



Albert Einstein Cell Phones Silent Spring
The Moon Landing The Underground Railroad Polymerase Chain Reaction
DNA Sequencing World Wide Web The Fall of The Berlin Wall
The Polio Vaccine 'I have a dream'
The Emancipation Proclamation Google Woodstock
...created the future. So will we.

CREATING THE FUTURE: THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT DAVID M. DOOLEY

As a boy - frequently barefoot on the hot, dusty, roads and fields of the Central Valley of California – I never for a moment imagined that I would stand before such an audience, in a place like this. The hard, rough legacies of the dust bowl, the great depression, and global war were everywhere - tangible and forceful. The spirits and minds of everyone I knew were steeped in and shaped by these experiences, and tempered by the emerging reality of the cold war. My father had not finished high school, enlisting in the Navy to fight in World War 2, and awarded a diploma for his service. He was farming cotton when I was born. Nearly everyone I knew farmed or worked around farming in some way. Although farming in the Central Valley was a dicey proposition at the time, there seemed to be a pervasive determination to build a new life, and both faith in the effort and the hope for success. My family emphasized the importance of faith - in God, certainly - but also in learning, in education, as the path to a better future. For a time, I lost my faith in God. God seemed to take it well, and, in hindsight, appears to have said: “Look, if you cannot believe in me, then believe in this – the value of education, the importance of learning, the goal of wisdom”. And I did, and now, here I am.

I have spent my entire adult life in colleges or universities. Frequently I have been asked: “Did you not ever wish to be a part of the ‘real world’?” – as if universities are somehow not a part of the ‘real world’. I am confident that most of you have heard or even used words like cloistered, “Ivory Tower”, insular, disconnected, or “divorced from reality” as describing a university or college. In my judgment, the real problem here is not the nature of the university; rather those who believe that universities are not part of the ‘real world’ have an inaccurate, impoverished, and dangerously misleading view of what reality is. The real world is not merely physical. It’s not solely about money, power, influence, “the bottom line”, and consumption. Interestingly, many who speak forcefully about the “real world” ignore an obvious part of the physical world – nature, and what it can teach us. We must recognize that reality is partly composed of intangible things – things of the mind, things of the spirit, things that cannot be grasped, things that are not the property of an individual or any group. Ideas matter, and are real. Words – written and spoken – matter, and are real. Relationships matter, and are real. Morals and ethics matter, and are real. Values and wisdom matter, and are real.

There is another aspect to thinking carefully about the nature of reality that I would like to emphasize: we are not free to invent our own reality. I think this is a major issue for America and much of the world: the invention of realities that justify ourselves and our assumptions, that rationalize our comfort and privilege, and that project our greed and prejudices as the “natural order of things” or, worse, as a directive from God. By inventing our personal realities we can deny the reality or validity of facts and even people that threaten us or our position in society. Universities, if they are doing what they were created to do, are places where the true nature of reality is recognized, where people are forced to confront the “real world” as it is - and not how we would like it to be. Universities are one of the very few places where those who enter are expected to abandon their own comfortable, self-justifying, alternative realities and learn to deal with the diverse, uncomfortable, surprising, and challenging real world, as it truly exists.

This is, I believe, a core value for the 21st century university. What are other attributes of a successful, thriving, university in the century in which we are now embarked? First, and foremost, the university must prepare its students not just to survive in the face of global and urgent challenges, but to help overcome those challenges. Given the magnitude and severity of the challenges before us, and the rate of change that is already characteristic of the 21st century, a successful university must be relentlessly innovative, flexible, responsive, and adaptable. Continuous innovation, in particular, will be the key to success. And we must be able to move quickly. Consequently, many of the comfortable practices and rhythms of university life will need to be revised. Shared governance will be more important than ever, but our implementation of shared governance must adapt to the new realities we face.

The 21st century university must be global in its orientation and international with regard to its education, research, service, and partnerships. The 21st century university must place research, scholarship, and creative work at the heart of the student experience, regardless of discipline, and build curricula that foster the inclusion of students in a community of discovery. The 21st century university will be characterized by a 24/7 learning environment for students that extends beyond the traditional classroom and takes full advantage of what technology can offer to enhance student learning, and enable students to learn at a pace dictated by their own ability and dedication. At the heart of the core curriculum of a 21st century university is the commitment to develop core competencies in its students: communication, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and the capability to work across cultures, languages, traditions, and origins. Research, scholarship, and creative work that cross disciplinary boundaries and are consistently translated externally will epitomize the 21st century university. Finally, partnerships - across the board - with other institutions of higher education, with K-12 education, with the private sector, communities, local and state government, non-profit and service organizations will become ever more important for the university and its many constituencies. As clearly demonstrated by yesterday's symposia and sessions, the University of Rhode Island is well on its way to becoming such a university - we are in the midst of transforming the University, the state of Rhode Island, and, indeed, the world. There is much yet to do, however, and no time to waste.

Our nation, our planet, faces challenges today that are as serious as any ever faced by previous generations: climate change, terrorism, the escalating global tensions between development and sustainability, the degradation of oceans, the rise of diseases resistant to the very tools that we once thought would lead to their eradication, poverty, hunger, and the potentially unmanageable intricacies of a global economy in which the bursting of a housing bubble in the United States would be felt from Beijing to Moscow to Dubai.

It seems to me that an essential prerequisite to discovering or creating the solutions to these problems is to face the reality that no one people, no single group or party, no nation by itself (no matter how powerful, no matter how populous, no matter how wealthy), no single set of traditions, can provide the answers.

In fact, one of our greatest challenges is perhaps the most characteristic and most enduring failure of our shared humanity: the nearly instinctual desire to be special, exceptional, more important, superior to "others" - to place ourselves in positions of power and judgment over others, to define them as inferior, less worthy, less enlightened, less important than we are. In doing so we are creating an alternative reality and ignoring basic facts: the overwhelming identity of human genomes, the lessons of history, the obvious, common-sense observation that every group that defines itself as "superior" is guilty of the very deficiencies as those it defines as "inferior". These alternative realities are defended by willful ignorance, fear, fabrication, and - all too often - by religion.

At URI, and in universities more generally, we have the opportunity to confront this universal human weakness and to instead build a community firmly grounded on fundamental realities: the reality that all humans have intrinsic worth; the reality that we are interdependent in unprecedented ways; and the reality that we all have a role in creating the future, for better or for worse. Our students must be

prepared to succeed and to thrive in a century where it will be essential to build mutual understanding and shared trust among groups who have not been allies in the past, to find common ground in spite of profound differences in perspective, to work productively across boundaries and divisions that are deeply rooted in history, and to function among people of different cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, orientations, and allegiances. Individuals without these capabilities risk becoming living caricatures of the past – marginalized, with limited horizons and a compromised future. In light of these looming 21st century realities we must reject the preposterous proposition that an emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism is merely misguided political correctness.

Universities are frequently accused, from all sides, of failing to protect freedom of speech in their efforts to build diverse communities. I am a strong believer in the value of free speech; universities must be places that not only protect but foster freedom of expression. But I also believe that the Golden Rule (to treat others as you would be treated) is older by far than the First Amendment and superior to it; after all the First Amendment may be derived from the Golden Rule – for example, if we wish our voices to be heard, then we should listen. Who among us would not wish to be welcomed, affirmed, supported, encouraged, and befriended? Then none among us should seek to marginalize, judge, undermine, ridicule, or ignore any person. Our goal at the University of Rhode Island is not merely to produce more educated people, it is to enable all of us to become better people. Our goal is not just learning, but wisdom. And the first step towards wisdom is to recognize that it is not solely associated with yourself and others who are like you, but may well be possessed by those very different from you, who may nevertheless be willing to share with you the wisdom they have gained.

Transforming ourselves is the key to transforming the world. To transform ourselves, we must be honest with ourselves. We must be willing to confront our unspoken, unarticulated assumptions and to examine our history and our beliefs with a clear and dispassionate eye. This is best accomplished in the midst of a community that is supportive of all of its members but also willing to engage with and, if necessary, challenge each other's assumptions and beliefs. To transform the world we must move beyond mere tolerance as a virtue to the point where we affirm difference and diligently seek common ground in the midst of difference, recognizing that the common ground thereby discovered will provide a foundation for building a better future for all who participate.

It's fair to ask what kind of future we can create together in Rhode Island. Allow me to answer in the following way. Since moving to Rhode Island I have heard the phrase "only in Rhode Island" innumerable times. I'm sure all Rhode Islanders know the context much better than I. After sharing a story relating to corruption, bureaucratic bungling, general ineptitude, blatant hypocrisy, woeful government, self-defeating behaviors, or simple scams, the storyteller will conclude with rueful shrug and the punch line, "only in Rhode Island". I must confess that occasionally after hearing one of these stories my reaction is: "If you think these kinds of things happen only in Rhode Island, then you need to get out more". And maybe, sometimes, that is the heart of the matter.

But one doesn't need to be in Rhode Island very long to sense that there is a deeply troubling aspect to the widespread use of the phrase. It's symptomatic of a pervasive pessimism – the conviction, even the fear – that we are prisoners of our past, trapped by our history, and somehow incapable of building a better, brighter future. That is not what I see; I see a very different meaning, a meaning based on the tremendous assets and advantages of this unique place - most importantly the talent, resilience, and commitment of the people here.

There will come a time in the foreseeable future when people will say:

Only in Rhode Island did the colleges and universities, public and private, set a new standard for collaboration and cooperation. Only in Rhode Island did their collective, coordinated efforts provide excellent, continuously innovative education, stimulate broad-based research advances that catalyzed the development of a new, sustainable, knowledge-based economy, and provide leadership in solving the grand challenges of the 21st century.

Only in Rhode Island did government, business, and education first come together to create new partnerships with the sustained commitment required to address the challenges faced by the state and to seize the opportunities of the times.

Only in Rhode Island did higher education and K-12 public schools develop the partnerships that help propel public education in the state to a position among the best in the nation.

Only in Rhode Island did it first prove possible to bring local communities together in a collaborative spirit to recognize that Rhode Island is, in fact, much smaller than Texas or Montana, and to set aside the artificial boundaries on maps to solve problems and build opportunities for all their citizens.

Only in Rhode Island did it first prove possible to bridge the divisions that tear at the very fabric of our nation and sabotage our shared identity and values. Only in Rhode Island were the people first able to set aside the comfortable labels of Republican/Democrat, progressive/conservative, Fox-fan/MSNBC-fan, immigrant/native, pro-choice/pro-life, gay/straight, and yes even Red Sox/Yankees - set aside all of that. Consequently, only in Rhode Island were the people first able to build on their renewed commitment to the value of all, to embrace the reality of the intrinsic worth of every person, and to transform their state and build a better future for all members of the community.

That is my hope for the University of Rhode Island and the State. These are the things I want to work toward. After nearly 10 months in Rhode Island I believe it is possible to achieve these goals. Numerous discussions at URI and with many partners across the state have helped define some initial strategies: revising undergraduate and graduate curricula consistent with the new academic plan; working with students, faculty, and staff to build community here at URI; strengthening and broadening our collaborations with Brown (the state's other research university); partnering with the private sector and Rhode Island agencies to leverage the enormous capabilities of the faculty and students at URI to assist businesses; working with state government and Rhode Island College to design and build a state-of-the-art nursing education facility in the nascent "Knowledge District" of Providence – all of these are examples of the kinds of strategies that can move us toward the goals that I presented. I am confident that working together we are able to achieve these goals. I am not saying it will be easy, but we can succeed.

I did not come to Rhode Island to play it safe and collect a paycheck. The state, and perhaps our nation, cannot really afford for any of us to do that.

Let me conclude with a few quotations – a couple from the Bible, and a few from popular literature (the book "The Art of Racing in the Rain", which my son, Chris, recommended to me). The common themes shared in these quotes, from such disparate sources, (and reflected in countless others) are perhaps an indication that these perspectives are part of our common humanity, and shared among us, and hence a basis for our transformational, creative work.

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and our failings that cling to us so closely, and run with endurance the race that is set before us...."

"Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, let us press onward towards the goal..."

"That which is manifest is before us: we are the creators of our own destiny"

"The physicality of our world is a boundary to us only if our will is weak; a true champion can accomplish things that a normal person would think impossible..."

"...there is no dishonor in losing the race; there is only dishonor in not racing because you are afraid to lose."

Let us join the race; let us dedicate ourselves to the work of transforming our university, our state, and the world – to create a future in which we want our children to live. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you.