

President Gee  
Address to the Faculty  
Thursday, May 14, 2009  
Thompson Library

"Building from Ohio State's Core: the 21st Century Temple of Learning"

Thank you, Professor Tan and Professor Rudoff. Your gifts and talents have given us an inspiring beginning this afternoon.

Thank you all for joining me.

It is a real pleasure to hold our gathering in this handsome, newly reconfigured Thompson Library. I want to thank Joe Branin and his staff for making many accommodations to enable us to do so.

Given the nature of much of my own scholarship, I have a keen interest in academic libraries and have followed the progress of this remarkable facility since my return some 18 months ago.

It is impossible not to be awed by these sweeping spaces and wonderful views to the West. On the East side, gone is the dark, cramped extra floor that was added in the 1970s. And gone are many other walls. Everything has been uncovered. Windows have been extended and broadened to connect the building's interior with the Oval and beyond. At once, we are pulling people in from the long walk, opening up from the interior, and becoming part of the infinite horizon here to the West.

I asked Joe to let us hold this talk here — before the building is opened to the public — because libraries are the temples of learning. This library is the physical, intellectual, and historical heart of the University, and it seems only right and proper that its debut is with our faculty.

I wanted us to gather in this renewed physical space because I see it as a metaphor for the kinds of transformations that we as a faculty are undertaking together at this uncommonly challenging moment. The renovation very deliberately combines firm roots in the finest traditions of the past with a distinctly forward-thinking approach to the needs of learners and to human and community engagement. And we, as a faculty, are on a similar journey.

The transformations of this building provide the refracted lens through which I envision our work in the coming months. That is the metaphor which has developed as I thought through my remarks for today. I will come back to this notion and explore it further in a few minutes.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we met last fall, amid the wonderful Warhol exhibition in the Wexner Center, I delivered something of a status report on the University. A nuts-and-bolts discussion of everything from my mishaps while milking a cow to student preparedness to faculty award-winners and newly promoted and newly hired leaders. And so many other programmatic and policy details.

Today, there is surely even more to discuss. But in this grand space — full of promise and possibility — a State of the University report would not do. My intent this afternoon is very different.

I want to use this time together to think through some critical, larger issues that have come into sharp relief during the last several months. Specifically, what today's disquieting circumstances mean for higher education and for our University in particular.

Let me state my meaning quite clearly: This time of great global uncertainty — with all of its angst and insecurity — this is Ohio State's liberating moment of opportunity.

We must seize this instant, use it to create long-term advantage, and become among the most innovative universities in the nation. To do so, we must thoroughly re-evaluate our ideas, revitalize our perspectives, renew our shared passion for teaching, learning, and discovery, and re-commit to the ideals of education in a democracy.

When we gathered in mid-October, the world looked very different than it does today. Our nation was in the final throes of a presidential election, and we were in the early stages of what we now see as a worldwide economic meltdown. In some respects, last fall's lack of confidence was replaced with a paralyzing panic attack. Fortunately, things have begun to stabilize; but nonetheless the fallout remains.

When we last met, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had just begun its precipitous decline.

Seven months ago, we were first hearing about bank and automotive industry bailouts. Now, one of the United States' iconic auto companies has filed for bankruptcy.

In October, the nation's unemployment rate was 6.5 percent. Last week, that rate had climbed more than two full points to nearly 9 percent. Ohio's numbers are even grimmer.

All but a few of this nation's 50 states are facing substantial budget gaps, and state-supported universities are once again enduring reductions to help fill them.

The “trickle down” to higher education has, indeed, been more akin to a rushing current.

A few examples to illustrate the whole.

Public colleges in South Carolina are receiving 18 percent less in state aid this year. Florida’s are undergoing a 9 percent drop.

At Arizona State University, all employees are being required to take up to 15 days of unpaid leave by the end of next month. Some four dozen academic programs are being eliminated, and leaders are considering closing two of its four campuses.

In some ways, California’s situation is the most extreme. Faced with a 15 percent budget reduction over the next two years, the University of California is increasing tuition by 10 percent. At the same time, they are reducing freshmen enrollment by 2,300 students. The state’s community college system already has 100,000 more students this year — without additional funds. The so-called “flight to price” phenomenon threatens to become the exodus to nowhere.

As dire as all of that might seem, though, our public universities are in a marginally better spot than our private counterparts. Public institutions have become accustomed to coping with the caprice of public funding streams. Planning for reductions is thoroughly ingrained in our budget management processes, even when times are flush.

Today, we are seeing something new: Private colleges and universities are reeling. With some institutions relying on endowment earnings for as much as 40-to-50 percent of their operating budgets, they are suffering as never before. And I will tell you, many are making mistakes.

Harvard University’s endowment fell by 30 percent last year. Now, as others are doing, the university is offering buyouts to 1,600 non-faculty employees. From one perspective, that is the most humane thing to do. From another, though, the institution is simply encouraging its most talented staff members — those who are likeliest to find employment elsewhere — to leave.

Because of their limited revenue streams, the *small* private colleges are the hardest hit.

Dartmouth College — which has lost \$700 million of its endowment during the past six months — is laying off dozens of staff members and eliminating even more positions through early retirement.

At Beloit College, *tuition* accounts for three-quarters of its income. Projected fall enrollment there has slid, tossing the college into a likely \$1 million budget

shortfall. The result? Some 40 positions — faculty and staff — have been eliminated.

And I could cite so many other examples — Yale, Stanford, Princeton, and others — in the same vein.

Public and private alike, our responses have been predictable and defensive.

At best, those across-the-board kinds of reductions have frozen colleges and universities in time. At worst, they have seriously hindered institutional progress — intellectually and creatively, as well as in service to students and to communities.

Those are troubling facts, and this is a particularly ornery moment. I mention them because they are the back-story for the enormous opportunities that lie ahead. They are requisite for the changes that are so dearly needed in American higher education. And they are the preamble for this institution's unmatched possibilities.

The current economic crisis will fundamentally reset our country for the next 50 years. It will reset our values, our direction, and our ability to be competitive. And higher education will be at the center of that foundational change. The world of ideas, Ohio State's fundamental currency, must be the driving force for the future.

I firmly believe this will become the century of the American university, and this University must be the best-positioned in the country to lead the way.

That is not just another line in just another speech. It is not hyperbole. It is certainly not intended as pallid inspiration.

After nearly 30 years of leading universities, I understand the landscape. And I will tell you this: Today, at this moment, Ohio State has the unequivocal ability to assume leadership on a global scale.

We have here in Ohio elected leaders who understand the transformative power of higher education. Governor Strickland and leaders from both parties in the Ohio House and Senate have made unprecedented commitments to higher education — fully funding our tuition freeze for two years. And in so doing, they have made our state a leader nationally in higher education funding.

The tremendous commitment of our elected leaders — while making so many difficult decisions about the budget — carries with it a commensurately large responsibility for us. We have a firm duty to transform our institution into the most successful, most efficient, and most responsive university in the nation.

Our ability to realize that potential begins with you.

We have at this University an unmatched breadth and depth of faculty expertise.

We have a wise and supportive governing board.

We have the most spirited and caring alumni in the country.

We have robust international engagements.

We have talented, motivated staff.

We have well-prepared students who are determined to work for a better and more just world.

A greatly challenging time, to be sure. But the confluence of advantages is even greater — and we must use this propitious moment or it will be forever lost.

This is not another crest-and-trough cycle. It is a foundational shift upon which we must capitalize. I believe that this is precisely the moment that American higher education has needed.

This economic upheaval — disquieting and difficult as it is — has loosened us from our moorings. It enables us to make substantial changes and to grow exponentially more effective in what we do at Ohio State.

At this moment, we must not fall back on the white-knuckles approach to riding out the storm. In the same way, we can no longer tinker at the margins — of budget structures, program design, and so much more — and claim success.

We must be willing to re-imagine what higher education can and should look like in the coming century. And then we must have the courage and the confidence to chart an entirely new course, a wholly different path forward.

In doing so, we must finally ask questions central to our institutional operating principles.

Are our promotion and tenure criteria the right ones? Is it really necessary that all faculty be all things to all people — fabulous teachers, leading-edge researchers, and dedicated hands-on public servants? Whom does that model exclude from our institutions? What talents are left untapped? What kinds of scholarship do those criteria reward — and discourage?

Other fundamental questions.

How have we organized ourselves? Does the standard department model work best for us and for our students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What other ways might we configure ourselves to truly address the large, complex, global issues that are needing resolution?

Have we become too narrow in our definition of scholarship? Have we begun over-specializing to the point of obscurity?

Are we emphasizing quantity over quality so that we encourage faculty to write too much, but not to think enough?

Additional questions arise in our expectations for students.

Are we supporting our graduate students in the ways that are most useful, given the world into which they graduate? Are we assuring that their scholarship — both in form and content — gives them the education and the skills they need when they leave Ohio State?

And finally, are we nurturing and challenging undergraduates in the most effective manner?

As you likely know, I have strong opinions about all of these questions. They are central to our University's future, as they are to our state's and our nation's.

A friend of mine, Mark Taylor, recently wrote an opinion piece on these topics that ran in the New York Times. Mark is chair of the Department of Religion at Columbia. He is an eclectic thinker, but no radical. As friends do, we agree on some points and disagree on others.

I was interested to see Mark raise the seminal issues, but even more interested — and altogether disheartened — to watch the vitriolic firestorm his column ignited.

The letters in the New York Times in response were uniformly doctrinaire. Mark's column was tantamount to heresy. He had spoken against the code of the realm.

All of the frothing and foaming, it seems to me, underscores an academic community often bereft of intellectual courage and freedom. One in which a disturbing, false binary prevails: It is always thus, and we need not consider otherwise.

As a community of scholars, we must be willing not only to tolerate colleagues' opinions about things that matter deeply; we must also be bold enough to engage with them in thoughtful, civil dialog. In the abstract, that is surely what

we imagine to be at the core of the Academy. In practice, I fear, it is all too often something different entirely.

And we cannot allow that to happen at Ohio State. We must be active stewards of our grand inheritance.

This great University, the living legacy of Abraham Lincoln, has not simply been left in our custodial care. Our responsibilities are much greater than tending to the status quo.

We cannot be foolhardy enough to believe that the way this University is configured today — not so very different from what existed in Medieval Bologna and Salamanca — is the eternal pathway to salvation.

If the world is such a wildly different place now than it was last October, then how can anyone deny the dramatically changed needs of our students during the past several hundred years?

Have we really got it right?

Not debating, not acting, not changing is, itself, a decision. It is a quiet capitulation to inertia and a pernicious form of tyranny. To fight it, we must always be questioning — ourselves, our policies, our structural design, our way of working with one another.

This is true for me; it is true for the provost, the deans, our staff, and our faculty.

To speak plainly: I believe we cannot allow ourselves to have a *de facto* policy of benign neglect. We must apply our full intellectual energy to evaluate honestly the best interests of our students, our state, and our nation.

Doing so requires us to free ourselves from parochial interests and territorial claims, to reject hardened attitudes, and to think and speak openly about the possibilities created by a rapidly changing world.

We are taking some positive, tangible steps.

We are moving forward aggressively to recombine Arts and Sciences — to make it the most powerful intellectual platform in the country by removing structural and budgetary boundaries and facilitating faculty collaboration. That work is, in many respects, the single most important intellectual venture at Ohio State during the past 20 years — and may well be for the next 20 years.

A close second is the shift to a semester system. After having been on the quarter system for 87 years now, the University's transition will admittedly be difficult. It is going to take extraordinary time and effort by faculty. And there are

bound to be issues we have not yet considered. I trust that as engaged University citizens, you will view your rethinking of course curricula and structure as an opportunity to re-engage with the subject matter.

Another major transformation — both physically and intellectually — is occurring with our Medical Center. Partnerships of all kinds are flourishing, translational medicine is taking hold, and plans for the expanded facilities are proceeding apace.

Those efforts — and so many others across campus — represent a fully rounded approach to transinstitutional endeavors throughout the University. They are important steps in creating here new systems and structures to facilitate and support innovative work. They are steps on which we must build.

Return, for a moment, to the metaphor with which I began my remarks — the meaning behind the physical transformation of this remarkable library.

It is important to note that the changes were not — and are not — universally acclaimed. I was not here during the planning stages, but as Joe Branin tells it, many traditionalists were very distraught when he revealed plans to substantially reduce the library's holdings.

But he and his team were right to do so. As comforting as it is — particularly for those of us of a certain age — to be surrounded by volumes of great and profound thought, the world has changed around us, and in spite of us.

Our students still rely heavily on books and manuscripts, but they also are increasingly savvy enough to know the good electronic resources from the unreliable ones. And the holdings formerly available here will be accessible remotely.

Most important, this generation of students needs to work together. It is fully a part of their DNA, and our curriculum increasingly calls for them to collaborate on so much of their work. Group spaces that have been created here will greatly improve their ability to accomplish their work on campus.

Quite simply, this library will be able to fulfill its purposes of today and tomorrow only because it has changed. And, of course, we must anticipate that the room in which we sit today will likely look very different one hundred years hence. Nothing is static.

The physical transformation is only part of my point. The changing role of libraries — and universities — is the other.

As homes for preservation, libraries enable us — and those who will follow us — to fairly judge the past, to hold our ancestors to account, and to hold ourselves to account as well.

Yet, while the preservation role of libraries remains just as important as ever, new responsibilities are joining it. A responsibility to be much more than museums for ideas, history, and culture. A responsibility to return to being the center of cultural life for our universities and for the larger communities we serve.

Looking back well past Bologna, we see the protean library as our contemporary model.

Recall the great library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt. It held as many as one million scrolls, and it also had a garden, a zoo, a museum, a lecture hall, and even living quarters for scholars. Imagine how vibrant that city must have been 2,000 years ago because the library was at its core. The current renaissance of the library at Alexandria is powerful testament to its centrality and enduring importance.

Why should our aspirations for this Thompson Library — and the University itself — be any less?

I worry some that in the daily press of duties, we sometimes forget the larger purposes of the institution to which we have devoted ourselves.

This nation's universities — particularly our public ones — are repositories of human achievement, sanctuaries for the human spirit, and incubators of human aspiration. On a personal level, they are part of both an active and a contemplative life. On a larger level, they are part of a social compact that helps to move civilization ever forward. They assure cultural and technological advancement, foster intellectual curiosity, sustain civil public discourse, hone appreciation for others and others' ideas, and, of course, inform and educate those who will follow us on this earth.

With those profound public purposes in mind — and at this most auspicious moment in time — our task is to use our great position of strength to re-cast the University and become the true agents of change in this country — the nucleus of intellectual ferment, economic development, and social, cultural, and artistic vitality.

That monumental responsibility — that great opportunity — is uniquely ours as this nation's most complex, most exciting land-grant university.

Who else can assume this kind of leadership position?

I give great deference to the strong leaders we have now, on both sides of the aisle, in Columbus and in Washington, D.C. I applaud their changed agenda, their support for scientific research, and their attention to so many other things that matter greatly to our future.

Yet, in spite of superb individual leadership, political institutions are, ultimately, political institutions. Because their scope is limited to governance, they simply cannot effect the kinds of wholesale changes that are now so urgently needed. A substantial part of our calling as a great public university is to partner with them to create the kinds of changes that are so necessary today.

That leaves to us an opportunity of a lifetime — to become the leading force for innovation and change in this country. The nucleus of innovation in literature, the arts, and music. The hub of scientific and medical advances that directly improve lives and stimulate long-term economic growth. The most innovative place for learning and discovery. The most dynamic campus life in the nation. And the integrated resource for help in our communities and around the world.

We must take what Lincoln imagined for us and re-conceptualize it for the needs of today and tomorrow. Re-shape our institution, just as we have re-shaped this library.

To fully realize our immense opportunity — to change our institution — we must change ourselves. We cannot imperil ourselves by not acting.

We must stop seeing collaboration as ceding territory and start seeing the greater good.

We must embrace a willingness to think anew about ourselves and to honestly and openly consider others' ideas.

We must become an agile, collaborative, and bureaucracy-free institution.

We cannot allow our insecurities to prevail. Nor can we slink away, citing academic tradition as gospel.

We cannot hide behind our Midwestern modesty. Without question, this is a world-class institution. I have presided over other world-class institutions, and I know one when I lead one. We must all know it and stop thinking anything less of ourselves and our colleagues.

And as the University reinvents itself, so also must our other civic institutions. Our state and federal governments. Our foundations and other non-profit organizations. Our business and industrial partners.

This is our time. This is our University. This is our unprecedented moment of opportunity. And we must move quickly, think creatively, and press forward with a common purpose that is unerring. One that will enable us to make good on our great promise.

I will end with a passage John Glenn reminded me of several days ago — something from an address Ralph Waldo Emerson gave to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Although he spoke these words 160 years ago, their ring is timeless and true. Emerson said:

“If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era?

“This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”

So says Emerson.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for joining me today. I am so very grateful for the ways you enrich this institution. And I am grateful for the many ways you enrich my life personally.

I believe that together we can and will realize our great opportunity at this most remarkable time.