. Ohio State moved up a notch to 18th among public institutions.

Also this summer, Newsweek magazine came out with a new assessment that is more qualitative and student-focused in nature. Again, we fare well. The magazine listed 25 colleges and universities according to what types of incoming students would thrive on those campuses. Ohio State is listed as the “Best Place for Bold Applicants Ready to Try Everything.”

After having spent much of the last two weeks with our students – new and returning, undergraduate, graduate, and professional – I can state that Newsweek got its facts right. The description suits our students perfectly.

External validation of the relevancy and quality of our programs comes in many forms. It came two weeks ago, when the University was host to the National Science Board, which is responsible for setting science policy through the National Science Foundation. They decided to meet at Ohio State because of a number of factors, perhaps the most important being the extraordinary progress the University has made in vaulting into the front ranks of American research universities. In my conversation with several members of the Board, and particularly their chairman, it was clear that they were very, very impressed with the science and engineering programs in place at Ohio State.

We have strong momentum in establishing new collaborations that expand our capacities in research, teaching, health care, and outreach. The examples are many, including our new, more formal partnership with Battelle; the many corporate collaborations ongoing at our Center for Automotive Research; and joint work in everything from STEM education to sensor-technology development with other colleges and universities. And we can see the immediate and very real gains that have come from the inaugural Pelotonia bike event, which developed from our partnership with NetJets.

Just consider these Ohio examples, and yet our reach is national and, indeed, global.

In talking about our collaborations, I want to mention our Board of Trustees. The Medical Center expansion, which was affirmed and officially announced during the Trustees’ meeting a few weeks ago, exemplifies not only the Board’s leadership, but also its full partnership. Embarking upon a billion-dollar expansion in the current economic climate is a bold move indeed. They worked shoulder-to-shoulder with us throughout the long planning process to get it right. And I applaud them for their vision for the future. Moving forward on this massive project will distinguish the institution in important ways, foster new breakthroughs in the treatment of disease, and improve the lives of countless patients and their families.

The Medical Center project is one component of our campus-wide comprehensive facilities planning work known as One Framework. That planning – which aligns the fiscal, academic, programmatic, and physical needs of the University and the surrounding community – will be complete next year.

Clearly, we have much to celebrate in this moment of great privilege, great responsibility, and great opportunity. And we have much work to do.

As our stature grows, so too does our responsibility to share our vast human resources with our communities. Reaching out to people in our neighborhoods, throughout Ohio, and around the world 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.

We must keep working to improve housing, safety, and education in the Weinland Park area a few blocks away. Just as surely, we must continue working in the remote villages of Peru and in the neighborhoods of Kampala, Uganda.

We must be aggressive in the strategic expansion of all facets of our global engagement. We best serve the needs of Ohioans and our students with a global strategy which assure that our students, our businesses, and our citizens compete successfully in the world economy.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we are to live up to our noble callings, local and global, there are substantial changes we must make in how we operate. And here is where our greatest opportunities and responsibilities intersect.

Let me state this directly: We must change our recognition and reward criteria.

Since I returned to Ohio State two years ago, I have made this point a number of times. Changing the way we define scholarship, appreciate new forms of engagement, and properly reward superb teaching can be this University's signal differential.

If we do not properly and tangibly value those activities, our efforts to extend our resources more fully into our communities will be stymied. We must take it upon ourselves to revise the centuries-old equations for promotion and tenure and develop new reward structures.

Without a doubt, this is a nettlesome issue. And I am not the first person to raise it. Ernie Boyer articulated the case nearly 20 years ago in a speech here on campus. And of course he did so very persuasively in his 1990 book,

“Scholarship Reconsidered,” in which he called for “recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching.”

At Ohio State, and at colleges and universities across the country, we have long had faculty committees devoted to looking at revising promotion and tenure standards. And yet, the status quo remains. Inertia is winning.

I believe we must finally speak aloud the truth: that some arbitrary volume of published papers, on some narrowly defined points of debate, is not necessarily more worthy than other activities.

I believe we must justly prize those faculty who are truly gifted, magical teachers – those who inspire a passion for Homer, Mill, or Faulkner that lasts a lifetime.

We must fully value the vast educational and social ramifications of the passionate faculty member who creates new electronic tutorials to teach literacy skills to kindergarteners.

I believe we must finally reward the comparative studies professor who incorporates field work in remote Peruvian villages into her community development courses.

We must appropriately acknowledge 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.

Ladies and gentlemen, this University is big and strong enough to be bold enough to judge by a different standard.

We can dare to say, “No more,” to quantity over quality.

We can stop looking at the length of a vita and start measuring its true heft.

This University, finally, can be the first to say, “We judge by a different standard.” And let others follow our lead, if they wish.

Only an exceptional institution could take this kind of action. Only an institution that is of great quality and great breadth. Only one that is blessed with strong public support and superb faculty.

Ohio State is uniquely positioned to take on this task at this particular moment in time – with your leadership at the forefront in determining our path.

Last spring, the provost issued guidelines for the allocation of resources in a faculty-reward system which acknowledges that faculty members contribute in different ways to the multiple missions of departments and colleges. That is an important first step in making good on Boyer's call to action.

The central point is that the time is right, at this moment, to focus intently on the quality of your work and its impact on our students, our disciplines, and our communities. Quality and impact. Those must be the two pivotal considerations in our reward system. And I am urging the provost and the deans to attend particularly to those two criteria in promotion and tenure decisions.

I fully understand that the University has exceptionally large-scale and vitally important transformations underway. The transitions to semesters and the realignment of Arts and Sciences are the most visible.

All of this requires much of us – of you and me, together. And, yes, it is over and above the work you do in the classroom and the laboratory. As we think through how to re-calibrate our reward criteria to focus on quality and impact, I am challenging all faculty members to work together to redesign committee structures to accommodate this new focus.

If we are to achieve our aspirations, if we are to realize our enormous capacity, then this University must truly be faculty-driven, with greater active participation and leadership. Today – to undertake ambitious, unprecedented, and vitally important changes – we cannot rely on others to carry the burden. We have extremely talented and committed faculty leadership at this institution, but they cannot do it alone. All of us must be engaged University citizens.

I have been leading universities for 30 years now. And I can tell you this: This University is in a position of strength that is, to my mind, unmatched by any other institution. We can be the model for the new American university.

Yes, today is very difficult. Yes, tomorrow is uncertain. Yes, funding streams are unpredictable. But we make our case for investment in the University by moral force. The moral force that comes from each and every one of your own "instrumental acts" – to feed the hungry, to develop clean energies, to cure disease, and to teach our students how to think critically and act compassionately.

Taken together, our assets are enormous. Our potential is far greater.

Now is not the moment for taking timid steps, clinging to tired dogma, or staying within our comfort zones. We must know our mission and stick to it with unrelenting tenacity.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will close by thanking you for joining me today, for thinking through these issues, and for working in partnership to help this University achieve its potential.

We have much to do. 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 extend.

Right here, right now, there is no crisis. There is only crystallized purpose.