

President to Presidents Lecture  
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AASCU Presidents as ‘Stewards of Place’

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I was more than surprised when Muriel called me with the invitation from the AASCU Board to join you here today. I know many of you, and have listened with rapt attention over the years to informative and insightful presentations offered by our presidential colleagues.

I was truly honored, but I did not immediately reply. I sought the counsel of a trusted colleague whose penchant is for clarity and plain speaking, and I knew he would be a welcomed reality check.

For, what to say to you, here, today who speak every week to a *mélange* of audiences on the broadest possible spectrum of issues. I thought to myself, “Would this be 30 minutes or so where all are politely attentive while waiting to check those ever-vibrating devices we all carry for the “message of the moment”?”

I was tempted to retreat into the familiar sanctuary of my lifelong academic interests and explore the global political, economic, and cultural transformations underway in the Middle East or other combustible regions, and the corresponding impact on US foreign policy and American global interests.

I also thought of telling the tale of my passage to this role and life style we have in common. I have listened closely to several of you at other AASCU gatherings as you captured our interest and admiration with personal histories punctuated by accomplishment, persistence,

courage and, often, heroism. On the Richter scale of riveting personal narratives, mine would not cause the needle to spike.

But I will offer a bit of personal orientation. Though I grew up in equal parts in Chicago and Seattle and pursued my post high school education in San Francisco, Denver and other US and global venues, and worked over these past 45 years in several states, I have lived, taught and served most of my working life in Oklahoma, and at two AASCU institutions. For those of you living near oceans, Oklahoma is in the middle of Middle America, a fly-over state for many. Oklahoma sits atop Texas with Oklahoma City and UCO about six hours directly north of this gathering on I-35. We are a young state with about 4 million residents who call Oklahoma home.

With 25 public colleges and universities, we in Oklahoma are in a continuing campaign to preserve shrinking state resources. In my “first life” at UCO as provost beginning in 1999, the state provided about 60 percent of our budget. Like many of you, that level of support today is the stuff of fantasy. This year we stand at 24 percent. I know many of you face even leaner state circumstances. In fact, a recent study by one of my UCO colleagues found that just 3 of 61 surveyed AASCU presidents said their budget is just fine. Viewed another way, the survey found that less than one percent of us are not confronted with the continuing issue of how to produce more graduates for America’s workforce with fewer resources.

To fulfill our accepted responsibilities, resources are essential. Currently, we find ourselves on a pathway of access to public funding that is unsustainable. Legislative understanding of higher education and its essential role in state-building is eroding via “legislative turnover, partisanship and polarization.” Our value to society is being lost in this maelstrom.

So for these few moments today, I would like to think aloud about us as presidents and our institutions, and about us and our community and society-building responsibilities in a global knowledge economy and in a world of challenges with no easy answers. I believe that to weather the challenge, it is crucial that we remember and embrace our historic roles as Stewards of Place.

As AASCU presidents we are fortunate to have, more so than any other category of institution, unique campuses whose heritage, social purpose, and missions have dramatic, tangible, and visible impact on the lives of others. Our social role is to build sustainable communities by constructing vibrant, local economies; by stewarding the development of our students to become community’s crucial social resource; and by resolving sociological issues, applying those student resources to produce healthy schools and happy families via civic engagement and service-learning projects. We are cultivating students to be “Stewards of These Places”.

## **SCUs can be the neglected higher education sibling**

We are regional universities, the middle child in America's public educational system. Generally, we don't generate decisive, sustained amounts of research grants that are integral components of our budgets. As a rule, we don't benefit from ad valorem taxes from the communities we serve. There is more than casual speculation that in the continuing distillation of higher education funding in the US, that we are not the first among equals in the minds of legislators, city councils, major foundations, the largest corporations, national reporters or sports enthusiasts. Polemicists and harbingers of darker times speculate that we may not be the last institutions standing once the shrinking of government to its irreducible minimum has, finally, been accomplished.

It is time for us to collectively and realistically reaffirm the role of our institutions in addressing and resolving the complex challenges of this dynamic era. Specifically, we must directly engage in the conversation about our role in sustaining the expected workforce for the technologically-contoured global knowledge economy, **AND** in preparing citizens who will be asked to validate those public policy decisions that affect all of society, including us. We are summoned to guide our institutions in the defining work of building citizens as stewards. In our finest moments, we are servant-leaders.

The rising demand from the marketplace and the responding legislative chambers calls for more career-ready, STEM-emphasis graduates. This is but one dimension of our shared responsibility. With equal resolve and fervor, we must also ensure that the collegiate experience has intentionally attuned our students to their roles as active citizens in a responsive, vibrant democracy. We contend that our institutions, many that have been serving our states and regions for a century and more, help students learn, **SO THAT** they may become productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders. Our common pattern has been that we grow public leaders who serve our regions and beyond.

In fact, we should declare that workforce/career skills and civic skills are dimensions of the same reality, and that the 21<sup>st</sup> century personal success skills we engender are essential building blocks for the communities we serve. At UCO, we've defined this common ground as the Central Six: teaching discipline knowledge; developing leadership capacity; providing opportunities for problem-solving via research, scholarly and creative activities; encouraging service learning and civic engagement; developing global and cultural competencies; and instilling a commitment to a healthy lifestyle.

Well over a decade ago, I had the good fortune to be present, here in Texas, for the initial interactions that spawned AASCU's American Democracy Project. The moment was propitious. I believe all knew something atypical was occurring. The energy was high, the interaction intense, with comments flowing at sidebars of twos and threes. I was a provost then and one of the original 16 among whom this national initiative first found fertile ground. ADP is now a

distinct chapter in the accomplishments AASCU can rightly claim and AASCU is the only national presidents association articulating such an explicit commitment to civic outcomes. As Tom Ehrlich, Anne Colby and others have counseled and written over the years, we must be intentional and clear about our mission. We are educating citizens. And this role matters.

There are many such AASCU programs and initiatives that are timely and relevant to our role as stewards of place. Through AASCU's leadership and our active participation in framing its agenda, we are positioned to influence the perceptions of our numerous external stakeholders toward a greater appreciation for our remarkable social value.

Initiatives like ADP are crucial in this contemporary confluence of political polarization, unprecedented challenge, and hyper-change, we are called to cultivate a culture of hope and opportunity, of support and engagement. Such initiatives define our role in this global knowledge economy, in this era of direct, immediate personal access to the world's expanding trove of information. They encourage us to set aside worn ideas and past practices less effective and prized in this age of instantaneous access and connection.

We can affect this prevailing condition by asserting our roles as thought leaders, facilitators and collaborative partners in our respective communities and states in meeting the accelerating challenge of change and unprecedented global connection. Our AASCU institutions are uniquely positioned to assist those stakeholders within our service regions to achieve common ground for the common good.

Building citizens is a defined and critical core of what we do, and of who we are. This responsibility links directly to our devotion to education, learning and contributing to the development of civic culture. As the grassroots institutions of our states, we are the proselytizers and caretakers of the transformational passage from seeking knowledge to intentionally and collaboratively applying it to address the full spectrum of societal challenges and opportunities.

Amid this swirl we call "life in 2015", what matters?

"In the end, we remember what we experience".

As we consider our advocacy roles in this current reality, we must remember to appreciate the historical continuum of higher education in the United States. Many of us here are the beneficiaries of the "Golden Age" of public higher education largesse. We attended college in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, when adding classroom buildings, constructing new residence halls, expanding our academic programs, and achieving designations as "universities" were the stuff of every day routine. Our current perspectives may be a bit distorted by those fond memories.

We must recall, though, the historic truisms from the preceding decades of higher education in America. Before the Golden Age, the consistent refrains among some business leaders, and decision-makers seem reminiscent of those we sometimes hear today:

- Presidents are ineffective leaders.
- The academic curriculum for students is of little value to society at large, and is of marginal relevance to the needs of employers and graduates.
- A college degree costs too much.

Since the 1990's, the pendulum has swung away from the Golden Age and back to the societal attitudes and opinions that permeated the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and earlier that questioned our actual social contribution.

Our higher education predecessors responded to these tensions by defending the core social contributions of their institutions, and also by revising their academic programs and institutional structures to meet societal demands. We, too, must not forget that as a social institution, we have been deputized by society to advance knowledge, to educate our students, and to serve as the sentry who challenges those perspectives that can harm the greater good. We must acknowledge that since society has empowered us to fulfill the roles it defined for us, society can alter those roles.

### **Everything seems to be changing all at once....**

The present-day social tensions are not occurring in a vacuum. Some observers note we are in a cycle of a “dysfunction narrative” when everything is changing due in part to the revolution in technology and communications. We are 15 years into this self-defined disruptive era, still in its infancy. For perspective, two previous great communication watersheds were the invention of writing and the Guttenberg printing press. They disrupted everything.

One consequence for us is that we are in an era of information and decision overload. In *The Organized Mind*, Daniel Levitin offers that we are living in a world with 300 exabytes (300 billion billion bytes) of information, and expanding. Yet, the processing capacity of the conscious mind is a mere 120 bits per second. Neuroscientists tell us that unproductivity can result from such decision overload. Scientists concluded that in 2011, Americans took in five times as much information as they did in 1986—the equivalent of 175 newspapers.

Levitin says we are surrounded on the planet by billions of other people; however, we can only understand two at a time. Hence, we often feel overwhelmed by managing some of the most basic aspects of life.

Cathy Davidson, a professor of interdisciplinary studies at Duke, expands on Levitin's findings. She offers this conclusion:

"People seem to think they know what school is, and they know what work is. We live in a world where anyone can learn anything, anytime, anywhere, but we haven't remotely reorganized our workplace or school for this age."

This is sobering, plain speaking.

So, as stewards of place, what is our present-day strategy both to protect our valued historic role and be responsive to the demands of society?

It may be that at least a portion of our answer and our bedrock and anchor remains in our core values as state colleges and universities. These were expressed clearly in the draft documents of the American Democracy Project:

- We create citizen laboratories, with hands-on opportunities to collaboratively connect and model the way for one another.
- We strive to help students learn so that they may become productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders.
- We intentionally provoke character development, one of the keys to integrity and democratic citizenship.
- We implicitly understand our role as stewards of place. This is not solely about economic development, but importantly it is the development of human talent—economic, political, social and moral—rooted in the premise that human talent is society's only truly sustainable resource.

Our students internalize these ADP values through interactions that are both exceptional and unique to AASCU institutions. These were described by Brandon Busted in the publication *Quartz*, when he synthesized The Gallup-Purdue Index, a massive study of 30,000 college graduates in the U.S. It measured the degree to which graduates were engaged in their work and communities and thriving in their purpose, social, financial, community and physical well-being. Gallup measured beyond earnings to gather broader outcomes.

Busted noted that Gallup concluded that the college degree was a marker of accomplishment, and "worth its weight in gold," BUT only for those graduates who made the most of their experience as students. Graduates performed better on every measure of long-term success when they engaged in these so-called "Big Six" college experiences.

They are at the core of AASCU institutions. Again, our unique role positions us more than other higher education category to affect students' lives. When we do our jobs the right

way, when as presidents we act as servant leaders and ‘model the way’, we virtually can guarantee that these six experiences can be delivered to our students. They are:

1. A professor who made them excited about learning
2. Professors who cared about them as a person
3. A mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams
4. Worked on a long term project, often with others
5. Had a job or internship, often in the community, where they applied what they learned
6. Were extremely involved in extracurricular activities with emphasis on volunteerism and service learning.

(Sound familiar?!)

The students with these experiences agree that college prepared them for life after graduation, encouraged them to be “thriving” in all elements of well-being, and to be engaged in work and in the community. One tangible measurement of this is that Big Six students complete college and enter their communities more quickly than those who attend college at other kinds of institutions.

As presidents, we help our graduates to achieve these objectives and self-awareness by the cultures we encourage. We are servant leaders dedicated to our students and, through them, our communities.

Our students will chart their paths in the cauldron of incessant change. Author Don Seidman believes that we have reached a tipping point. "The world is not just rapidly changing; it is being dramatically re-shaped. The world operates differently, it is not just interconnected, it is interdependent. More than ever before, we rise and fall together."

This reminds me of the prediction made by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin about 100 years ago in the midst of the nationalistic fervor that spawned World War I. He said “the age of nations is passed. If we are not to perish, we must set aside our ancient prejudices and build the earth”.

Higher education, local to global, should be a voice for peace and global understanding based on this unprecedented era of change and opportunity to connect, collaborate, create and redefine community and citizenship. Eric Hoffer taught us that "In times of change, learners shall inherit the earth."

We now accept our roles of building the bridges of global civil society, institution to institution, person to person, around, beyond and, perhaps, in spite of government to government relationships. We are fueling the next iteration of global civil society.

If these places we serve matter, and we matter to the vitality of these places, then it is time for a continuing reappraisal (not necessarily agonizing), and, perhaps, a change in tactics. It is time to be less defensive and apologetic.

Some might contend that we have strayed away from True North amid the unequal comparisons and lack of confidence in our worth to society and the cascades of criticisms of what we do. Some critics posit that we have lost sight of our special purpose, our unique heritage that has linked us to families and the communities where they live, work, raise families and dream of a rich and full life for those they cherish.

Though we all attract and accept students from the breadth of America and the far reaches of the globe, we are, from our inception in our states and communities, their universities. We know their parents and their children. We taught generations of families who instinctively looked to us for the next steps in preparing them and their loved ones for a prosperous and meaningful life.

For me, this reality is reaffirmed at every commencement, every hand shake and every smile.

Kevin Reilly, the former president of the University of Wisconsin System (and my former boss), described some fundamental “constants” in a speech he delivered in 2013 after a decade of leadership: he labeled them as “lessons learned over the long haul: shapes shifted and constants confirmed.”

I believe he outlined some of the core responsibilities of every president must embrace if we are to fulfill our obligations as stewards of place in this era of change:

We must operate in an atmosphere of (1) mutual trust, (2) clear communications and (3) be the keepers of the flame.

Mutual trust is essential and is an ongoing process of building and nurturing relationships. If this is overlooked or taken for granted, it results in a perilous path for the individual and institution.

Open and clear communications are necessary, but they can be surprisingly tricky to maintain. Communications require tactical and tactful approaches, being mindful that sharing information is not always a straightforward process.



**SCUs are the keepers of the flame.**

One of the unwritten roles of the university, and those who serve there is as "keeper of the flame". We face calls to prepare students to be sought-after employees. But it is our distinct domain to remind social influencers of higher education's larger purpose. We are here not only to prepare our students for careers, but also to help develop engaged, enlightened citizens to be leaders in a globally competitive, 21st century democracy.

We build society from the grassroots up by educating citizens. As stewards of place, we offer and operate a set of diverse learning experiences that nurture and stimulate student and citizen success. This role and service must come to be recognized and valued as a critical dimension of what we do, and who we are.

Communities, the places and people among whom we live, are laboratories where the skills of effective and ethical engagement should be sculpted and refined. The community becomes a natural extension of our classrooms, and many of you here today are exemplars of how to accomplish this vital linkage.

Students who serve the community through civic engagement or service-learning projects are being introduced into a culture of public service. Guided by the knowledgeable hand of faculty and staff, they experience the real-world application of their emerging competencies. We know our students demand and relish the opportunity to learn first-hand that their college experience is relevant. Here, among us, is the convergence of both workplace/career and civic life aspirations and goals.

This is no facile undertaking in a time of expanding inequality and the polarization that almost precludes fruitful public discourse. Economic, social, and civic challenges are greater than ever. But we stand in the midst of this division and mutual recrimination with an alternative, as Campus Compact reminds us, of "re-establishing space for meaningful democratic deliberation."

One encouraging strategy is our role as champions of collaboration. Though I doubt many of us ever actually inhabited an "ivory tower," as a concept it is, and has been used by detractors to lengthen the litany of higher education's pejorative attributes. It serves as an added pretext and justification for reducing state financial support. But we know the power of connection and its ability to weaken stereotypes such as these. All of us here today can enumerate multiple relationships that tie us and our institutions to others at the local, regional and state levels. At the optimum, we are inextricably interwoven with our places.

Arizona State University's Michael Crow reminds us that higher education has reached a defining crossroads in which society demands that we demonstrate our value as social institutions. He contends that "if we stay static" we will dramatically underperform in preparing

people for what lies ahead. “Our role as educators,” he continues, “is to produce master learners from the entire breadth of society in large numbers at the lowest possible cost without giving up anything. And we are also to be known for the students we include, not exclude, and how well we educate them. This is what the new American university has to deliver.”

AASCU institutions are best-positioned in all of higher education to demonstrate value and commitment to our democracy. We are non-elitist, affordable, accessible, with learning outcomes focused on the critical thinking skills students will need to thrive after college. Critical thinking is prized because it is not discipline-bound, and it is highly adaptive, a key quality of continuing success in a volatile environment. We are helping our students to be nimble, flexible, and adaptive. We are meeting the test of AAC&U’s LEAP Challenge to provide “an education for a world of unscripted problems.”

We should be encouraged by the efforts in civic learning being advanced from a number of quarters and colleagues. In the AAC&U report, *“Civic Prompts, making civic learning routine across the disciplines,”* Caryn McTighe Musil, invites us to “infuse all disciplines and specialized studies with a civic lens.”

And Barry Schwartz, who offered in the Chronicle last June that it is liberal arts education that offers us perspective on the disciplines. Liberal arts are the linchpin of general education that “enriches the specialized training of the disciplines.” Our institutions must “articulate our unique value in real detail, in a way that it makes clear that students who have training in the liberal arts will not only be better people and better citizens, but also be better professionals and employees”

David Brooks, in the *Road to Character*, expands on these themes. He points to the dichotomy between “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Resume virtues are the competencies that are important to becoming good doctors, lawyers, and teachers. But, as Brooks tells us, we can sense eulogy virtues in a deeply good person. When those individuals are kind and thoughtful to others, we can tell that it is because of who they are, their personal values and sense of commitment to improving the lives of others. These virtues are important to becoming good citizens, parents, spouses and friends. And the eulogy virtues of being known as a good person are needed by our students as much for material and professional success as they provide for moral success.

In the journal *Liberal Education*, Ira Harkavy earlier this year offered this critical linkage between what we say and do, with whom we do it, and the strengthening of the sinew of civic virtue.

“When institutions of higher education give very high priority to actively solving real-world problems in and with their communities, a much greater likelihood exists that they

will significantly advance learning, research, teaching and service. More specifically, by focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities (such as poverty, poor schooling, inadequate healthcare), institutions of higher education will generate knowledge that is nationally and globally significant and be better able to realize their primary mission of contributing to a healthy, democratic society.”

Our universities can instill a passion in students for community connection and service that extends far beyond graduation into life habits, thereby enriching the fabric of society.

We can connect students and their ambitions with a sense of meaning and public purpose that both transcend and complete their personal goals.

Amid the dissonance and discord that characterize our contemporary political environment, we can offer a clarifying experience focused on the search for meaning and purpose, and the development of personal values and a civic culture.

Investment in the stewardship of place makes sense. We are growing the next cadre of public servants, civically attentive citizens. As a collective goal that unites institutions like ours, this also makes motivational sense. We can best effect these outcomes via a breadth and depth of our collaboration rarely documented in higher education. Students are our co-conspirators in this societal service. They teach and they learn, and we learn and we teach.

We are speaking of a strategy for institutional relevance, for thriving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Such collective, bold, purposeful efforts clarify that we matter, and that these places, from rural counties to the inner city, from intimate colleges of a few hundred to multi-campus institutions of many thousands, these places and the people who call them home, do matter.

### **We come to work each day for a reason.....**

I believe that we, as AASCU presidents, share a common focus, a personal, persistent imperative for rising as early as we do, committing the days and nights and weekends and our lives to advancing the power of learning and demonstrating its relevance to our students. We do this so that lives will be enriched and communities will prosper. We proselytize about the power of education to transform lives and to change states. But beyond the personal growth and sense of accomplishment, beyond the individual enrichment that a college education can offer, there is another goal.

That objective is linked directly to the future of the communities, regions and states where we are located and who have been our partners for decades.

We are welcoming ports of entry for first generation students, be she 17 or 18, for us at UCO this past graduation, 82 years young. We at UCO have been educating people in the territory and then the state of Oklahoma since the 1890s, and yet this fall about 54 percent of our entering students were the first in their families to attend college.

Let us not be defined by others. Let's abandon any defensive posture that finds us reacting to the latest damning critique of higher education. Let's continue to actively nurture the culture that educates workforce and citizens, entrepreneurs and great neighbors and parents, that links the personal opportunities offered by a college degree to the corresponding spirit of public service and civic virtue that has underpinned American society since the days of Alexis de Tocqueville.

We must remain the gathering place for the community and its citizens, for all who live and work close by, those concerned about the present, and troubled by an uncertain future in this tempest we call our time.

We are places to learn and to live, for self-discovery aided by effective mentoring, and for pushing beyond the fleeting encounter to become an engaged member of an emerging, diverse community, a place where virtues and values inform our choices and create fresh and meaningful personal pathways.

I believe that AASCU institutions are those affirming, restorative way stations on thousands of citizen's personal treks to their future. Our message and mission is displayed in what we do, but also in who we are. Values and virtues have marked unique communities throughout human history. I am confident that we here are committed to virtues of modeling the way, and championing values that can shape lives, communities and states.

Among them are those eulogy virtues I mentioned, including authenticity, integrity, selflessness, compassion, tolerance, service, kindness, honor and duty: the characteristics that shine through when we define a thoroughly good person. Character and its many facets are tightly bound to civic engagement and culture. David Brooks reminds us "that we are splendidly endowed, and also broken, and the whole logic of character-building is on your strengths, but you improve your character by trying to address your weaknesses."

Our AASCU institutions first and foremost are egalitarian. We provide opportunities for all.

So, amid the swirl of our era, we reaffirm why we are here. Offering stability and flexibility amid incessant change. Encouraging imagination, creativity and innovation in the next generation of citizens and leaders.

Higher education's role is fundamentally important to US and global success. Most of us who work in higher education are here because we believe deep inside us that our universities enrich, extend and liberate people's lives from the demons of ignorance, ugliness, prejudice, poverty, despair and ill health.

We serve as a societal compass, highlighting True North amid an abundance of shrill claims and false echoes.

What happens at our institutions often depends on us as presidents, and the weather we create. Our warmth and competence, our student-centered actions and attitudes make the university a valued asset in the lives of individuals, communities and states alike. Our institutional cultural attributes are among the values and practices that separate us from others.

As I noted earlier, I am thinking aloud today about our roles as leaders. As presidents and chancellors we have the good fortune during our time on this planet to serve in this unique manner as servant-leaders of institutions dedicated to advancing the human condition, one learner, one community, one state at a time.

We know why we come to our campuses every day.

Each morning, I am reminded of two visionary statements, separated by centuries, that resonate for me.

The first is from a storied local leader who I met early in my days at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. It abounds in the common sense found in the Ozark foothills of eastern Oklahoma, and the wisdom of the Cherokee Nation. He said simply,

"Leave the woodpile a little higher than you found it."

And he did ..... for 85 years.

The second is from the Hebrew Sayings of the Fathers, 2nd C AD, as found engraved in the College of Education on our campus at UCO. It reads:

"We are not required to finish the work, nor are we at liberty to neglect it."

I wish you continuing success and fulfillment as keepers of the flame and as stewards of these places we serve and love.