I am honored to have the opportunity to visit with you all today. I thank President Bowen Loftin for the invitation, the hospitality, and for that gracious introduction. I also want to share with you how pleased I am to have with me one of the members of Ohio State’s Board of Trustees, Dr. Gil Cloyd, who came over from his home in Austin to join us today. Dr. Cloyd was chairman of our Board of Trustees when I returned to Ohio State four years ago, and I will tell you I learned a great deal about leadership from his superb example.

I keep a framed quote in my office on prominent display – so that every visitor can immediately be reminded of my task and theirs. The quote is not from Plato, Thomas Aquinas, or John Dewey. Instead, the philosopher in question is a person with a good deal more hands-on experience in the matter of solving problems and leading people. There on an easel, looming large over my conference table, inserting itself in the proceedings every day, are the words of General Eric Shinseki.

“If you don’t like change,” the general said, “you’re going to like irrelevance even less.” The general’s fuller context was that the Army had to change because the nation cannot afford to have an Army that is irrelevant.

To that I would add, educators and institutions must change, because the nation cannot afford universities that are irrelevant. In fact, the general believes that the pursuit of positive change creates what he calls irreversible forward momentum.

*Irreversible forward momentum.*

I like the sound of that. Translate it into Latin and I think you would have a world-class university motto.


To me, that is the essence of what we can do in a university. It is the essence of what we must do. Positive change in expanding and improving what we know and who we reach, that is the physics of academic momentum that flows from a university to students, to research partners, to civic partners, and to all constituents. And from all those directly touched, that irreversible force cascades outward to the communities and workplaces they inhabit.

We must use the latent force within universities to maximum effect. Indeed, raising our universities from plateaus to peaks will surely elevate our states and our nation. To achieve that rise, we must not fear climbing out of the tautological trap of doing things as they have always been done, merely because they have always been done that way.
Ladies and gentlemen, my central point today is this: the most powerful limitations on our universities are self-imposed. And the time to break free is nigh.

Let me acknowledge that embracing change is always an important, driving force for universities. Indeed, I could not have stood here at any stage in my academic career and kept a straight face while making a case for sloth. But, today, today the urgency is palpable. The great fortunes of the world were once forged by muscle and sweat in the mills and the fields. Now, the great fortunes of the world are amassed from products of the mind.

One hundred years ago the three richest Americans made their money in oil, steel, and timber, respectively. Now, the three wealthiest people in this country derive their riches from software, finance, and software.

Even with derricks pumping out oil that retails north of $85 a barrel, the three wealthiest Texans today made their fortunes in retail sales, computers, and banking. The economic expectations of a century ago, a decade ago, even a few years ago, are no longer operative.

But this is not reason to lament. The catalyst of virtually all future economic progress will be ideas. And to our great good fortune, that happens to be the stock and trade of universities.

President Obama has said this nation now faces a “Sputnik moment,” in which our universities will be called upon to accelerate our economic progress past the limits of our imagination. Governor Rick Perry has said “improving higher education” is essential for Texas to “maintain a competitive edge in the global marketplace.” Indeed, my own governor in Ohio and leaders of all political stripe agree and are laying claim to a future made brighter by higher education. Rhetoric aside, budgetary pressures in some states — though Ohio is a happy exception — have produced fiercely Spartan allocations to higher education.

In fact, the phenomenon is international.

I was in Europe in July, exploring new partnerships and opportunities for Ohio State. At Oxford University, I saw the effects of government funding for the classroom having been reduced by 40 percent, and a university left to increase tuition by almost 200 percent. The University of Exeter’s vice chancellor said of the government’s budget: “we are being thrown out of the nest.” I sincerely sympathize with his plight.

At the same time, I recognize that we must all learn to fly on our own. Indeed, longing for the comforts of the nest has never been anyone’s impetus to soar. At a fundamental level, we cannot allow our great universities to be deflated by fads or formulas, by partisan battles or legislative bargaining.

Ladies and gentlemen, I assert to you that the irreversible forward momentum we seek will be of our own creation. And it begins when we see past the old problems directly in front of us and look toward new solutions. In a time in which the U.S. population has slipped from first to 12th in educational
attainment among developed nations, we must expand opportunity in this country today. The problem for those of us running our nation’s finest and strongest universities is that we simply do not have—and in many cases will never have—the capacity to increase admissions by any significant degree.

Nevertheless, when your governor or mine asks what we are doing to increase access, simply illuminating a ‘no vacancy’ sign is woefully insufficient. We are left, then, with the vexing puzzle of how to reach more students without growing.

As leaders here well know, one of the most promising solutions is strengthening our ties with community colleges. Community colleges serve as the front door to the American dream. Building our capacity to attract more qualified community college students to top university campuses puts us in service not only of the dream, but the American reality.

Here at Texas A&M, your TAP plan allows students of partner institutions to claim guaranteed admission after successful completion of community college coursework. This year at Ohio State, we launched a transformative partnership with our neighbors at Columbus State Community College. Together, our two institutions now provide a Preferred Pathway from the college to the university. We are not simply putting out the welcome mat, leaving on a light, and hoping for the best. Rather, we are actively working to challenge, inspire, and prepare these students from day one.

Faculty and staff from both institutions are collaborating to develop a curriculum and advising program that builds upon a natural progression from enrollment at Columbus State to success at Ohio State. Two years ago, we launched our initiative to attract more community college students to study in the health sciences at the University. Working with the College Board to create a national pilot program, we are attracting more students from underrepresented groups and helping to address shortages in certain health care specialties.

Young men and women who might not otherwise have had the means—financial or otherwise—to pursue such training are now future doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals. The societal value created in the process is simply incalculable. Overall, we have increased the size of our incoming transfer class by 29 percent over the last six years. The impact on access is akin to compound interest—since every slot occupied by a transfer student can produce multiple degrees in a four-year span. Like our peer institutions, we are—and always will be—dedicated to the full four-year undergraduate experience. But when we are presented with a problem—creating, for example, a $10,000 degree—we must be able to do more than spin our wheels, stymied by the impossibility of the task. We must do more than fail to create a single new idea. Rather, we must start with the solution—serve more students and better serve our states—and work from there to produce opportunity. Indeed, every student who enters A&M through the TAP plan, or Ohio State through the Preferred Pathway, is a life transformed.

As we nudge the door open a bit wider, we must also nudge open our minds to recalibrate how we make progress happen. Like any powerful institution, universities compete for resources and recognition with unyielding zeal. As well we should. But we must not let our desire to be first and best impede the pursuit of our mission.
Constitutional scholars in the audience can tell you that this nation’s first years after independence were marked by a stifling insularity. With no national economic oversight, states regularly imposed tariffs on their neighbors’ products. Surrounding states then replied in kind. Trade that would have benefited both sides was lost. Natural complementary strengths were negated. And state and national economies shrank within themselves. In the process, all parties were made poorer by myopic competition. Ladies and gentlemen, our universities must rise above that same impulse and take advantage of natural complementary strengths. That is precisely what Texas A&M has done with its groundbreaking partnership with the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. Combining minds and resources in the search to create and test new treatments for cancer maximizes the impact of two great universities in service of hope and healing. At Ohio State, we have reached across the great Midwest to join in league with Colorado State University. Together, we have assembled a 500-person team working on energy and environmental research and economic development. Our efforts are headed by former astronaut Ron Sega who serves as Vice President and Enterprise Executive in a unique joint appointment between our two universities. We must all acknowledge that no one university can match the depth of expertise, research programs, facilities, regional advantages, and student talent available at two or more universities.

In this era, when the Internet has opened a virtual door to crowd-sourcing, far-flung minds are being marshaled to find unconventional solutions, and universities must not be left behind, trapped in old ways of thinking. Even as we seek transformative changes on campus, I would be the first to admit that we do so without knowing the precise challenges our students will face in four or forty years. We cannot know the state of the economy or the state of the world. But what we do know is the burgeoning value of preparing students to think analytically and see expansively. Toward that end, both Texas A&M and Ohio State have steadfastly worked to bring a global perspective to our campuses and send our students out to claim the world as a classroom.

Both our institutions rank among the top twenty in the nation in the size of our international student body. And, both our institutions are among the leaders in sending American students to study abroad. I firmly believe that as the world shrinks, opportunity grows. In a time when actions taken on one side of the globe have an immediate and profound impact on the other side, we simply must break out of our own routines and reach out more fully and effectively to one another.

In fact, my commitment to this notion spurred me to make Ohio State the first comprehensive university to ask all its students to acquire a passport. I believe a passport is a tool for the imagination and for thinking big thoughts. It has become what the driver’s license once was: permission to explore our most relevant surroundings. Imagine what it means for a first-generation college student from Johnstown, Ohio, or Hubbard, Texas, to hold a passport in his or her hands. Imagine the possibilities; the world conjured in his or her mind that suddenly has no borders, no limits. As universities, we must ensure members of the next generation are citizens of the world, living a life made larger by a world made smaller.

I am happy to report that among our sophomores, members of the first entering class to bear the brunt of my polite but firm suggestion – two-thirds now hold a passport – about double the proportion of Americans overall.
Ladies and gentlemen, there is irreversible forward momentum in broadening the horizons of our students, in collaborating on tasks of outstanding import, in widening the path to our campuses. Whether headlines celebrate or enervate our efforts, we must remain steadfast in moving forward in these and other ways that help move our students, state, and nation forward. Study after study show that the difference in lifetime earnings between holding a high school degree and holding a college degree is about one million dollars. That is the greatest return on investment modern society offers. But, my friends, let us never become mere bean counters in assessing our work. We must never arbitrarily speed up the assembly line, for we are not in the business of producing widgets. And let us never, never pit the study of classics versus the study of commerce in an equation filled with numerators and devoid of nuance.

Let me be clear: All of us who have devoted our lives to the noble purposes of public higher education must resist ill-conceived calls for artificially quantifying the per-student, per-hour value of teaching history, biochemistry, or law. To counter these unproductive calls, we must be much more assertive in talking about what we do and how we view our role. Because, of course, the value of a degree is good bit more than one million dollars. The value of a college degree is truth.

And beauty.
And depth.
And purpose.
And hope.
And meaning.
And connection.
And sustenance.
And possibility.

I want to leave you today with the results of an experiment that took place some two decades ago on this very campus. It is an experiment that tells us a good deal about where positive change is to be found. David Jansson and Steven Smith, a pair of Texas A&M engineers, asked an experimental group to design a fairly mundane product—a bike rack for the roof of a car, for example. Participants were told they must overcome specific design problems others had encountered when creating the same product. The control group in the study was asked to design the very same product, but without any instruction on potential pitfalls.

By every measure, the control group shined.

The control group created more designs, better designs, and designs less likely to replicate the very flaws that others had found so vexing. The experimental group, by contrast, was fixated on the problem as described to them, and had trouble seeing any way around it. Two randomly composed groups of talented engineers, asked to design the very same product, produced markedly divergent results. Yet the only difference between the groups was this: one knew the problems they would face, and the other knew only of an opportunity.
By simply removing the seed of doubt from the mind, Professors Jansson and Smith unlocked the possibility of design.

Ladies and gentleman, it is time we in higher education see past our difficulties. It is time we see past our limitations. Of this I am sure: A university is not defined by problems, but by solutions. Remember that in how you think about these times.

Remember that in every task you pursue.

Remember that every single time you set foot on campus.

For that is surely the path to irreversible forward momentum.

I thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.

And I look forward to hearing what is on your minds.