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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

BOARD OF REGENTS MEETING

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“BEGINNINGS AND NEW BEGINNINGS”

When I was pondering what to say to this august group in my final formal remarks to you as President, I thought, well, there has been plenty of excitement during my term, so why don't I just bore them? Then I thought, what better way to bore them than to read a few statutes? (Apologies to our lawyer Regents . . . special apologies to Regent Walsh, for whom reading anything to the Board, as opposed to spontaneous, brilliant eloquence, is a high crime and misdemeanor.)

So I will read a statute to you—section 36.01 of Chapter 36 of the Wisconsin Statutes. I will call what I have to say about it today—and what I believe it says about the university and all of us—“Beginnings and New Beginnings.” At times of great institutional change, such as those that face the UW and American higher education across this nation now, it can be wise to seek both grounding and energy for the future in an institution's founding document, its charter, if you will.

As we know, Chapter 36 is our constitution. It created the University of Wisconsin System in 1973. Section 36.01 is its “Statement of purpose and mission.” Let's step back from the building projects, new degree programs, financial policies, personnel systems, and all the

important operational things this Board needs to do on a regular basis, to think for a few minutes together about our basic purpose and mission.

Here's what Chapter 36 has to say about that.

"The legislature finds it in the public interest to provide a system of higher education which enables students of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of income to participate in the search for knowledge and individual development . . ."

-This is state government recognizing the value of the university system as a public interest, and individual development as a way to get there. No contradiction between the two, apparently.

-The statute makes clear that the public interest will be best served by opening the university to the 18-year-olds and the 48-year-olds; the whites, the blacks, the browns, the yellows, the mixed races; the straights, the gays, the bisexuals, the questioning; the Protestants, the Catholics, the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, the agnostics, the atheists; immigrants and their children; the rich, the middle class, the poor, and the destitute.

-The public interest will be best served by enabling all these individuals to learn, and to build their personal intellectual capital thereby, to the best of their ability.

The statute goes on to speak of a university system "which stresses undergraduate teaching as its main priority" and "which offers selected professional graduate and research programs with emphasis on state and national needs."

-Right at the beginning of this System, Wisconsin recognized the primacy of having more of its residents earn their first college degrees, along with the connection of graduate study and research to meeting the needs of the state and the nation. Interesting, isn't it, that the

University of Wisconsin System has always seen itself as an institution with reach both to the borders of the state via The Wisconsin Idea, and beyond those borders as well.

Chapter 36 envisions a university system “which fosters diversity of educational opportunity; which promotes service to the public; which makes effective and efficient use of human and physical resources.”

-The UW is not to be in the business of guaranteeing anything to anybody. Rather it is to offer a diverse audience genuine access to a wide array of educational opportunity.

-The UW is not to be about preparing selfish graduates for a life of leisure, but producing men and women who will engage in public service.

-Part and parcel of the university’s public commitment is wise stewardship of its public dollars, using the right amount of them to have the most positive effect on the public good.

The intent that the University of Wisconsin be a system is emphasized in the language of the statute that describes an organization “which functions cooperatively with other educational institutions and systems; and which promotes internal coordination and the wisest possible use of resources.”

-The message to my ears here is that the UW campuses and the system administration should seek to complement, and not wastefully duplicate, each other. Also, that we all should coordinate with K-12, the technical colleges, and the private colleges and universities in an effort to broaden, not undercut, opportunity, thereby making the taxpayer investment we all share yield the best possible return.

-One of my former bosses once aptly described a university system as a place where competing public interests come into equilibrium. You, my dear Regents, are the “equilibriumizers.”

The law proceeds to define our mission thus.

“The mission of the system is to develop human resources, to discover and disseminate knowledge, to extend knowledge and its application beyond the boundaries of its campuses and to serve and stimulate society by developing in students heightened intellectual, cultural, and humane sensitivities, scientific, professional and technological expertise, and a sense of purpose. Inherent in this broad mission are methods of instruction, research, extended training and public service designed to educate people and improve the human condition. Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for truth.”

-WOW! WOW! WOW!

-We do not usually look to the dry, dusty, legalistic prose of state statute to hear about intellectual, cultural, and humane sensitivities, a sense of purpose, improving the human condition, and the search for truth—unless we’re lucky enough to live in Wisconsin!

-Let’s notice several things about this mission statement.

-We in the University of Wisconsin are to discover and disseminate knowledge, AND to extend and apply it. The law does not afford us the luxury of taking on one or the other of these tasks. We are required to do both, and they sit comfortably astride each other in the language of the statute.

-We in the University of Wisconsin are charged with developing in our students intellectual, cultural, and humane sensitivities, AND scientific, professional, and technological expertise. Sensitivity and expertise; culture and technology. We want our graduates to be competent professionals who understand the human condition, and by virtue of that integrated competence and understanding can improve it. We seek to produce at the UW neither narrow-minded worker bees, nor unmoored, purposeless dilettantes.

- UW graduates, recognizing how privileged they are to have a college degree that has been underwritten by the people of Wisconsin, and earned through their own hard work, should feel the obligation to lead a purposeful life—one that helps others see purpose in their lives. Ripple it out.

-Now about that search for truth business. Reading the sentence in the mission statement that “Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for truth,” we hear the echo of a famous earlier statement by the Board of Regents in 1894, defending Professor Richard T. Ely, unpopular at the time in some quarters. Most of you will know that 19th century statement: “Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.” May we have the courage and wisdom of our foremothers and forefathers as we pursue our truth today, and into the future.

Well, Section 36.01 of Chapter 36 of the Wisconsin Statutes isn’t so dull after all, is it? It is actually a rousing expression from the past of the will of the people of Wisconsin that we need to understand to shape the future, to motivate our “new beginnings.”

The university is always about the future—the next class of freshmen, the graduate students training to become the new generation of faculty and experts outside the academy, the scientific breakthrough about to be seized and put to good use. One of the best aspects of being an academic, or a Regent, is the contact with the energy, optimism, new thinking, and excitement of the young. Which, as occasionally happens as you know, puts me in mind of a poem. This is “What Fifty Said,” by Robert Frost:

When I was young my teachers were the old.

I gave up fire for form till I was cold.

I suffered like a metal being cast.

I went to school to age to learn the past.

Now when I am old my teachers are the young.

What can't be molded must be cracked and sprung.

I strain at lessons fit to start a suture.

I go to school to youth to learn the future.

Those of us in this room know the crackings and springings that face the university as we move into the future—the outdated financial model, the rapidly morphing teaching and learning paradigm, the disruptive effects of new technologies, the influx of “post-traditional” students, the resistance to tuition increases, the call for more telling contributions to economic development and job creation, and on and on. As I like to say: “Change is good . . .you go first!”

But these challenges really do make it an exciting time to be in American higher education. We now have an opportunity, employing the new information and teaching technologies, big data, learning analytics, partnerships with business, industry, and government, to reoutfit the university for 21st century demands. We will need to be more nimble and cost efficient. Government will need to tell us what it wants, and then give us room to deliver in a nimble and cost efficient manner. Wisconsin citizens will need to step up, with our assistance, to champion a responsive 21st century University of Wisconsin, as they did through Chapter 36, when the system was first formed.

I know we can do this because I know the talent we have in this System. We ought to approach the tasks at hand with the optimism Thomas Jefferson showed about the United States at the end of his life. Jefferson, ever brilliant and refined and canny, might be well described as an uncommonly imperfect and accomplished human being and President. He was founder of one of our great universities in the University of Virginia, and perpetrator of our most shameful institution as a slaveholder and father of slaves.

He looked beyond his own and his expanding young country's deep flaws in 1824, two years before his death. He wrote in that year: "... I have observed this march of civilization advancing from the sea coast, passing over us like a cloud of light, increasing our knowledge and improving our condition ... and where this progress will stop no one can say." Thirty-nine years later, the American march would encompass Emancipation, an eventuality Jefferson could not come to grips with. But the republic he helped create did, an accomplishment we should celebrate especially the day after the death of President Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

The University of Wisconsin continues to be one grand engine of that march. It can help chart its direction, temper its excesses, and strengthen its power by drawing into it more Americans, and those who want to be Americans. The people in this room are the chief engineers of the University of Wisconsin. If you do your job well—with focus and with courage, with humility and with intelligence—where the progress of Wisconsin and the nation will stop no one can say.

No one can say because none of us has clear foresight, or for that matter, can comprehend the whole truth in our own time. In history as in all the other core disciplines we study, comprehensive, final truth runs always ahead of us, as the language in Chapter 36 seems

to recognize. I should say here that one of my colleagues once quipped that just because the university is about the unending search for truth, does not mean none has been found yet!

At the University of Wisconsin, I know we intend the fearless sifting and winnowing for the truth never to stop. While truth may be elusive, there is no more bracingly human trait than to chase it. Let's run faster together in that pursuit. I'll try to keep up with you in the years ahead.

Thank you for listening, and thank you for running with me for the last nine-plus years.