

2466 words / 17 minutes

Indiana University Bicentennial Ceremony  
Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie  
President, Indiana University  
IU Auditorium  
Saturday, September 28, 2019  
10:00 a.m.

## 1. AN INSTITUTIONAL GENEALOGY

The arc of Indiana University's first two centuries has reflected the broad sweep of the history of American higher education, as well as that of the state of Indiana and the United States. During this time, Indiana University emerged as a leading global research university, Indiana evolved from a forest wilderness into a flourishing agricultural and industrial state, and the nation achieved cultural and scientific maturity as the world's leading power.

But even as they faced the daunting challenges of subduing the trackless wilderness to build a new state, Indiana's earliest leaders had the wisdom and foresight to recognize that a well-educated citizenry would be essential to the state's development and prosperity. Thus, they called for the establishment of a state university in the state's first constitution.

Much of Indiana University's first century could be described as one of a small, provincial educational institution, whose modest reach and impact was mainly limited to the state. IU's first class of 10 students, and those who first followed in their footsteps, were a homogenous group—all white men—extraordinary, perhaps, only in the fact that they were among the first Midwesterners to recognize the value of a college education. IU's first campus at Seminary Square had a small footprint—home, at its largest, to only a handful of buildings—and it was accessible only to those who could journey by foot, on horseback, and later by railroad, to a small southern Indiana town for a residential education.

Indiana University's second century, however, bears virtually no resemblance to its first. Intent on expanding the reach and access to higher education throughout the Hoosier state, the State of Indiana made massive investments that helped expand IU's educational reach to every part of the state, from the north to the south, and from the east to the west. IU's second century began with many of its major schools recently established. During that century, vibrant regional campuses and prospering medical education centers were established. Today, IU's regional campuses have become part of the very fabric of many of the cities and regions they serve, embedded in communities that passionately support and sustain them.

At the same time, the university's second century saw IU emerge as a "complete university,"<sup>1</sup> in President Bryan's fine phrase, with almost all disciplines, and emerge as a world-class research institution where the effects of the information technology revolution are pervasive. Today, over 100,000 talented students of all ages—with a vast range of academic backgrounds and of socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages—come to IU each year.

What, then, will define Indiana University's third century?

Are there attributes we have inherited from our past that remain of fundamental importance—areas to which we should re-double our commitment? And are there others that have held us back or that no longer serve to advance our missions—and are we prepared to discard them?

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<sup>1</sup> William Lowe Bryan, remarks at the centennial celebration of the opening of Indiana University, as quoted in *Indiana University Alumni Quarterly*, XI, July 1924, 379.

## 2. THE GREAT TRADITION OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

One of those fundamentals at the very core of an IU education is that it is an unashamedly liberal education, not in the political sense, but in the sense of the great tradition most eloquently described and defended in modern times by John Henry, Cardinal Newman.

This great tradition of liberal education, which is at the very heart of an IU education, contends that essential to the training of good citizens is an education in the breadth of human knowledge, from the sciences to the humanities, from the social sciences to the arts, and instruction in the skills of both analysis and discrimination. It is a training that develops, in Newman's words "habit[s] of mind which last ... through life."<sup>2</sup>

There are those who assert that an education of this kind is a relic of the past, not in tune with our modern technology-saturated times. But on the contrary, I claim just the opposite—that it is, in fact, the best kind of education for these complex and troubled times.

Indiana University serves the state by making an essential contribution to Indiana's economic development and its emerging knowledge economy, providing the state's exceptional students first with an excellent liberal education that builds the "habits of mind" that Newman described, and then with the opportunity of further education at the highest standards in nearly every profession.

The great tradition of liberal education is fundamental to the best universities in the United States—universities that are admired around the world for the creative, innovative students they produce and their pathbreaking research and scholarship. It must remain essential to an IU education. It has quite simply, made us who we are—and who we will be.

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<sup>2</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, (Longmans, Green & Co., 1901), 101.

### 3. EDUCATION: THE GREAT EQUALIZER?

During its second century, Indiana University experienced enormous growth in many areas, including its student population, its research enterprise, its international engagement, and its commitment to contributing to the cultural, social, and economic advance of the life of the state. Some would say that during this era, IU aimed to be all things to all people, with the idea that higher education would be the great equalizer for students from various backgrounds.

But has it been?

Much of the distrust of higher education stems from those who feel that they have been left behind. Great divisions exist in today's world: between the wealthy and the poor, urban and rural America, between the political right and the left.

While much of the national and global rhetoric might imply that universities accept or even embrace these inequities, IU's history shows just the opposite. IU was—and is—in the forefront of the equal education of men and women, and in bringing an end to the scourge of segregation. Today, our regional campuses bring an IU education to every corner of the state, bound together with their supportive community partners. Service to the community is part of the very identity of the IUPUI campus, built into it at every level. And in Bloomington, the wildly successful Center for Rural Engagement has brought IU into the lives of dozens of small communities in southern Indiana. All of this proves that higher education can, in fact, play a vital role in bridging these seemingly insurmountable divides.

This, then, will be a key challenge for our third century—to bridge the divisions that exist in our society and permanently shed the image of higher education as an “ivory tower” and the preserve of the privileged.

Vital to this is to ensure IU remains completely accessible to able students from all over the state no matter what their backgrounds. In fact, IU has perhaps never been more accessible. IU Online provides vast flexibility of time and space for an IU education, of which over one-third of our students now take advantage. We now provide record student financial aid, thanks, in part, to the overwhelming success of IU's Bicentennial Campaign. Tuition is very low by the standards of many of our peers. Student debt is falling rapidly. And the percentages of minority students across all of IU now approximates that of the state. It is one of our accomplishments of which we should we most proud, for we are truly a university for all the people.

And vital, too, has been IU's research enterprise. I noted in my State of the University address a few days ago that as IU begins a new century, its research enterprise is strong. Fundamental to this strength are faculty of excellence and outstanding ability, whose research and scholarship blaze new paths of knowledge for the enlightenment and betterment of humankind. And as we enter that century, the excellence of IU's research faculty grows unabated. Last year saw the most successful year ever in the university's history for external research funding, with a record \$680.2 million being awarded. Such success emphatically underscores the excellence and importance of IU faculty research and scholarship in a funding environment that continues to grow increasingly more competitive.

But IU begins a new century with a major transition underway among its faculty. The baby-boom generation, on whom so much of IU's postwar reputation for research excellence is based, is gradually retiring, and a new generation is taking its place. Of the roughly 5,000 tenured, tenure track, and clinical faculty at IU, almost exactly half have joined IU since 2007, and of these, nearly half are women. It is this generation who will lead IU's research enterprise into its next century.

#### 4. A UNIVERSITY GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY

The devoted support of IU's alumni base of over 700,000 alumni, spread all over the world, has been, in a myriad of ways, a key to our success. They, and tens of thousands of friends of the university, have supported the university for over a century in a succession of ever-larger fund-raising campaigns, which will culminate next year in the completion of what we expect will be IU's record-setting Bicentennial Campaign of over \$3 billion. In this, it reflects the extraordinary philanthropy that is such a basic part of American universities. It exists nowhere else in the world on this scale. It is a uniquely American phenomenon.

IU's success in its third century, then, will rest on the continuing engagement and support of its world-wide body of alumni, and from its extensive range of supporters, friends, and community partners.

#### 5. FUTURE CHALLENGES

In 1920, almost exactly 100 years ago, one of IU's greatest presidents, William Lowe Bryan, spoke at the centennial of Indiana University. He spoke at a perilous time. A devastating war had just finished. Disease still wracked the globe. In such a world, Bryan asked whether America and its states had the will to support their great public universities to be the foundations of their future prosperity. He wrote in tones of grave concern that "The fight for national business and for world business must be won first in the Universities ... [but] ... cannot be won at all if the Universities are allowed to degenerate."<sup>3</sup>

But the century since Bryan's apprehensive and worried words has seen the United States lead the free world in two great victories against totalitarianism, and seen its

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<sup>3</sup> William Lowe Bryan, "President's Message to the Alumni," Indiana University Foundation Day, January 20, 1920, *Indiana University Newsletter*, Volume VIII, Number 1, 7.

great research universities become the world's finest. As Mary Sue Coleman, president of the Association of American Universities, recently said, America's research universities "created the internet, put a man on the moon, ended polio and countless other diseases, blunted the scourge of AIDS, and put the world in the palm of our hands with the smartphone."<sup>4</sup>

But I find myself, a century after President Bryan, asking almost the same question he did. Will America's research universities endure and keep their positions of global leadership, once seemingly so unassailable? Since 2008, federal funding for basic scientific research has effectively declined, failing to keep pace with inflation. And while state support for higher education in Indiana has exceeded that of many of our peer institutions, it, too, has failed to keep pace with inflation over the past several decades. And federal budgets proposed in recent years, thankfully not supported by Congress, would utterly devastate this nation's capacity for basic scientific research.

Nearly 10 years ago, I attended a celebration like this for another great university. I sat in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, along with 8,000 people on a Sunday morning at the official celebration of the centennial of the founding of Tsinghua University, China's finest. The keynote speech was given by one of its alumni—then-President of China, Hu Jintao. Nearly the whole of China's senior leadership was also there, including another Tsinghua graduate, then-Vice President Xi Jinping.

In a remarkable speech, President Hu spoke at length about the vital importance of China's research universities to the nation's future, echoing President Bryan's prophetic words. He said: "Innovation [is] the main driving force of economic social development, and intellectual innovation becomes the core factor of national competitiveness." He continued: "Higher education institutions must ...conduct ... research to meet the needs of the nation's (economic and social) development, conduct ...research in cutting-edge

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Sue Coleman, "The Educated Citizenry: An Endangered Species?" The Thomas Willis Lambeth Distinguished Lecture, delivered November 29, 2018 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

fields of science and technology, and (become more involved) in public non-profit research concerning major welfare issues.”<sup>5</sup>

He described at length the ways in which his country was investing to make this happen. The scale of this investment has been massive; its impact has been extraordinary. Chinese universities are now sophisticated, large, and extremely well equipped, and as a result, have risen dramatically in world rankings.

This is the world in which IU will begin its third century—a world in which the dominance of the American research university can no longer be assured.

But at Indiana University, we are acutely aware of the challenges that are coming in our third century. This awareness has driven much of the reform, restructuring, renovation, and rebuilding that has taken place across all of our campuses for over the last decade or more. As I described in detail in my recent State of the University speech, we believe we are well-positioned to confront these challenges.

Nor can the dominance of American universities be sustained by cutting and freezing. At the end of the day, it can only be assured through investment like that which is happening elsewhere around the world. In the coming century, then, will the federal government continue to invest in the research conducted at its universities and even expand this investment? And will states continue to invest in their great public research universities at the level needed to ensure their continued global competitiveness? Such investment will ultimately be critical to America’s global competitiveness, its national security, and the quality of life of its citizens. It will also be critical in helping the state of Indiana grow its population, attract new employers, and deal with pressing challenges like environmental change and the scourge of addiction.

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<sup>5</sup> Hu Jintao, Remarks at the Centennial Anniversary of the Founding of Tsinghua University, delivered April 24, 2011.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As we enter this new century, we are heading towards a new social contract. The role of public universities in this new social order will be essential. In order to achieve our goals, we must redouble our efforts to build the trust of the public in what we do, how we do it, and why we do it.

And in order to build this trust, we must simply shed one last relic of our institutional identity that has endured through our first two centuries. While the Midwestern ethos of humility and quiet confidence has been a defining characteristic of Indiana University, we have unintentionally become one of the best kept secrets in American higher education, known for “doing more with less,” rather than for the quality and distinction of the work itself. We have allowed others to tell our story for us, and that has not always portrayed IU or American higher education in its best light.

It is time for Indiana University to bear the torch of telling our own story, boasting about our strengths, and measuring them against only the best standards we aim to achieve. The bicentennial celebration of Indiana University, then—while it is, strictly speaking, an extended reflection on what has come before—must become the launching pad for a new era of pride in the institution as it is now, and optimism about its bright future.

This, then, is the call to action for Indiana University’s third century: To rebuild our social contract by purposefully bridging the divisions that exist in our communities and telling the world about our success. Anything less at this juncture will propel us backward when the winds of change and the challenges of the next century necessitate that we take our search for light and truth forward.

Thank you.