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JANUARY 2020

West Virginia University is Heeding Lincoln's Clarion Call



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E. Gordon Gee, J.D., Ed.D. is the President of West Virginia University. He is one of America's most prominent higher education leaders, having helmed universities for more than three decades. Gee's leadership goals include putting students first, advancing the university's research agenda and making sure that 1.8 million West Virginians know that West Virginia University is their university.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time."

West Virginia University has ascended to new heights in the past five years, earning recognition as a Research 1 university, opening a new WVU Tech campus in Beckley and fundamentally resetting our student culture to emphasize academics, among other things.

Looking back, it is easy to view our progress as inevitable and to forget the nearly 2,000 days we spent striving to arrive at this point. And, if distance obscures details behind us, current conditions may make the view ahead even hazier.

Certainly, clouds are gathering on higher education's horizons.

The number of students graduating from high school has been declining, and after a brief spike over the next few years, the drop will accelerate sharply.

Meanwhile, many people have become skeptical about higher education's value. In a recent survey by Third Way, only 55 percent gave America's higher education system a favorable rating. Only about half said that universities provide a "good" or "very good" return on a student's investment.

In this environment, America's land-grant universities must evolve to offer what our citizens are seeking.

President Lincoln, the son of illiterate parents from the country's vast frontier, signed legislation creating our land-grant universities, thereby extending opportunity beyond the wealthy and well connected.



After seven terms as president at five different institutions, I have observed American higher education from nearly every vantage point. And I am here to say: While many elite academic institutions are laser-focused on conducting cutting-edge research, turning away all but the most privileged, and reimagining themselves as global enterprises, land-grant universities can give America precisely what it needs right now.

Unfortunately, leaders at too many land-grant universities have allowed the quest for prestige to divert them from the power of purpose.

At West Virginia University, however, purpose has been our polar star. Over the next five years, we must approach the future as Lincoln advised us, one day at a time, one step at a time, one hard decision at a time.

Above all, we must demolish the silos we build to encircle ourselves and the walls we erect between our universities and those they serve.

Twenty years ago, the Kellogg Commission urged land-grant universities to return to their roots, engaging in reciprocal relationships with communities to solve local problems and prepare students for real-world challenges. As the commission's original chairman, I believe the insular nature of universities is still preventing many of them from fulfilling many of our people's needs.

Re-engaging with communities does not mean abandoning our efforts to do great research. But land-grant universities must focus on research that benefits our citizens, and we must spark prosperity through partnerships,



as we are doing with government, businesses and other educational institutions through West Virginia Forward.

As land-grant universities initially emphasized agriculture in America's rural past, today's institutions should focus on market-driven programs giving students in-demand skills. Artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, preventing and treating addiction and caring for an aging population are critical priorities with great potential for growth in West Virginia and beyond.

We must also maintain accountability to our citizens by reducing costs wherever possible.

And we must throw out *U.S. News and World Report*. The greatest and most pernicious undermining of higher education in the recent past has occurred because of this and the other so-called ranking systems. We must reject the relentless pursuit of money and prestige, chasing rankings that we know are deeply flawed at the expense of genuine educational excellence.

The only rankings we should consider are the ones that show West Virginia near the bottom on measures of education, health and prosperity. Helping our state rise in those rankings is our tireless quest on behalf of 1.8 million West Virginians.

Looking to the future, Lincoln himself left us a fitting clarion call. "It is not 'can any of us imagine better?' but, 'can we all do better?'"

I know that we can at West Virginia University, if we advance down a trail that leads our institution closer to Mr. Lincoln's ideal.

Over the next five years, we will brave new frontiers in knowledge. We will navigate toward the shifting horizons that new generations are seeking. And we will ensure that each new day draws those we serve closer to health, prosperity and hope. V