

Bowles **Rice**

VIEWS & VISIONS



BOWLESRICE.COM

SUMMER 2025



E. Gordon Gee
West Virginia University

Currently serving for a second time as president of West Virginia University, Dr. E. Gordon Gee has been a leader in higher education for more than four decades. In 2009, Time magazine named him one of the top 10 university presidents in the United States. Recently, the website Great Value Colleges named him the nation's top university president. In addition to his service at West Virginia University, Gee served as president of The Ohio State University (twice), Vanderbilt University, Brown University, and the University of Colorado.

WVU's PRT: Moving Us Into the Future!

During 2025, WVU will celebrate the 50th birthday of our Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) System. This milestone is a great occasion to reflect on this remarkable engineering achievement. In a larger context, I think the PRT also holds significant meaning for the future of WVU and higher education generally.

During my first WVU presidency in the early 1980s, the PRT was a novelty. Students and the community were getting adjusted to the guideways and cars that ran through Morgantown like something out of science fiction – Star Trek, perhaps, or The Jetsons. By my second WVU presidency, the PRT had become a campus icon, well known and (mostly) beloved by alumni and current students alike. Perhaps the PRT has aged better than I have!

So as I reflect on 50 years of the PRT, what does it represent to me? What lessons can we learn from it?

The PRT represents research and innovation.

Samy Elias, an Egyptian native who came to WVU as an industrial engineering professor, was a leader of a generation of researchers in the 1960s and 1970s who were researching innovative solutions to America's problems with traffic congestion, environmental pollution, and driver and pedestrian safety. More cars, more commercial vehicles, more miles of roadways: how would America handle this explosive growth? In response, Professor Elias helped to bring to life the PRT, which earned him the prestigious Gantt Medal from the Institute of Industrial Engineers.



“The PRT makes me optimistic about the future of WVU and higher education generally ... I see the fruits of research and innovation.”



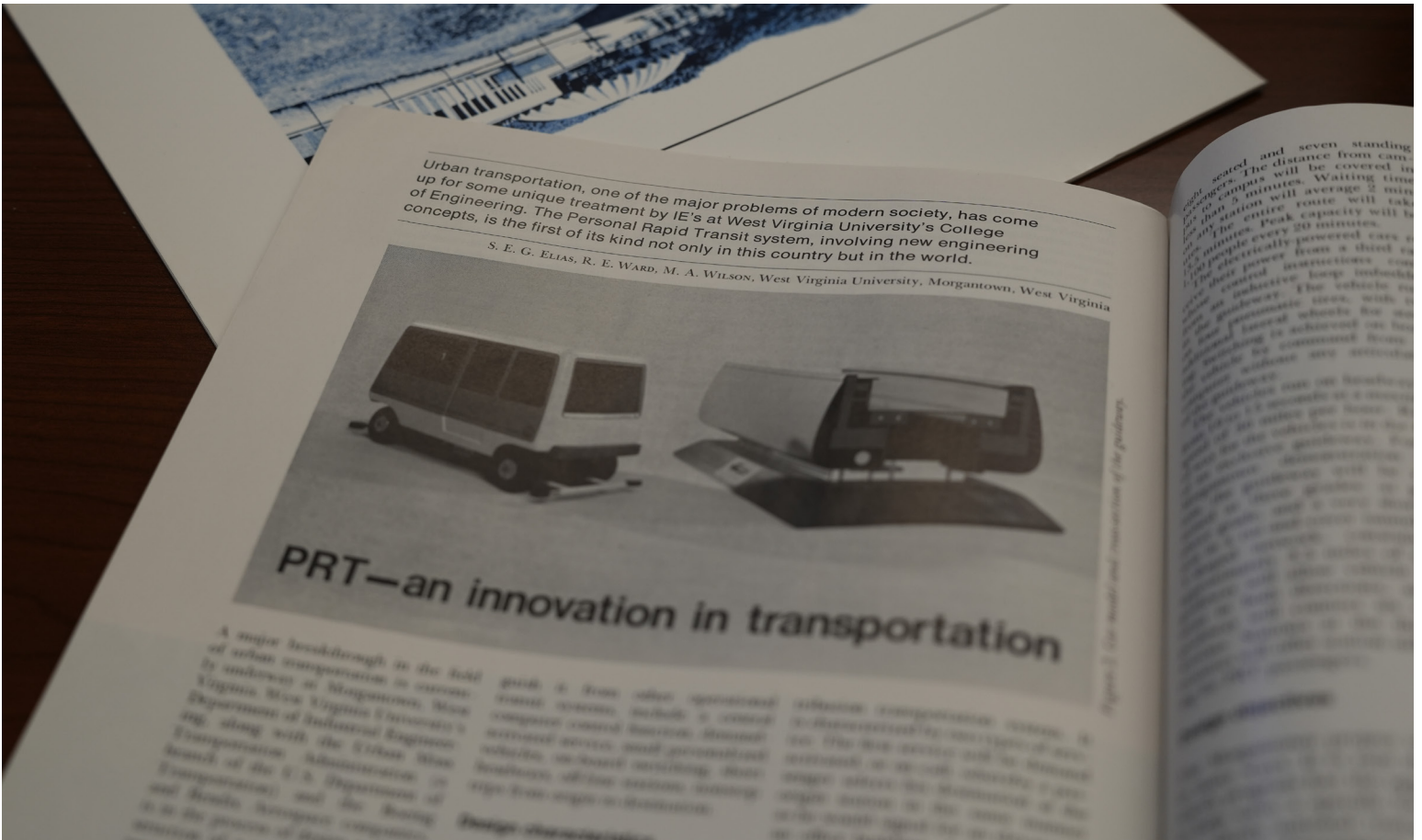


Photo of a published article featuring the PRT as an innovation in transportation, taken at the PRT Operations Center in Morgantown, WV

The PRT represents willingness to experiment, belief in trial-and-error, and the ability to learn from mistakes.

On Professor Elias's first test ride during the initial phase of the project, the PRT car he was riding in stalled on the guideway. Undaunted, Elias and his team learned, adapted, and overcame this setback and others. The important question is not: will there be mistakes? Of course there will be, and that is fine. The important question is: how will we learn from those mistakes? The PRT provides us with a shining example.

The PRT represents the land-grant spirit of solving problems.

As beautiful as our home is on the banks of the Monongahela River, Morgantown's terrain poses certain geographical and topographical challenges, from steep hills to narrow roadways. The PRT was one way we tackled those challenges head-on to serve the WVU community and improve Morgantown's quality of life.

The PRT represents the skills, ingenuity, and work ethic of West Virginians.

From constructing the stations, guideways, and support columns to programming the computers to repairing and maintaining the vehicles, over the last half-century West

Virginians who have worked on the PRT have demonstrated they can do exceptional work on complex systems under difficult conditions. When we talk about what makes West Virginia's workforce special, the PRT is a prime example.

The PRT represents a shared experience, a connection among members of the WVU community.

From a student's first PRT ride during new student orientation to a PRT trip back home after a football or basketball game, we all have PRT memories and stories. Alumni take their young children on the PRT and hope that one day they will ride the PRT as WVU students. The PRT links Mountaineers across the generations.

The PRT represents the benefits of cooperation between the university and government officials.

On Capitol Hill, U.S. Senators Robert C. Byrd and Jennings Randolph, and Representative Harley O. Staggers were a tremendous team advocating for Morgantown to be the test site for the PRT project in the early 1970s. Bryce Harlow, brother of WVU President James Harlow, was an advisor and counselor to President Richard Nixon and championed the PRT project within the executive branch of government. At the state level, Governor Arch Moore was a proponent for

the PRT. Local leaders in Morgantown recognized the value of the PRT. When WVU and its friends in government at all levels work together, great things can and do happen.

Elsewhere in this magazine, Dr. Ali Rezai describes another example with the Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute. Our world-class program in radio astronomy and astrophysics is also an example. Our pioneering Forensic and Investigative Science program is yet another. Some people dwell on the differences between academic and political cultures. I focus on the synergies. When research and resources, academics and appropriations, politics and policy align, our potential is unlimited.

In the last 50 years, more than 100 million passenger trips have been made on the PRT. Collectively, our PRT cars have traveled more than 40 million miles, roughly the equivalent of circumnavigating the Earth 1,600 times. And during the 2023-23 academic year, the PRT had a reliability of 98.7%! No, the PRT is not perfect, but its history and track record are marvels of engineering and good old-fashioned Mountaineer know-how.

The PRT makes me optimistic about the future of WVU and higher education generally. When I see the PRT traveling from campus to campus, I see the fruits of research and innovation. I see the results of experimentation and learning from mistakes. I see the spirit of land-grant problem-solving. I see a remarkable proof of the skills and diligence of West Virginia's proud workforce. I see a gold and blue thread that runs through the lives of the WVU community. I see the tangible value of the cooperation between academe and government. These have been the building blocks of WVU since our founding in 1867. I fully expect they will be the pillars that support us long into the future. And they are the same things that will enable higher education everywhere to continue to thrive.

As we celebrate the PRT's birthday in 2025, I invite you to come to campus and take a ride. Enjoy the passing scenery. Bask in the glow of a treasured memory. Recognize the engineering accomplishment. Strike up a conversation with a student. Most of all, celebrate what the PRT represents to WVU, Morgantown, and the State of West Virginia. Happy 50th birthday, PRT—and here's to (at least) 50 more! **▼**

President Gordon Gee has contributed numerous articles to Views & Visions, and we are deeply grateful for his longstanding partnership. As he prepares to retire from West Virginia University, we celebrate his enduring legacy of leadership, service, and commitment to the vitality of our communities—principles that echo the mission of Bowles Rice.

