



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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The Architects of Change

E. Gordon Gee, President
West Virginia University

Dr. E. Gordon Gee is one of America's most prominent higher education leaders, having served as president of some of the most prestigious public and private universities for more than three decades.

When he returned to lead West Virginia University in 2014 as the institution's 24th president, it was a homecoming of sorts. He was first named WVU president in 1981 at age 36 – at the time, among the youngest persons to ever serve as a university president.

He led WVU until 1985, when he went on to presidencies at the University of Colorado (1985-90), Brown University (1998-2000) and Vanderbilt University (2001-07). He served as president of The Ohio State University from 1990-97 and again from 2007-13.

Born in Vernal, Utah, Gee graduated from the University of Utah with an honors degree in history and earned his J.D. and Ed.D. degrees from Columbia University. Before starting his career in higher education, he clerked under Chief Justice David T. Lewis of the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals and was a judicial fellow and staff assistant to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he worked for Chief Justice Warren Burger.

Gee has served on several education-governance organizations and committees, including the Big 12 Conference Council of Presidents, the Business Higher Education Forum and the American Association of Universities. He is serving as chair of the Big 12 Board of Directors Executive Committee for the 2017-18 year.

For more than 10 years, residents of tiny Prenter, West Virginia, have lived without the most basic requirement for a healthy life – clean water. When the coal company that established Prenter's water system left the area, it quickly fell into disrepair.

West Virginia University student Morgan King, a civil and environmental engineering major from Charleston, learned about abandoned water systems in Prenter and 12 other communities while she was interning with the Department of Health and Human Resources. She helped to bring our University's chapter of Engineers Without Borders to Boone County to assist with getting clean water flowing again.

Morgan's story is an echo of the story that Mountaineers have been helping to write for 150 years at our land-grant university: A story about big ideas that produce real solutions and positive change.



Our University's mission to serve West Virginians is the driving force for everything we do to advance education, healthcare and prosperity. And what we do is more important now than ever before.

Our state is at a tipping point. Economic shifts triggered a half-billion-dollar budget crisis. Employment in manufacturing has declined by about one-third since 1990. Meanwhile, state spending on public two- and four-year colleges is at its lowest point in a decade.

While funding has decreased, the need for higher education is at an all-time high. Since 2008, 11.8 million jobs have emerged in this country. But just 80,000 of those jobs required only a high school education. The rest required either a college degree or substantial post-secondary training.



A Mountain Area Robotics (MARS) team member proudly holds the team flag in this May 2017 photograph



A WVU Heart and Vascular staffer assists a patient with a breathing exercise

The world is changing, and if we in West Virginia do not act as the architects of change, we will become its victims.

A fabric of cuts and taxes may patch this year's tattered budget, but over the long-term, our state will only prosper if we move from a scarcity mentality to an abundance mentality, in the firm belief that we have much of which to be proud and much to offer the world.

In that spirit, our University is implementing a strategic vision to transform West Virginia and the world.

We are addressing West Virginia's critical health needs through WVU Medicine, now the state's largest private employer, which served 800,000 outpatients and treated more than 37,000 in the hospital in 2016.

In a state that leads the nation in cardiovascular disease prevalence, WVU Medicine has recruited some of the best heart and vascular surgeons, cardiologists and anesthesiologists in the United States to provide state-of-the-art care.

In addition to saving lives, we are also working to revive West Virginia's economy. Energy is an important industry in the state, and our faculty and staff members are advancing efficient, sustainable energy production.

For example, we have joined a national effort to turn natural gas into valuable products – and do it at the wellhead. This serves a real-world need for many production locations in West Virginia,

where some shale gas resources are stranded without pipeline infrastructure, which affects access and price.

We are also helping West Virginia build a workforce capable of performing the technology-rich careers of the future.

In addition to training more math and science teachers for West Virginia schools, we are opening children's eyes to the joy of discovery. From facilitating robotics projects for schoolchildren to giving virtual music lessons to rural students, our faculty members are nurturing the force that drives all discovery: Curiosity.

And we are nurturing the drive to discover and create in our own students through community projects, such as a six-week exposure to how a water crisis affects a community to the production of a 360-degree video on West Virginia's flood recovery, which earned recognition from the Newseum.

By moving our Montgomery campus to Beckley this summer, we are opening new opportunities to students in southern West Virginia and the surrounding region. Along with our campus in Keyser and health sciences campuses in Martinsburg and Charleston, our Beckley campus will help us provide the academic programming and supportive environments that meet the needs of our students.

We recognize that our University cannot effectively catalyze change in West Virginia if we shrink from change ourselves. Our desire to change our "party school" reputation led to direct and candid conversations and shared efforts with our students to begin creating a healthier and more positive culture. Our accountability to West Virginia taxpayers has driven our endeavors to bust bureaucracy, increase efficiency and seek new revenue sources. We are also continuing to bring our structure into alignment – from academics to athletics to alumni to health care – into one West Virginia University that serves our entire state.

A lot has changed since 1867, but amid wars, economic fluctuations and incredible technological advancements, West Virginia University has been a beacon of hope for West Virginia. And in these tumultuous times and all the years to come, we will continue guiding West Virginians toward a brighter tomorrow. 