



"Outrageous Ambitions"

by Terry Sanford

The President's Address to the
Annual Meeting of the Faculty, October 25, 1984

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On this occasion of my last meeting with the faculty, it was tempting to look back to the past fifteen years, summarize what has been done, and claim victory. Instead, let me look to the future, let me talk about institutional goals.

Nor am I good at farewell speeches. Besides, I am not saying farewell to Duke. I am an honorary alumnus and pay annual alumni dues. And I expect to be getting calls from the Annual Fund solicitors.

Everybody is seeking excellence, or claims to be. I sometimes think we have misused the word or weakened it by overuse. Excellence is not a brand of cheese. It is not even a place. It is more like a path or a guiding star. A single professor in a classroom in a small and otherwise inadequate college may seek excellence with as much validity as does the total institution of, say, The Johns Hopkins University. Every individual, every institution, can seek excellence in performance. That does not suggest by any means that they will all end at the same place, because excellence is not a destination. It is a spirit; it is a determination; it is a set of personal and institutional values.

John Gardner in his second book on excellence, had this to say: "When we raise our sights, strive for excellence, dedicate ourselves to the highest goals of our society, we are enrolling in . . . the age-long struggle of humans to realize the best that is in them. Humans reaching toward the most exalted goals they can conceive, striving impatiently and restlessly for excellence . . . have set standards of conduct that heighten our sense of pride--and dignity as human beings On the other hand, humans without standards, faith their eyes on the ground . . . [are] living a life devoid of meaning. A concern for excellence, a devotion to standards, a respect for the human mind and spirit at its best move us toward the former condition and away from the latter."

As I was dedicating, a few weeks ago, the Trinity Memorial Gazebo at Trinity, North Carolina, the birthplace of Duke University (as proclaimed on an automobile license tag given to me on that day), I was reminded that decisions continue to mark a university for years to come. Wrong-headed decisions and narrow-minded views can deform the growth of a university, while enlightened decisions and ambitions can shape a character that continues to grow and find enrichment within itself.

Such positive results were gained for Trinity College from the beginning. The Church that transformed Brown's Schoolhouse into Trinity College was remarkably broad-minded and visionary for that day. (Perhaps it would be even more so for today, with so many born-again patriots trying to rewrite the First Amendment.) The Trinity College Trustees in the 1880s were mostly preachers, who in that post-war period lacked much in formal

education, and local leaders in a rural, generally devastated State, who sought for their children education that they did not have. The Trinity Trustees' presidential choice in 1887 was surprisingly liberal in a time when most Southerners still harbored bitter sectional memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction. (Many still do.) This group of Trustees thought boldly and acted with vision, although its public probably did not understand immediately their selection of a twenty-nine-year-old educator who was not a Methodist, not a North Carolinian, not even a Southerner, and someone they had never heard of--a Pennsylvania "Yankee" and a graduate of Yale University, whose twin passions were athletics and high academic standards.

President John Franklin Crowell viewed his charge with some dismay when he first saw the institution he had agreed to head. He later recounted that he considered leaving before he was inaugurated as president, but that he finally saw the elements of Trinity's inner life--"forty years of history back of it, rich enough in traditions to endow it with an institutional spirit quite its own; and a living loyal clientele of trustees, faculty, and students constituting a collective moral endowment of support."

It is not for me to argue that a president can make a difference. I do assert that the president ought to strive to make a difference, and President Crowell strived mightily. He sharply increased the academic standards of Trinity, created the library, attracted some unusually good people to the faculty, started and coached the football team (whose 16-0 victory over North Carolina in 1888, incidentally, is considered the first real game of football ever played in the South!), and began looking audaciously to the future. He reformed the curriculum so fast, the story is told, that one young man, who thought he was a junior when the new president arrived, three years later found himself in the freshmen class!

President Crowell faced financial worries, poor facilities that would require improvements to remain usable, and the need for new instructional supplies and equipment. He conceived the important question of whether to remain in a relatively isolated and quiet setting, or to try to relocate in a city that would bring Trinity College out into a broader world. It is easy to think that the decision in favor of removal was an obvious decision, but the entire undertaking was extremely ambitious. It was resented in the town of Trinity. It was resented by a great many of the faculty members. It was not endorsed with any enthusiasm by the former president of Trinity College. Then, too, a receptive city had to be found. The offer was carried by the Methodist network, and Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South, of Durham, made a bid that was backed by Julian Carr and Washington Duke, who with other Durham residents had become agitated when the Baptists rejected Durham in favor of Raleigh for their "female academy" because Durham was "no fit place for girls." (Meredith College has done all right, but aren't we glad we are not in Raleigh.)

The lesson I get from this bit of history is that there is nothing wrong with being outrageously ambitious for your institution. I am sure that President Crowell did not achieve everything he hoped to achieve. But think what the situation would have been in higher education in North Carolina and the South had it not been for Crowell's outrageous ambition. Certainly, there would have been no Duke University.

Another lesson from Crowell's administration is that decisions have long lives. In all he did, President Crowell assured the long-range future of his college by being true to academic principle and insisting on standards of excellence. Any view of a university's future should be a long, hundred-year view. That does not mean we need to wait one hundred years to perceive results, but it does mean that what, is done today will still have an effect on this University a hundred years from now.

I was reading recently a brief biography of Howard Odom, who came to be one of the country's foremost sociologists and one of the gigantic forces of progress and enlightenment in the South and the entire nation in its relationship to the black race. He moved in 1920 to North Carolina from an institution where he had set out to do his life's work, primarily because he felt that the president of that private college, similar to Trinity, stifled the climate of intellectual freedom at that institution. It takes a long time to recover, and the differences today, in my opinion, are in the history of the two institutions, demonstrated by the contrasts between the president of that institution in the early part of this century and Presidents Crowell, Kilgo, and Few of Trinity College. The heritage of Trinity College is that these three presidents understood the nature of the free academic institution. They set a tone and adhered, generally, to those standards and aspirations that characterize a free and exuberant academic

enterprise. They, themselves, bred an exuberance, and the lesson is that the faculty one hundred years from now can tell if we let ourselves become comfortable and let ourselves lose sight of the need for exuberance, for excitement, for outrageous endeavors, for exacting, and painful when necessary, adherence to the basic characteristics of an academic community. We do not want to see Duke tolerate shoddy work. I do not want to see us accept second best. I want to see us set goals beyond our obvious reach. I do not want to see us substitute timidity and contentment for courage. I do not want us to fear individuality, to stifle one whiff of free expression, or to ever lack the sureness of the self-confidence that has permitted us to go our own peerless way.

This is not an Ivy League school. We are not of any flock or tribe. I quote from my inaugural speech: "I do not propose that we seek for ourselves a homogenized pattern of the half-dozen great private universities of the nation of which we are one, or that we try to 'catch up' or follow any university, no matter what its prestigious position. Simply to do as some other university does, to teach as it teaches, to operate as it operates, to accept it as our model, would make our best success but a carbon copy. We strive to be Duke University, an institution seeking the highest scholarly attainment, and using to the fullest its own peculiar resources and creative capabilities." I do not even like to hear Harvard referred to as the Duke of the North. We will continue to shape our own destiny in our own way in our own place.

The goals of Duke University, first and foremost, embrace a commitment to excellence in faculty. We have achieved that, but because excellence is a never-ending path, I am sure that we can add to our already excellent faculty and have the best faculty in the world, and that we can achieve that goal in the next two decades; but I am absolutely certain that we cannot achieve anything close to that if we do not set such an outrageous goal right now. Each new faculty member must add to the scholarship, intellectual capacity, and promise of the department and the total of Duke. It is not enough, however, for the faculty to be improved by the recruitment program. Each department has the responsibility for evaluation annually and, indeed, constantly, for the purpose of seeking improvement in quality and dedication of all who want to be a part of Duke's future.

Duke's most bothersome shortcoming, and my most urgent priority, is our competitive weakness in attracting enough of the brightest and most promising students to The Graduate School. My ambition is simple. Our goal should be to attract an appropriate number of the most outstanding Ph.D. candidates in America to our Graduate School. Our present weakness lies not in our lack of adequate faculty, or the quality of our departments, but rather in the financial constraints that have become more and more severe over the past decade. Scholars who seek to take this long and arduous road must have substantial financial assistance. We will make available the best financial package for graduate students of any major university in the country. That proposal may sound outrageously ambitious, but it is not impossible, and I have no doubt that our faculty, embracing this ambition, can reach out and bring to Duke the very best minds who will be academic leaders of the rising generations. The ultimate measure of a great university is the quality of its supply to the ranks of university scholars and teachers, that endless intellectual column which marches into the future to mark and transform society. That is our ultimate mission, not only to seek truth, but to enlarge and perpetuate the search for truth. If all of that is seen as outrageously ambitious for Duke University, then let it be, but nevertheless let us set it as our goal.

It is the spirit of freedom and scholarship that counts most, but none would deny that the spirit must be sustained by substance. President Few clearly comprehended the essentiality of libraries to graduate studies and research. Equally essential are the other tools of research, the equipment and instrumentation, funds for materials and supplies, space, and facilities. We cannot afford to limp along with inadequate tools of research. The libraries must be endowed, and for continuity in keeping our work at the intellectual edge, all research needs must be endowed, and all must receive a fair share of our operating budgets. These resolves are expressed in our Capital Campaign for the Arts and Sciences, but without waiting for beneficence we will continue to build such support into our own budgets.

I am satisfied reasonably well with the way we operate our undergraduate admissions program, which is blind to financial need, in spite of the rising costs. Let us be certain that it remains always blind. We will never deserve to be called a great university if we admit any percentage of our student body on the basis of ability to pay; I deplore recent admissions practices of the number of fine schools that peek a little at an applicant's ability to pay when the admissions process is in progress. If blind to financial need, we have our eyes wide open when judging the quality

of applicants. We have a well-rounded student body, one not selected solely on the easy basis of SAT scores. The reliability of SAT scores may not be what some claim, that is, the primary indicator of success in higher education, life, and career. Surely, these scores are important, but our approach in looking carefully at class rank, at extracurricular efforts, and at a number of other qualifications has enriched our student body, has done justice to countless students who deserve the very best in university opportunity, and the broadened process also has raised our undergraduate capacity for scholarship. Our faculty has been involved in shaping this sound approach to admissions, which process we have codified and placed firmly in the hands of the Office of the Provost.

The Final Report of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, published in 1980, suggests that "the humanities are often being unduly neglected," and notes, from a survey, that "alumni most frequently state they wish they had taken more work in the humanities." That has been our concern, and a part of the directions we have chosen. The undergraduate curriculum at Duke had been changed just before I arrived, to include the small group learning experience and independent study, and since then we have made numerous adjustments to curriculum requirements and doubtless will make many more. When we established a graduate business school, we phased out the undergraduate major in business administration. We added drama and the Institute of the Arts, among other interests. With all the changes, we have remained true and dedicated to "The Liberal Education." The concept of learning for a lifetime of living suits Duke's purposes precisely, and we should always resist pressures to provide what is called "a more practical curriculum." Duke has kept the faith. Let us always keep that faith.

That report also notes, "We have elsewhere expressed concern for the deterioration of integrity on campuses. In particular, we have noted: grade inflation, reduced academic requirements, low-quality off-campus programs, false promises by institutions, cheating, vandalism, and student defaults on loans." I plead not guilty. The report further states, "The morality of this disturbs us. So also do the potential political consequences." It is, indeed, the duty of the University to set the very highest moral standards.

Our Duke students spoke to the necessity for civility, integrity, honor, and self-discipline in adopting their Student Honor Commitment. Twenty-five years from now, looking back, it may very well be that the Duke Student Honor Commitment will be considered a landmark and a firm tradition. It is certainly unique, for no other institution has defined honor and the acceptance of honor as it has been defined by the Duke Student Honor Commitment. It will not attain the status of a tradition unless students continue to nurture it and unless faculty members continue to encourage such nurturing. I hope that both will continue such support, for truly a liberal education is not complete without an understanding and acceptance of honorable personal conduct as a constant guide in life.

The standards we insist on for the Arts and Sciences extend obviously to the professional schools, as exemplified by our Engineering School, which combines in a unique way The Liberal Education with professional learning. All understand that there is no reason today for us not to aspire to do those things which take us to and keep us at the very highest ranks of professional schools. We do have a duty, given our resources, our history, and our capacities, to provide the examples of excellence at its highest definition in all that we do. We have no right to be satisfied to be resting on the second rung of any academic ladder. The Medical Center is undergirding its own brilliant reputation by a careful self-study entitled "The Quest for Excellence." A remarkable, perhaps unique, feature of Duke University is its sense of oneness as a University. Our professional schools do not go their separate ways, and I hope future years never see a departure from this combined show of University strength.

I am not worried about athletics and the other peripheral enterprises of the University. Well, I am not too worried about athletics. (I promise you that I have never been tempted to follow President Crowell's example. I've never even sent the football coach a play. I'll admit that I have thought of asking why we don't punt more often toward the "coffin corner.") We have endeavored to remain true to our academic purposes and to place athletics in the role of wholesome adjunct to university life. We have not let the devotion to athletics overwhelm us in a period when many institutions seem to have made it the single most important endeavor of the institution.

I now note with some satisfaction that the NCAA has reached the point of calling a constitutional convention of presidents to re-examine the rules, to put athletics back into its proper place, and to accomplish nationally, if I may be permitted to claim this, what Duke has been trying to do all along. We are going to continue to lead in the national effort to place collegiate athletics in the role of a wholesome extracurricular activity instead of a business

intent on winning at the cost of dollars and honor. We shall see. In the meantime, we have codified gradually our internal governance of athletics by placing the enterprise more firmly under the influence of the faculty and the academic administration.

Undergraduate student life and the experience at Duke are the spicy ingredients in the general institutional success we have had. We are small and should stay small. We are a "residential university," and should retain the on-campus living option--but not an overcrowded one. It is the remarkable appeal of Duke to the undergraduate that insures we can reach any goal now set for Duke, and intellectual excitement is the reason for the appeal. We gain intellectual excitement with intern programs, special travel opportunities, visiting fellows and speakers, house courses, and conversations with faculty and peers outside the classroom. (There are those who feel this aspect of student life is inadequate, and it can be improved, but I don't want us to get to a point that when a student comes in and shouts, "Hey, how about that soccer team," a fellow student lifts a finger to his lips and admonishes, "Watch it, we are talking about Chaucer.") We also get intellectual excitement from student extracurricular activities, publications, the arts, athletics, and social work projects, along with the most important excitement--the excitement of the laboratory and the classroom.

I cherish the reputation of Duke's senior and tenured professors who eagerly teach undergraduate courses. I hope that the faculty will always make such participation a hallmark of Duke University. Good teaching, insistence on superior performance, a scholarly attitude toward school and work and life should always be expected of those responsible for Duke University's policies and practices. I think we have that kind of excitement at Duke across the board. I think that is why so many students want to come to Duke. I think that is why the name of Duke University is always spoken by high school seniors in every part of this nation with high respect and sometimes awe. This kind of acceptance, this kind of excitement, and this kind of faculty concern are the very heartbeat of a great university. With these foundations, we can proceed to any outrageous institutional ambition.

You know about my concern for our employees, especially "biweekly" employees (a clumsy designation, incidentally, for those who keep our University operating). Duke University is the fifth largest private employer in North Carolina. That fact suggests management problems, but it also suggests a responsibility for treating employees as an institution of freedom and enlightenment should treat them. It is difficult for free enterprise managers to get away from the produce-or-get-fired syndrome. That attitude tends to produce less than superior results. That attitude actually flies in the face of the true meaning of free enterprise, in which everyone is to have his or her best shot at life and a chance to make a worthy contribution. Duke is a good employer. This is a pleasant place to work, but we haven't done enough to embrace the full productivity, the full love and caring, or the full appreciation of employees who are each an integral, necessary part of our successful operation. We are engaged in a conversion to a new approach, to set an example for other universities, to get better performance in our work, and to establish a more humane and rewarding way to manage our employees and their work in this establishment. The first sentence of our proposed "President's Policy on Human Capital" says, "Every person who works for Duke is responsible for the successful operation of Duke. Every person who works for Duke is responsible for maintaining the general excellence that is the constant goal of Duke. Every person who works for Duke is important to Duke; they are all Duke University People." This policy will not be easy to implement, but we are on the way. This paper, now being considered in conferences by various echelons of management, concludes with this statement: "Duke University, a center of freedom, intends to foster that sense of freedom and individual worth in every segment and level of the University. Duke University, through its new principle of employee management, affirms confidence in all employees, relying on their sense of duty and responsibility, their commitment to Duke excellence, and their personal pride, to accomplish Duke's various goals and objectives." I suppose that such a departure from management norms is somewhat outrageous, too, but the prospect of a new way of management is being embraced enthusiastically by our managers.

Finally, the stamp of Duke University and its continuing goal ought to be the unrelenting search for excellence in all of its endeavors. Duke aspires to leave its students with an abiding concern for justice, with a resolve for compassion and concern for others, with minds unfettered by racial and other prejudices, with a dedication to service to society, with an intellectual sharpness, and with an ability to think straight now and throughout life. All of these goals are worthy of outrageous ambitions.

Thank you, and even eight months prematurely, thank you for making my time at Duke the best years of my life.

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