

Inaugural Address

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Higher education once enjoyed the highest levels of support and respect from the American public. Indeed, from the earliest days of the colonization of this country, higher education was recognized as integrally important in our society. For example, Harvard College was established in 1636, just 16 years after the Mayflower had landed in Plymouth, and only six years after the founding of Boston. The Universities of North Carolina and Vermont, both of which claim to be the first public university in this country, were established around 1790. In 1862, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act that granted each state 30,000 acres of federal land for each senator and representative it had in Congress. The intent was that the land would be sold, and the proceeds invested to support colleges of agriculture and the “mechanical arts”—what we would now call “engineering”—in order to bolster economic development through education in these applied fields.

Following World War II, the GI Bill allowed hundreds of thousands of returning servicemen to attend college at virtually no cost. There were many skeptics who thought these young men, mostly from working class families, could never succeed at college, but of course they did—and as they graduated, the colleges and universities that had expanded to accommodate them turned to the younger children of working class families to fill their classrooms. Sputnik and the implicit threat posed by the Soviet Union started the space race, and that led to a massive expansion of campus numbers and infrastructure through the late 50s and 60s.

By 1990, however, society’s view of higher education as a public benefit had changed. Higher education was now more broadly seen as a private benefit, and that change in thinking took society—and elected officials—off the hook. Since it was a private benefit, the beneficiary (and his or her family) should be the ones to pay the lion’s share. That thinking, coupled with growing pressure on state budgets from other areas such as prisons and health care—and the growing demand to reduce taxes—has resulted in massive disinvestment in the public institutions that now enroll about 70% of all students.

The private institutions did not escape the changes in social attitude. Graph after graph shows the steep increase in tuition costs over the past 20 years, and today the existence of more than 100 private colleges with sticker prices over \$50,000 a year—coupled with the enormous increase in student debt at graduation just over the past decade—has resulted in a rising chorus of critical voices, complaining about the deaf ear college officials show in not finding ways of reducing costs.

If the colleges aren't hearing these voices, the politicians certainly are. Witness Gov. Rick Perry's call for the \$10,000 degree—and the fact that a presidential candidate is saying such things encourages people to believe that it must be possible. The fact that no state in the country is spending such a small sum even on K-12 education doesn't seem to enter into the conversation—and of course K-12 education does not involve 24/7 education, with residence halls and associated staff. In K-12 education, New York spends the most—over \$18,000 per year per student, or well over \$70,000 for four years—but that fact does not seem to lessen the enthusiasm for the cheap college degree. I'd like a \$5,000 Mercedes myself. I think that's at least as worthy a goal as a \$10,000 college degree. But I can pretty much guess that a \$5,000 Mercedes might be lacking some of the amenities of the current, rather more expensive models: an engine, for one, and perhaps wheels would be nice.

But I'll be the first to admit that sarcasm is not a satisfactory response to this challenge. In any case, it's not Rick Perry's challenge that really concerns me. What concerns me is that some of our long accredited public colleges and universities have been so drained of resources that some are attempting to offer a university education for about 60% of what New York is spending on a K-12 student. These universities—and the degrees they offer—are mere shadows of what they once were, and it seems only a matter of time before they lose their accreditation.

Diplomas are not like automobiles. An automobile that is not built to appropriate standards—that is assembled on the cheap, where every decision is based on keeping the price low—is not likely to drive well. A new owner will quickly realize he has purchased a lemon.

Not so with a college degree. The inadequacy of a given degree will only become apparent over time, as its owner proves incapable of performing at the expected level of competence. We are in

grave danger as a country if we allow the problem of poorly educated college graduates to become rampant. Our long-standing, and hard earned, reputation as the country with the finest higher education system in the world is under severe threat, and it's a threat of our own making.

So what's the answer? How do we create what we might call "affordable excellence" in our higher education system? Do we all just shut our eyes and cross our fingers and hope for a return of the good old days when the public respected and supported higher education? I submit we have been doing that, but whenever we peek, we find the situation has only become worse. Some of that worsening has been self-inflicted. Many colleges have cut costs by increasing class sizes past the point of highly effective pedagogy, or they have replaced retiring tenured faculty with adjuncts. We have allowed bottom line thinking to dictate how we offer our educational programs, and we have too often made the expedient decision, rather than the decision that makes us proud.

That's the national picture. What can we do about it here at a small university in the smallest state in the union?

This university was named for Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, and a man who deserves to be much better appreciated by our nation. We tend to start our pantheon of heroes with the people alive at the time of the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, and the Constitution—but Roger Williams lived a century and a half before that time—yet his ideas were at the heart of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and in some ways were more progressive than either. At a time when religious tolerance was an oxymoron—there was no religious tolerance, but instead a state-imposed religion almost everywhere—Roger Williams founded Rhode Island on the basis of the separation of church and state, and he welcomed believers in any faith—a kind of "y'all come" (except in the 17th century it was more like, "ye all come.") For this he was reviled by the neighboring states of Connecticut and Massachusetts, and they conspired to have Rhode Island's charter revoked. Their efforts necessitated a voyage back to England by Roger Williams who, when not fighting to have Rhode Island's charter preserved, spent his spare time teaching Dutch to John Milton. (Milton, in return, provided some refresher lessons in Hebrew to Williams.)

Roger Williams also opposed slavery, and endeavored to prevent its inception in Rhode Island. Had he been successful, the history of Rhode Island would have taken a different path, and there might never have been a Brown University—but that’s another story. My point is simply that he was a man ahead of his time, but also a man unshakeable in his resolve and his beliefs.

One of his beliefs is printed on your programs: “The greatest crime in the world is not developing your potential. When you do what you do best, you are helping not only yourself, but the world.” It is as relevant today as when he said it, more than three centuries ago—and as a university, in charting our future, we could do worse than by asking, “What would Roger do?”

So, in recognizing that an inauguration ceremony is an opportunity for a university to imagine its future, let me try and channel Roger Williams by asking, “What would Roger do?”

I’m pretty sure Roger would be appalled when he learned that, today, we have in America created a society where the top 20% of the population has 85% of the nation’s wealth—indeed, where 1% of the population has 27% of the wealth—where the middle class is being financially marginalized (to the detriment of our economy), and where the percentage of our people living in poverty is climbing rapidly—the bottom 40% of the nation shares just 0.2% of the wealth. Higher education is supposed to be the doorway of opportunity, the socioeconomic ladder that permits young people with talent and ambition to find their place in society. Why hasn’t 60 years of widely available higher education created a more economically balanced society? Well, it’s because higher education is similarly misdistributed. If you are born in the top quartile of family income, 82% of you will earn a college degree. If you are born in the bottom quartile of family income, just 8% of you will earn a college degree. In what way is that a meritocracy at work? Isn’t this why young people are occupying Wall Street, and demonstrating in other cities around the country? We are hearing unfamiliar words, like “oligarchy” (government by the few), or “plutocracy” (government by the rich). Didn’t most of our ancestors leave the Old World to get away from a plutocracy? And isn’t it more than a little ironic that we seem intent on creating a plutocracy here in America?

I’m pretty sure Roger would be even more appalled to learn that there is a clear parallel to the concentration of personal wealth reflected in higher education, where a relative handful of

campuses, enrolling a tiny fraction of the total number of college students, sit with multi-billion dollar endowments, while the overwhelming majority of campuses, responsible for educating the overwhelming majority of students, find themselves all too often on the horns of a dilemma: whether to increase tuition to preserve the quality of their educational offerings, knowing that by so doing they will make it increasingly difficult for families to afford college, or to maintain access through very modest tuition increases, knowing that by so doing they will need to find ways of economizing that will lead to a poorer educational product.

Here is some specific detail: Of the more than 4000 colleges and universities in the U.S., as of June 2010, 62 had endowments in excess of \$1 billion, and 14 had endowments greater than \$5 billion. The figures for 2011 (the fiscal year ends in June at most campuses) are now coming in, and Harvard—by far the richest university, with an endowment last year of more than \$28 billion—raised almost \$600 million in new gifts and bequests. Put another way, Harvard raised more in a single year than the entire endowment of all but 104 other universities.

But that's not all. Harvard also reported a return on its investments—that is, its current endowment—of more than 21%, which translates to almost \$5.9 billion. Put another way, Harvard had a return on investments in a single year that was greater than the total endowment of all but 8 other universities. When their investments earn almost 10 times more than they raise, one wonders why they are still trying to raise new money.

But Harvard is in no way alone in its determination for more money. The University of Southern California, which last year ranked 23rd in both prestige and size of endowment, has just announced a campaign to raise \$6 billion. Presumably, a successful campaign will move the school into the top 20—but is this ceaseless competition for prestige by a handful of extremely wealthy colleges and universities in any way in the national interest?

My last institution, Rowan University in New Jersey, was utterly transformed by a \$100 million gift from Henry Rowan, a local industrialist. It is difficult to overstate the impact of that gift to a former teacher's college. Ranking, size, programmatic breadth, and overall quality all rose significantly, outcomes that directly affect over 11,000 students every year. If the money going into USC's \$6 billion campaign were somehow broken into \$100 million chunks, 60 universities

the size of Rowan University could be transformed, impacting more than 600,000 students annually. It will never happen, but it's fun to dream!

Let me bring these issues to the local level here in Rhode Island. What would Roger Williams, the man, do? What should Roger Williams, the University, do?

I believe that Roger Williams, the university, should do several things, all of which would lead to its becoming the best university in America. Ah, the restiveness begins! The man has taken leave of his senses. How can we be better than Harvard or Princeton—or Amherst or Williams, for that matter?

Quite simply, by changing the definition of what it means to be “best.” “Best” today, as defined by US News, refers to a campus that admits a tiny fraction of its applicant pool, virtually all of whom are valedictorians or have perfect SAT scores, or both, and then spends lavishly on these brilliant and highly motivated students, all the while ensuring that the size of the class stays small enough to remain truly exclusive and elite.

If we tried to convert Roger Williams University to a Harvard wanna-be, not only would we be unsuccessful, but surely Roger Williams the man would rise from his grave and demand that we stop using his name to identify our institution.

When I speak of “best,” I mean:

- an institution that considers more than SAT and high school GPA, one that seeks students of ability and ambition with the potential to do great things but who have not necessarily had the opportunity or motivation to show what they can do;
- an institution attentive to “value-added” education, where we focus on outcomes much more than inputs, where we assess and document the skills and competencies of our students at graduation;

- an institution that is broadly reflective of the economic, racial, and ethnic diversity of our society such that all of our students have the opportunity while in college to live in the type of diverse world they surely will be living in when they graduate;
- an institution committed to the proposition that all young people deserve the opportunity to climb the socioeconomic ladder, regardless of the circumstances of their birth;
- an institution that recognizes the need to create not just college graduates, but graduates who are committed to improving our democratic society, and therefore an institution that prepares students for their future roles by ensuring that a good proportion of their education takes place in the community, where they not only practice what they are learning but also are doing good for the organizations or businesses with which they are affiliated;
- an institution that bridges the world, by being committed to internationalism, both through study abroad and also through connections that bring international students here;
- an institution that prepares students for a future that is beyond our current imagination by ensuring that all of them have a strong foundation in the liberal arts and are able to reason at a high level of abstraction, integrate diverse bits of information into a cohesive whole, communicate effectively both orally and in writing, and are capable of solving complex problems; and finally
- an institution that is committed to graduating students with the skills, values, and ambition to compete with the graduates of any institution in our country.

But Roger Williams University should not just be about residential education for 18 to 22 year olds. We know that part of the reason why unemployment is so high is that there is a disconnect between what those seeking work can actually do and what those organizations with jobs actually need. A recent study that measured the size of the gap between education and training of the workforce and the skills needed by employers in 100 urban areas ranked Boston #2 (a narrow gap) and Providence #41 (much larger gap). Rhode Island, sandwiched between two of the

wealthiest states in America, has double-digit unemployment and the second highest poverty rate in New England. I submit that all Rhode Island institutions—both public and private, since all of us are part of the social fabric—need to address this compelling issue.

Thus, at Roger Williams University, we should more enthusiastically embrace addressing the needs of adult learners, both face-to-face and on-line—and we must have multiple approaches. Some are college graduates who need additional skills to advance in their careers; some aspire to advanced degrees; some have less than a baccalaureate but can't see a way to find the time to complete their degree because of other obligations. Corporations are looking for educational institutions to partner in programs for their existing employees. The military is concerned about finding ways to convert what their soldiers, sailors, and airmen have learned into college credit.

So how do I define the “best” university? It is the one whose efforts add the greatest value to the lives of its graduates. And if at the end we are only the second or third best university in the country, I won't see that as a failure. If our efforts are successful in addressing the full complement of higher educational needs in the country, and that success motivates other institutions to follow our lead, and in so doing gets America back to work and into a positive frame of mind, then we can be proud of the work we have done.

All of the things I have been talking about—all of them—Roger Williams University is doing to some degree today. We simply need to develop an institution-wide commitment to have these things become universal on our campus. And incidentally, the work that we do in our continuing studies area generates revenue that will allow us to subsidize the inherently expensive program of residential education we offer here on the Bristol campus.

So what I am presenting is not a pipe dream. It is achievable. We lack only a collective aspirational vision, and the collective commitment to see that vision realized. If Roger Williams, the man, could found a new state by walking in January from Salem, Massachusetts to the site of what become Providence, Rhode Island, how can we, who carry his name, be any less committed?