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Edwardsville Bulletin

To the Faculty and Staff of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

Announcements

Vol. 8, No. 2
October 22, 1975

TENTH ANNIVERSARY CONVOCATION
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY AT EDWARDSVILLE
MERIDIAN BALLROOM, UNIVERSITY CENTER
10:30 A.M. MONDAY, OCTOBER 13

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT JOHN S. RENDLEMAN
"THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY"

First of all, let me congratulate you on your singular good fortune. This nation, through the Congress, is annually subjected to the reflections of the President on the State of the Union. It is, in my judgment, a mark of our courtesy and civility that here at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville we have waited ten years to inflict such a burden upon you. That, if nothing else, should give us reason to enter upon this Tenth Anniversary Celebration in a festive mood.

My involvement with this institution goes back to the moment when it was little more than a glimmer in the eye of Delyte W. Morris. My recollection of those days is that when that great man's eyes began to glimmer, things began to happen. Delyte Morris always dreamed with his eyes open wide, looking ahead to making each dream come true.

In this connection, we might call to mind what John Keats had to say in one of his letters, "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream -- he woke to find it truth." The truth we find here today -- and what we might make of it tomorrow -- is the subject I would like to discuss today.

Of course, an institution which has grown in the period of ten short years into the largest of its kind in the metropolitan area could not be construed as the product of any one single imagination. It is our good fortune to have with us today many of those who gave of their very best in bringing us to the present point of our growth. It would take fully another ten years of my speech to pay proper homage to their achievement. We will acknowledge what we can. To those we do not mention, I can only offer my apologies for the oversight. You know what you did and I hope you take your due pride in it.

For the past seven years, it has been my privilege and duty to have the central responsibility for the decisions which have shaped us to our present state. Considering this, I suppose it would come as rather a surprise if I did not look upon this campus and, exercising that quasi-divine right of Presidents, find it good. The Lord Himself managed to create the entire universe in seven days -- including a day off for rest. At the end of each day, he looked critically at His work and found it good. Of course, he worked alone and did not have to contend with Trustees, Vice-Presidents, Legislators, and an infinite variety of

committees, not to mention the Board of Higher Education. He had only one angel to quarrel with His opinion; and Milton tells us in great detail what happened to Satan.

I much prefer the humanity of the way we grew. From its beginning, this institution was of, by, and for the community. We can use this word "community" in two ways. We have our intra-mural community of the University proper, composed of students, faculty, staff and our governing Board. This community has spoken eloquently from the beginning about the shape we ought to take and the standards against which we should measure ourselves.

Of course, there is a larger community -- that great metropolitan area we were founded to serve. The one community is not necessarily exclusive of the other. We speak now in a special way of an Open University -- a program that has grown out of the constant focus on responsiveness to an area for which we have been a promising beacon of hope. But from the very outset of our operations, a spirit of openness has characterized everything we have tried to do. We have been open to suggestion; by fighting for low tuition and developing special work and grant programs, we have tried to open the doors of educational opportunity to anyone who sought to enter. We have tried to conduct an open and candid administration -- and I think the record will show that we have practiced what we preached. At times, fairly rare in my opinion, we have been open to criticism. At least, we have tried never to be thin-skinned about voices that told us we were doing something wrong. We have paid attention to ideas about how we could improve.

Many have already shared the benefits of our deliverance on our promises. The great numbers we can point as falling under this description is the best evidence that we have kept faith with the mission we were given.

Today, however, I do not want to focus on numbers. Nor do I -- pleasant as it might be -- desire to recount the vast storehouse of happy or humorous anecdotes that I can recall with warmth and laughter. We have a whole year to indulge in story-telling. I am deeply concerned at this moment with what we are now and what we will become.

Measured against the life-spans of other institutions, ten years is not such a long time. Even looking at an individual human life, we are forced to admit that a tenth birthday is not such a big deal. Still, having witnessed the unstinting dedication of men of insight, imagination and deep human concern, I will venture to use the word "maturity" when I speak of our present state. This university was well-planned from the moment of its conception. Spread against the background of the history of our nation, we had to grow quickly. We were expected to meet enormous challenges.

Given the share of national and state resources that were allocated to us, one must say that we came along at a propitious time. Higher education was enjoying its most glorious days in the history of the country; it is safe to say that we would not have the grounds and buildings we have now, gracing this twenty-six hundred acre tract which was once rolling hills and farmlands, were it not for the generous public attitudes that made possible an unprecedented federal and state largesse for education.

It would be a monumental understatement to say that our first ten years witnessed tremendous change on the national scene. One of the results of that period of turmoil and upheaval has been a disenchantment on the part of the public as to the value of education. However mistaken we may consider this alteration of attitude, to me, we would be drastically foolish not to admit that it is there. It will, I fear, remain with us for a long time to come. We can only be grateful that we still retain the confidence of the area near us. The community support that brought us into being is still strong.

The phrase has been used in regard to this institution that we "started from scratch." I would rather think that we originated from an itch. Certainly it was not an itch in the citizens of the Metro-East area for the presence of pure knowledge and sophisticated scholarly research in their midst. Nor, in all honesty, do I think that the irritant asked for political reform in the sense that we would provide philosopher mayors and legislators to bring about a more perfect society.

To be candid, this community was itching for opportunity. The second most populous area of Illinois was also the most neglected from the point of view of availability of higher education. We came to end that neglect.

Some have felt that this basic service function runs at odds with the higher ideals and more stringent standards a University worthy of the name should aspire to. There has been and will continue to be a debate as to the priorities we must give to programs and resources.

From the standpoint of higher management technique, I look on this as a positive form of "creative tension." This notion is usually understood as giving the same job to two people within an organization, so as to profit from the competition that is created.

Well, we are not going to be able to afford to have two people responsible for the same task. To repeat, no one here today can remain under the illusion that the glory days of the sixties are still with us. In fact, we will soon see one person taking on duties previously performed by two or more people, particularly as regards the upper levels of administration.

For the needs that brought us into being have not gone away. Over the past decade, progress has been made; with the formation of new community colleges, new resources have been made available. But with the onset of a serious recession and the identification of even deeper problems at the heart of our economic, social and cultural conditions, higher education still has a central and indispensable role to play in the future health and strength of the entire metropolitan area spanning both sides of the Mississippi.

Master Plans and Mission Statements will come and go. Along with the perennial need for more filing space, we will have even more pressing human needs. Beyond that, we must not lose sight of the traditional storehouse of wisdom for which we must act as conservator. This body of human knowledge, understanding and gentle appreciation continues to grow apace. It has an historically demonstrated relevance which is beyond the debate of daily priorities. Keeping and communicating it remains the essential reason for which a University exists. To forget that is to lose our soul as an institution.

Thus we must use the utmost care in marshalling all available resources and foraging for new ones. If we are fortunate enough to have the new Civic Center located on this campus, we will have built sufficiently for the foreseeable future in my judgment. Certainly, budgetary constraints demand that we not over-build. The two new classroom buildings, along with the student housing soon to be dedicated, should be able to handle our projections for the future, even though I think we are going to have some extremely volatile registration figures in the next few years.

Conversely, we cannot let ourselves wither. We are restructuring to provide more efficient administrative support for increased student populations, even as our base budget continues to shrink with lower appropriations and inflation. This has always been a student-centered school, with a strong focus on those unusual problems that beset minorities. This centrality and focus will continue as a prime administrative concern. With all the necessary administrative realignment and budgetary reallocations, we do not intend for Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville to become a minimum security detention facility for eighteen to twenty-two year olds.

Rather, we must let the spirit of openness I alluded to earlier take on new dimensions and directions. Already we are drawing students who want to refresh their earlier educational experience or expand the existing parameters of their knowledge and expertise. Attractive as the youth in bloom that constitutes our general image of the student population, we are being blessed with the grey hair of experience in pursuit of further education. Furthermore, we are using cooperation with other institutions, new developments in technology, and all the innovative equipment and insight at our command to bring the university to the community. No longer can we smugly wait for students to come knocking at our doors.

Out of the creative tension of this continuing debate to which I alluded earlier, I think we will discover that the needs of community service and academic excellence can be reconciled and harmonized. If we can preserve openness of mind and flexibility of attitude, we can fulfill the hope expressed by Alexis de Toqueville well over a century ago. Fully aware that the University has its roots in aristocratic, or to use the more current term, "elitist", societies, this Frenchman visiting an America full of pioneers wondered what effects democracy might have on the higher studies.

He contended in Democracy in America:

As soon as the multitude begins to take an interest in the labors of the mind, it finds out that to excel in some of them is a powerful means of acquiring fame, power or wealth. The restless ambition which equality begets instantly takes this direction, as it does all others. The number of those who cultivate science, letters and the arts, becomes immense. The intellectual world starts into prodigious activity: every one endeavors to open for himself a path there, and to draw the eyes of the public after him.

"Restless ambition". The words very aptly describe the itch we were founded to scratch. For the past ten years, we have been opening paths. But our task is far from finished. It remains up to us to show that skeptical conservative Frenchman that it can happen here.
