

HONORING TRADITIONS, CREATING THE FUTURE

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Ohio Northern University

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It is with great humility and a profound sense of privilege that I address you this afternoon as the tenth president of Ohio Northern University. Nine enormously talented individuals have preceded me. Along with unbelievably dedicated students, faculty, staff, Trustees, alumni and friends, they have created a distinguished, comprehensive, Christian institution that is firmly rooted in the liberal arts and sciences and embraces the professions. To me—and to all of you and those you represent—falls, today, the challenge of building on this magnificent foundation, of adapting this institution to the needs of the new millennium just as it has previously been adapted to meet the needs of the 19th and 20th centuries.

To accomplish this goal, one must be a special person, according to Gene Belch, former ONU English professor and author of *Tempered By Crisis*, the history of Northern's first 100 years. He characterizes the presidents of Ohio Northern as a

Hardy and courageous breed...[who would have regarded] the life of an heretic in the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition [as] serene compared to the life of a president of Ohio Northern University. (5)

Almost “without exception,” he goes on to say, they have been “men of resolution, energy and skill.” (6) I don't know if I meet these exacting standards. I do know, however, that ONU does and thus I am completely confident that this institution will be a vital and vibrant part of higher education in this part of Ohio, the region, and the nation in the future. The reason I am so confident is because I know that Northern has grown and prospered for 128 years despite challenges and adversity that would easily have felled another institution. Indeed, the history of this superb institution is, in some ways, so daunting that Belch opens his centennial history by suggesting that the

course of Ohio Northern University might be compared to the journey of a high wire walker across a wind-swept canyon on a frail wire—blindfolded. (5)

Only a few short paragraphs later, though, Belch acknowledges that the University “not only survived, [it] bloomed,” and by the 70's, when Belch was preparing his centennial history, was a place of “substance and hopeful confidence in the future.” (5)

But, what will Northern's future be like? What vision do I have for this future? What aspirations and dreams can ONU have? These are, without doubt, the questions I have been most frequently asked in the short three months I have officially been part of this wonderful institution. And, each time I have been asked them, I have indicated that I think it is important that I learn as much as I can about ONU, its history, traditions, people, opportunities, possibilities, problems and challenges before I offer too many thoughts about its future. In proceeding this way, I am following the advice of Clark Kerr, the highly respected former president of the University of California, who recently urged presidents to avoid “public visions in [the] first year” of office. [*The Presidency*, Winter, 1999, p. 14] In my view, this makes great sense because, in my experience, the hard part of the visioning process is not identifying dreams and aspirations. It is ensuring that there is a substantial probability that the organization will be able to achieve its goals and aspirations. And, this depends greatly on the internal strengths and characteristics of the organization and the nature of the environment in which it operates. Hence, it is important, in my view, to take some time to learn about both.

At this point, of course, I'm more comfortable talking to you about the ways the external environment is likely to impinge on our future than I am about the impact of internal factors. Hence, I'd like to share some of my thoughts about this external environment with you this afternoon. But, I'd also like to talk about four core values of this institution that must be central to our vision of the future and that will, without question, significantly influence our ability to achieve it. Let's start, though, with external factors.

All sorts of things have been written about the world of the future. Some talk about “Monsters Under the Bed;” others adapt Huxley's famous title and proclaim a “Bold New World;” still others use space and science fiction as their inspiration and talk about the Age of Information, the Age of Knowledge, and the Age of Everything-Everywhere. Regardless of the metaphor, there is solid agreement on the factors that are likely to be central to our world and thus to higher education in the future. At the top of lists, almost always, is technology. No one disputes the revolutionary impact the computer, in its

past, present, and, anticipated future, forms, has had and will have. It has provided unparalleled access to information and audiences, and it has essentially eliminated “place” and, to a large extent, “time” as anchors of our existence and relationships.

At ONU, we see the impact of this every day. The number of students coming to campus with computers in hand increases annually. [Indeed, it has almost tripled from 200 to 750 in just the last five years.] The number expecting access to computers and their use in their curricular and extra-curricular activities increases even more dramatically each year. All of our recently renovated rooms in Founders, Maglott and Park Halls have two computer ports and a cable TV outlet. The new student apartments we are currently constructing immediately south of the Founders complex will have this capability and more. Many of our classrooms are able to handle a multiplicity of technologically based learning aids, supports and supplements and our faculty are integrating technologically based assignments and learning into their courses. Just look at how many students, across the campus, are in our computer labs on a daily basis. For them, the Internet, “chat groups,” “conversation threads,” and so forth are an integral part of the learning process. Because they are accustomed to gaining access to information about, essentially, every imaginable specialty, desire, need, issue, and so on at the click of a mouse, “active” learning is part of their expectation of college. It shouldn’t surprise us, therefore, that they increasingly want us to serve more as “coaches” in their quest for knowledge and understanding than as sources of facts. And, soon, our technology will become voice activated, and simulations, virtual reality, and even more sophisticated interactive devices and software will become commonplace in the learning environment.

Technology, though, is impacting our institution in lots of other important ways as well. It affects our ability to recruit and retain faculty and staff, to provide the many support services, whether in the Business Office, McIntosh Center, the Library or the Registrar’s Office, that are essential to a contemporary university, and, of course—as the concern about the rapidly approaching millennium reminds us—our ability to operate everything from our light switches to highly sophisticated heating and ventilating exchange systems in our laboratories. In short, technology pervades practically every aspect of a modern university and thus the changes and development that are occurring faster than we can comprehend and appreciate will, undoubtedly, contribute to making ONU a very different institution in the next 10 or 20 years than it is today.

One outcome that we have not mentioned so far that may have the most profound impact of all, though, is that technology is making our world smaller than it has ever been. The person at the other end of our instantaneous Internet connection could be in Columbus, Ohio or Bogotá, Columbia, or, perhaps, in one of my old haunts in Munich, Paris or Vienna. And, because of the availability of technologically facilitated simultaneous translations, language is no longer the barrier it once was. Not surprisingly, therefore, a second frequently identified characteristic of the environment in which we and higher education will live and work in the future is its international and global character. Knowledge of one’s immediate geographic area and familiarity with the people, language and culture of its inhabitants simply will not be enough in the future. On the contrary, to succeed in this new global, multi-cultural world we will need to learn about and embrace diversity in all of its forms at every opportunity.

It is not clear, though that we will, necessarily, reach out to the actual reality of this new global society. We may, rather, decide to embrace virtual and simulated realities. It is, after all, easy to do today and it will only get easier in the future. As many of you in this room know, it is easy to spend hours in front of monitors and see and experience things we’ve only dreamed of. And, in only a short time, the monitors won’t be on our desks; rather, they’ll be on our heads just like glasses and the images will be more brilliant, complex and precise than ever before. Many wonder, therefore, about what will happen to personal and social relationships when interactions can be largely confined to the virtual world. A third feature of the external environment that higher education cannot ignore, then, is the potential redefinition of realities and relationships. This could impact both the context and the environment in which learning takes place.

And, this brings us directly to one of the absolutely essential pillars of all organizations, especially higher education, namely resources. If relationships and realities are potentially changing, should we invest in bricks and mortar or infrastructures and networks? Regardless, how do we secure the financial resources we will need to continue our enterprise in the future? In private higher education, can we continue to rely on tuition or should we aggressively seek alternative sources of income? What we must remember is that the traditional distinctions between the public and private sectors and between business and industry as the drivers of our societies and economies and universities as the critics and evaluators of these efforts are rapidly disappearing. In their place are emerging opportunities for partnerships and collaborations. We are, in short, seeing a fusion of traditionally distinct sectors and activities that will profoundly affect both what is possible for higher education and the ways in which higher education generates the resources it needs for its programs. This is a fourth characteristic of our environment that we cannot ignore.

We can be sure, though, that we will not be alone in our efforts to build relationships and partnerships and secure our financial futures through non-conventional resources. And, the competitors we will face will be unlike any we have faced before. Post-secondary education is no longer the exclusive preserve of traditional colleges and universities.

Increasingly, for profit organizations are entering the fray. In addition, the audiences for higher education services are no longer exclusively young people who have just completed high school, but rather individuals at all points of the life cycle. Indeed, one of the most fascinating recent developments has been the creation of “seniors villages” either adjacent to or as parts of college and university campuses. The athletic, arts, cultural, and continuing education opportunities found on a typical college campus are proving to be very attractive to individuals enjoying the later years of life. But, they and other potential audiences of higher education’s services will want our services made available to them in convenient ways at convenient locations. In the future, therefore, we will be expected to provide not only conventional undergraduate and graduate education but also continuing education, and we will have to be prepared to provide all of these educational services to students who are both on and at a distance from our campuses. This, then, is a fifth reality of the environment we can expect to be part of in the future.

When I began this discussion, though, I indicated that our vision of the future would be influenced not only by our ability to adapt, nourish and take advantage of the characteristics of and changes in our external environment. It would also, I suggested, be heavily influenced by the enduring characteristics and strengths of the institution we are all a part of. Let me turn my attention, therefore, to what I regard as the core or central values of this superb institution.

To some, it may seem quite presumptuous of me to suggest that I know what these values are. After all, my official experience with Ohio Northern is limited, at this point, to three months. Fortunately, though, I had some time this summer to explore the histories of ONU. My newness has also given me the opportunity to have one on one conversations—interviews, if you will—with individuals involved in all aspects of the activities of this institution and with decades of experience and perspective. Finally, and fortuitously, I’ve established, in the past three months, two groups that are addressing various aspects of our future and the vision and dreams we can have for it. One is developing a Master Plan for our physical development and the other is focused on the marketing of the University and the image we should try to project in these efforts. By reviewing the minutes of the meetings of these groups, in a sense, eavesdropping on their conversations, I’ve been able to gain a sense of what they think is critical to and about ONU and how they believe this can be secured in the future.

From all of this emerges, in my judgment, a pretty clear view of the central or core values of this institution that simply must inform, influence, mold and, ultimately, determine the vision we can pursue in the future. They are four in number: Quality and Excellence; Student-Centered; Christian and Values Based; and Innovative and Persistent. Let’s look at each of these.

As I said when I made my comments at the opening of the fall quarter in September, quality is the first thing that impresses one about this campus. It’s everywhere. Everyone is so welcoming, so thoughtful, so helpful. The 260-acre campus is strikingly beautiful and obviously very well cared for. The curriculum has been regularly reviewed, adapted, and up-dated, and faculty members obviously take their teaching and learning responsibilities very seriously. In all, it was clear to me in September and even more so today that ONU is a community that prides itself on being a university—no, a premier private university—where learning thrives and flourishes and where knowledge is the highest value.

But, this is what you expect me to say! Right? Don’t all institutions aspire to quality and excellence? Ah, but isn’t that the point. All institutions aspire to quality and excellence, but only some of them achieve it. Well, I’m pleased to tell you today that Northern not only aspires to quality and excellence, all the evidence indicates that it practices it every day. Most of you, for example, probably know that *U.S. News and World Report* has identified ONU as one of the best liberal arts colleges in the Midwest for ten years. In addition, we have been regularly listed by *Peterson’s Competitive Colleges* and *Princeton Review’s Best 311 Colleges*. You may also be aware that the quality of our student body has been growing each year and that this fall one of every eight of our undergraduate students was either a valedictorian or salutatorian of his or her high school class.

But, let me share with you what some others have said. First, listen to the comments of some recent student visitors.

- Everyone says I am Ivy League material. [The student has an ACT of 35 and a 4.0 GPA.] But, I [am not going] to apply to Harvard or Yale. Neither can offer what Ohio Northern does. A personal, complete education and life experience is what I crave. I desire academic attention and professors who care about my education and my life goals. I do not feel any school but Ohio Northern can bring reality to the dreams I have of college. The feeling I got at Ohio Northern was that the classes are smaller, individuals are valued, exploration is promoted, professors are available for help, and the students are there to perform up to their potential....If I had built a college to my specifications, it could not be more perfect than ONU....
- Ohio Northern’s high academic standards coupled with an excellent science department will aid me in achieving my dream of becoming a doctor.
- I would enjoy ONU because it has an exemplary engineering school tucked away in a roomy, liberal arts setting.

Listen, as well, to the comments of our accreditors. In 1994, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools recommended continuing accreditation for ONU and pointed out that our “faculty is talented, devoted to teaching, and committed to the students it serves.” The report of the site visitors also noted that “the campus and facilities are impressive, beautiful, extensive, functional, and almost without deferred maintenance.” When the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) reaccredited our College of Engineering in 1997, it pointed out that “the quality of the students is excellent...Student scores on the Fundamentals of Engineering Examination are excellent and graduate placement in employment is outstanding.” In the same year, the National Association of Schools of Music noted that the Department of Music and the university provided “an outstanding program of artistic activities for the whole county...[which brings] a rich cultural environment to a rural area that encompasses approximately 100,000 people.”

Finally, listen to the comments a couple of our graduates make about the quality of their educational experience at ONU.

- The faculty was excellent and they provided the freedom to think and take risks with your ideas. They would let you go as far as you wanted to!
- I have used my education to not only strengthen my own performance, but also to educate my co-workers.
- [And, finally, from a Law graduate]...The personal touch I received from the faculty and staff was a far cry from my undergrad experience. I had never known any of my instructors like I got to know my law professors and vice-versa.

All of these comments point to the same thing: Quality and Excellence. These two characteristics, moreover, have been at the heart of this institution from the very beginning. As H.S. Lehr said in ONU's very first catalogue: “We aim, not only to impart the best instruction and to have our students independent thinkers, but also to assist them in acquiring the best modes of communicating what they know to others.” (8) Quality and Excellence have served as guiding principles in good times and bad and they must, without doubt, continue to play this role in the future.

The same can be said for our second core value, namely our insistence that students be the center of our focus and concern. When Toby and I visited Northern for the first time at the end of June, we had lunch with five remarkable ONU students. What an advertisement they were for this institution. How effusively they talked about their experiences at Northern, and, especially, about their interactions and relationships with faculty and staff. They certainly convinced us that students were at the heart of everything at this University. They also convinced us that we definitely wanted to be a part of Northern if we were fortunate enough to be given the opportunity.

Now that we've had time to learn more, though, we've concluded that what we experienced with these wonderful young people on a beautiful summer day in June is what has been part of this institution from the beginning. That beginning, of course, as many people in this room today know, was August 14, 1871. On that day, Henry Solomon Lehr officially opened a school that had been deliberately designed to be accessible to students. Lehr was concerned about students who, like him, might have to take time out from classes so they could work to earn the resources they needed to continue their studies. For them, Lehr divided the year into four parts to facilitate different combinations of study and work time. From the very beginning, therefore, students were at the center of Northern's focus. But, it wasn't just in the way terms and classes were laid out that this was apparent. On the first Friday in the life of the new university, August 18, 1871, Lehr got his students together to talk about the “Literary Societies” he wanted to become a part of their learning experience. These societies, the “Franklins,” “Philomatheans,” and, later, the “Adelphians,” became central components of the vibrant learning environment that characterized the early years of ONU.

And, this imperative, that we shall be focused, first and foremost, on the welfare of students shall continue to guide us in the future. So, too, will ONU's third core value, namely that it will be an institution where Christian caring and values are honored and celebrated. It is with great pride that I tell you today that Ohio Northern University is an institution where caring about others and the magnificent world in which we live is an integral part of everything that we are. And, our students celebrate this every day. This fall, for example, more than 300 students, on average, converge on the English Chapel every Wednesday at 11:00 to praise God and celebrate their faith. And, how they celebrate and give praise. They have a band, complete with drums and instrumentalists of all varieties. They dance (though ONU's third president, Dr. Albert Smith, would undoubtedly demur). They clap. They sing. They enjoy. Most importantly, they unabashedly and with great enthusiasm praise their Creator and what He has created. This doesn't happen, though, just on Wednesdays. Throughout the year, hundreds of ONU students participate in Habitat for Humanity, and a whole variety of other organizations and projects that are focused on caring for others and providing witness for their faith. It is a joy, I can assure you, to be with these wonderful young people. Each time, we marvel at the intensity of their commitments and faith.

As an institution that emphasizes Christian caring, we are, I am fond of saying, a university where values matter. We welcome conversations about good and bad, right and wrong. We believe there are standards of conduct and ethics of

behavior and professional interaction. We are unafraid to invite our students to enlist on the side of humanity, and to oppose hypocrisy at every opportunity. Yes, values matter at Ohio Northern and we're very proud of it.

None of this, of course, is new. ONU has been associated with the Methodist Church since 1899 and five of my nine predecessors were Methodist ministers. Indeed, it is as recently as 35 years ago that a Methodist pastor, at that time F. Bringle McIntosh, would be standing before you bringing remarks and good wishes. Moreover, it was our devout founder, H.S. Lehr, who created on August 17, 1871 the Student Prayer meeting that ultimately attracted 200 to 300 students on Saturday nights. And, it was one of my distinguished predecessors, Dr. Samuel L. Meyer, who reminded us so eloquently in his inauguration address on October 15, 1965, that:

The educational system is incomplete that ignores man's spiritual development. A man cannot live by reason alone. The development of the mind is not all that is involved in education. The whole man, wisely directed and committed to the permanent values, is really our concern. Those values constitute the wings we bequeath our youth. (36)

And, finally, it was Northern students who collected more than \$1,000, following the tragic events at Kent State University in the spring of 1970 to pay for an advertisement in the Washington Post that said, succinctly, "Civilization is the Victory of Persuasion Over Force." Can there be any doubt that values have always mattered at ONU and that Christian caring is an essential part of the fabric that is this University?

But, there is a fourth and final core value I want to share with you, Innovation and Persistence. During much of its history, ONU has faced crisis and adversity of one sort or another. On each occasion, however, it has found creative solutions that have enabled it to continue down the road of progressive development. For example, we are proud of this fall's enrollment of 3,159 students and tout it as the largest enrollment in the history of the institution. Yet, in 1885, H.S. Lehr reported that 2,364 different students had participated in college programming at some point during the year. What happened between 1885 and 1999? Well, the University, like the country as a whole, was faced with war, depression, and more war. By 1932, enrollment was down to 450. After climbing back to about 750 by 1937, it plunged to 156 in September of 1943 and to its lowest point ever in 1944. Indeed, at this point, there was only one student in the Law School. Yet, by 1947, enrollment was back to 1,000 students, and the institution was struggling with how it was going to meet the housing needs of the WWII veterans who were matriculating to the institution. In short, there has not been monotonic growth in enrollment at ONU since 1871. Rather, there has been constant oscillation, with all the worries and woes that come with this.

But, what about other aspects of the University? Has there been greater stability there? Today we take pride in our financial strength, emphasizing our endowment of more than \$113 million, our 43 consecutive years of balanced budgets, and the relative absence of deferred maintenance. Yet, when President Albert Smith was inaugurated as ONU's third president in 1905, the institution was in debt and in poor condition. Indeed, President Smith used his own money to purchase 600 Methodist hymnals for the Chapel because, as he said, "there was not a single song book in the building." (22) Similarly, in 1943, Dr. Robert McClure, ONU's fifth president, accepted no salary during his first year because of the need for the faculty to accept "deep salary cuts" if the institution was to survive. And, as recently, as January 1971, Dr. Samuel Meyer, ONU's seventh president, led the University into a program of financial "frugality and retrenchment" (39) because of threats to its future.

Throughout its history, then, ONU has faced one crisis after another. It has been, as historian Gene Belch reminds us, walking across a wind-swept prairie on a fragile high wire, blindfolded! Happily, though, on each occasion, the innovative creative spirit that pervades every corner of this institution has come forward to provide constructive solutions and productive alternatives. How could ONU keep its College of Law open with only one student? Because Judge Claude Pettit, after whom the Law School is named, drove from his practice in Lima to provide instruction. When the institution was in desperate need of money, buildings and equipment at the end of the 19th century, what did H.S. Lehr do? First, he very seriously contemplated turning ONU into a publicly supported state university. Indeed, had not the politics of late 19th century Ohio gotten in the way, we would be part of the public university system today. When this did not work, Lehr sought and ultimately found another suitor, the Methodist Church. A devout man, of enormous intellect and impeccable values, H.S. Lehr was also a "pragmatist." In addition, he was a great entrepreneur and public relations specialist! The debate between sitting Governor James Campbell and future U.S. President William McKinley on the ONU campus in 1891 was a grand affair that brought great attention to Lehr's school. And, again according to Belch, he "not only organized the debate, he dreamed up the whole idea...arranged the whole gaudy production, [and] served as publicity chief." (14)

The example of innovation and creativity that Lehr set in the early days has nourished and guided his successors as they have led ONU through good times and bad. We see it in Dr. F. Bringle McIntosh's inspiration, persistence and dedication as he refocused the campus after the "bitter disappointment" of not achieving North Central accreditation in 1955. "Dr

Mac's" dream was, of course, achieved in 1958. We see it in Dr. DeBow Freed, ONU's 9th president, as he led the campus from financial risk and debilitating internal turmoil to recognition as one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. We see it in Dr. Albert Smith as he rallied the campus after the devastating fire of 1913 and in Dr. Sam Meyer as he led the "book brigade" in 1968 when books were transferred from the old library to Heterick Memorial Library. Perhaps most importantly, we see it in the Dukes', Brown's, Biggs', Brookhart's, Young's, English's, Hughes', Herrel's, Clark's, Combe's, Elzay's, Stambaugh's, Smull's, Taggart's, Insley's, Hakes', Hedrick's, Frazer's, Pierstorf's, Faber's, Ludwig's -- Trustees and benefactors all who have supported and guided us to the enviable position in higher education we enjoy today.

Innovation and creativity, like quality and excellence, devotion to students, and an emphasis on Christian caring and the importance of values in every day life has been at the core of this institution throughout its 128-year journey. That will not change as we now enter the 21st century. Everything that we consider as we think about our vision for our future must start with these core values. For they are what have sustained us and defined the kind of institution Ohio Northern University will be.

We know, then, that Northern's future must build on the foundation of these core values. We know, as well, that it must incorporate the reality of the environment in which we find ourselves and that this environment will, at a minimum, be characterized by the continuing and rapid advance of technologies that will fundamentally transform our enterprise, new audiences and also new competitors, and exciting financial opportunities that will be accompanied, at least potentially, by monumental financial challenges. How do we propose to navigate this complex environment and thus move ONU forward in the next 100 years even further than it has come in the past almost 130? The answer to this question, at least in my view, is straightforward and unambiguous. We have printed it for you in the very front of your program. It is provided by Theodore Roosevelt, and it calls upon us, quite simply, to accept the responsibilities of the arena, to dare greatly, to strive valiantly, and to be a doer of deeds. For it is only in this way, Roosevelt reminds us, that we can know the exhilaration of satisfaction, accomplishment, and contribution.

My family and I have tried to live our lives in accordance with Roosevelt's advice. We have dreamed great dreams and we have stepped into the arena to accomplish them. Yes, our faces have been marred by dust and sweat and blood and we have certainly made errors and come up short again and again. But, more often than not, we've succeeded, and, on those occasions, we have, without question, felt the high achievement of triumph.

So, join me in the arena, and let us, together, as my esteemed colleague Sam Meyer advised nearly 30 years ago, "cut the cloth to fit the pattern made by the times in which we live." Ohio Northern's history and traditions suggest that the journey will be rich, rewarding and enormously fulfilling.