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## Nannerl O. Keohane: The Transforming Experience of Being Around an University

President Nannerl O. Keohane reminisces about and praises Duke in a Founders' Day address

Wednesday, October 01, 2003 | Nannerl O. Keohane, in her 10th and last year as Duke University President, gave the following address Oct. 2 at her last Founders' Day ceremony.

It is an exceptional honor to be invited to give this Founders Day address, and to reflect back on that sunny autumn day when I stood in front of this Chapel to be inaugurated as the eighth president of Duke University.

The main West Quadrangle looked then virtually as it does now. There have been many internal renovations, and the trees have been pruned so that the original vista from Davison to Clocktower once again pleases the eye. But a visitor today will see what the audience saw on October 23, 1993, sitting in front of the Chapel or watching from nearby windows or parapets.

Yet a great deal has changed. Anyone who has been away for awhile can confirm, with a mixture of awe and frustration, that even the roads have refused to remain in place. Most of us would celebrate these changes, and others that are still only a gleam in the eye of outrageously ambitious officers and deans who will keep construction firms in solid business for years to come.

Among the small but lovely innovations of the past decade are the banners on the Duke lampposts down Chapel Drive and Campus Drive, celebrating each new first-year class and then, four years later, honoring their graduation. The seniors when I was inaugurated will be back for their tenth class reunion in April. Almost all the graduate students in 1993 have moved on to careers after Duke, although I have no doubt that at least a few who were here that day are still working on their dissertations. We wish them well!

Many of you have been part of these full and fruitful years, making your distinctive contributions to the life and work of this institution. Much has happened in our lives, joy and sadness, tribulations and triumphs; but the commitment to one another, and to Duke, has been powerfully sustained.

Other good friends and colleagues are no longer with us. The pictures of the inaugural ceremony highlight President Emeritus Terry Sanford sitting beside me with a thoughtful, appropriately avuncular expression. I learned much from Terry, and was fortunate to have his wise counsel. And we miss others of equal importance in helping me steer this ship in the early days - Tommy Langford, Charles Putman, Wes Magat, and many others.

In a recent interview, I was asked about the greatest accomplishment of my presidency; I responded, without hesitation, building an exceptionally talented administrative team. One of my strongest sentiments is the grateful awareness that there is nothing I could have



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done alone. I've had to resist the temptation today to thank all the people who made this decade possible, in the spirit of the standard Oscar speech. If I started doing that, we'd be here late into the night. So I will not mention by name any of my partners on this journey - trustees, administrators, faculty, employees, student leaders, even my own senior officers. You know who you are, and you know what we have done together. You will know exactly when, in this speech, you hear the unspoken thank you.

In 1993, my inaugural address began with the image of scholars at a retreat center called Bellagio. Next fall, Bob and I will pursue our scholarship not on the shores of Lake Como but by the more uncertain waters of Lake Lagunita, in the Stanford Hills, not the Italian Alps. Our intellectual home will be the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, a place very like Bellagio in many respects, with the added good fortune that one is in residence for nine months rather than a few short weeks.

My inaugural address moved outward from the collaborative pursuit of knowledge to the international mission of Duke. Today, as I prepare to make the journey back to the scholar's study, I will briefly replay the tape in the opposite direction.

### **Duke in our city, our region and our world**

One of the commitments I made in October 1993 was to lead our institution to a more certain awareness of "what it means to be an international university." I believe we have made good on that. Duke has a stronger and more deliberately focused international presence, and the world is more fully reflected on our campus every day.

There are robust new Duke clubs from Hong Kong to Santiago, and despite the complexities of travel in the wake of September 11 2001, the number of international applicants for study at Duke in every school has grown substantially. These international students and faculty members greatly enrich our institution with the perspectives they provide in the classroom and in our cultural activities.

But of course there is much work still to be done. The occasional sighting of kids in Duke t-shirts from Beijing to Buenos Aires is no substitute for the instant brand recognition that a few US institutions of higher education enjoy abroad. We're making progress; Duke programs on every continent, Duke alums in leadership in major cities, Duke experts consulted and cited on many different issues around the world. But we are still notably behind some of our older colleagues in international visibility. I have no doubt that this effort will continue to be one of Duke's priorities in the years ahead.

During these ten years we have also, by design, put great emphasis on "a renewed sense of what it means to be of service to this region, our homeland." We have significantly expanded collaborations with our university neighbors in every direction. The Robertson Express that connects Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill is only the most visible sign of that deepened sense of joint enterprise. Countless other collaborations have been launched and sustained, not only with Chapel Hill but also with State and Central, with Durham Tech and other institutions across our region from Georgia to Tennessee. Students and faculty members can now, with much greater assurance, take advantage of the marvelous proximity of several top-notch

institutions to enhance their own scholarly endeavors.

Yet one of my few regrets is that we have missed precious opportunities for partnership between our universities, businesses in our region and the state government. Ten years ago, I hoped this might be a decade that historians would regard as they did the 1930s, when our libraries undertook the bold venture of near-full integration, or the 1950s, when visionary leaders from all sectors came together to create the Research Triangle Park, putting North Carolina on the map. Such descriptions, alas, will not be part of the historical account.

This is no time for complacency about the economic future of North Carolina. Our historic industries - tobacco, furniture, textiles - are under siege, declining or moving elsewhere. They could and must be replaced by new industries that arise from advances in genomics, photonics, informatics, marine sciences, medical care and financial management, all areas that are well represented in the campuses of the Triangle, including ours.

States that in the past looked to us as a model are rapidly outstripping us in innovation. We have fallen behind Maryland and Georgia, Virginia and Texas, who have made this inter-institutional collaboration a high priority. These states have included as full partners private universities like Johns Hopkins and Emory and Rice. All of them are reaping rich rewards. It will not be easy to make up the ground we have lost, but I believe that doing so is imperative for the next generation of leadership.

In 1993, I pointed out that a university is "neither an ivory tower nor an academic village. We are a sizable small city-state, and people and money and requests and opportunities and ideas flow incessantly across our borders." As a result, I said, "we must recognize the impact of what we do here on our neighbors, and on the quality of the society in which we live."

Not all the impact has been positive, as our neighbors near East Campus on the first weekend of school made clear. But the Neighborhood Partnership Initiative has been one of the best aspects of our outreach as a university. In a focused and systematic way we have, together, made some fundamental difference for good in the lives of our neighbors on all sides. In schools and churches, clinics, neighborhood centers and renovated housing, Duke people are out there every day working with our neighbors as partners.

We are also involved with our city and county as partners in improving "the quality of the society in which we live." One of my colleagues is fond of reminding folks that Duke isn't going to be moving anywhere else. And I have no doubt that we will continue to be part of the solution to problems we face, and join in celebrating the many advantages of this vibrant region.

### **The university and support for the voyage**

As we move back on campus in this imaginary journey from our international horizons to the scholar's study, we should be mindful of the crucial contributions to the work of the university made by tens of thousands of people who are not themselves scholars by trade or training.

These contributions include financial resources as well as time, energy, and talent. Here the decade has indeed been fruitful, and there are many reasons for celebration at this anniversary mark. Ten years ago, \$750 million was a stretch fundraising goal for Duke. We are now approaching the \$2.2 billion mark, with three months left to go in the Campaign. This is a tremendous achievement for any university, and a transformative expression of faith in Duke and our future.

Equally transformative, in a different way, have been the contributions of skill and love and labor by Duke people everywhere in this institution. Ten years ago, I noted that those who are engaged directly in scholarship are only one part of the university, that "those who cook the meals and tend the grounds and make arrangements for our upkeep are essential to what we do, and part of the university in their own right." I urged us, therefore, to recognize the university as a "partnership in discovery and exploration that must include those who provide the material support for the voyage." With the benefit of ten more years of experience, I would underscore this point even more strongly.

One of the things I have enjoyed most about this job has been getting to know and work with many people, in all the different jobs and pursuits that together define this immensely complex institution. When I am wrestling with one of the thorny dilemmas that cross a president's desk, the best tonic is to get out of the office, stopping to say hello to the housekeepers or the men planting flowers by the front door; then head over to Duke Hospital and watching the intricate and compassionate pursuits of the whole patient care team; or walk into the cool sanctuary of Duke Chapel to listen to somebody playing the organ and enjoy the light from the stained glass windows on the stonework; or steal a few moments in Duke Gardens, watching children feed the ducks or a gardener planting chrysanthemums. These, too, are Duke, and without them, this would be a sterile place indeed. In fact, it would never be any "place" at all.

When you stop to think about it, it is amazing how many different complicated pieces go into making and sustaining a university, every minute of every day. Around the core scholarly enterprise thousands of people are facilitating, enriching, strengthening. The people in information technology, in student affairs and residence life, in research support and tech services, in athletics and the arts, at the nursing station and in the police cars, the library and the secretarial staff - all contribute to life here in ways that many of us too often take for granted.

And they find aspects of working at a university that nourish them as well. For many, Duke is not just a job but a way of life that extends across the generations of their family. Mindful of our own Duke "family values," in the past decade we've provided more opportunities for people to take steps in their professional development, and included all of the community in events on campus. We've let Duke managers know that it is important to respect everybody in the workforce, as individuals with ideas and distinctive contributions. We've been mindful of the need for more support for those who are trying to juggle careers and family demands, especially in recent months, through the work of the Women's Initiative. But there's still plenty of work to be done to push the values we extol at the top of the hierarchy down through the institution, and extend the advantages of a community of teachers and learners across the university.

In my inaugural address, I noted that we owe several things to the people who pay tuition and provide generous gifts to the university. Among them was that we "take great care about how we administer ourselves." Duke has made great progress in these past few years in improving the efficiency of our administration while holding administrative budgets flat, through imaginative procurement strategies, careful monitoring of building projects and administrative programs, and mergers of redundant activities.

We have also been exemplary in the sophisticated nature of our strategic planning, linking priorities with resources in a way that makes it much easier to keep our eyes on our major goals and hold people accountable for reaching them. It's true that we haven't gored many oxen, and there isn't a lot of blood on the floor. But those of us in senior leadership positions in the Allen Building, the Green Zone and every dean's office say "no" to people with excellent ideas in the student body, the faculty and the administration, every day of our lives.

Yet there is still reason to be worried about the inexorably rising costs in higher education. If we truly wish to be "one of the handful of institutions that define what is best in higher education," as we say in our strategic plan, we should do so not just by adding new programs and building new facilities, but also by figuring out how to provide the best more efficiently. That, too, will be one of the most significant challenges we will face in the years ahead.

### **The core scholarly enterprise**

Yet all this is a means to an end: the core scholarly enterprise that is the heart and soul of the university. Teaching and learning, pushing back the boundaries of knowledge and exploring new terrain that we call "research," are what this is all about. All the services, all the infrastructure, all the support functions, all the extracurricular activities, surround and undergird the central work we do, which is undoubtedly some of the most exciting, rewarding, and deeply meaningful work done anywhere.

If you ask why universities survive and flourish for centuries in many disparate cultures, despite incredible challenges and changes; why the students and teachers in Iraq are still dedicated to their enterprise amidst bombed out and looted classrooms; why girls and women in Afghanistan rushed to take advantage of the education that had so long been denied them - the answer has to be that universities are places where we pursue and nurture a fundamental human passion.

This passionate spirit is captured in the best rhetoric of the strongest leaders of higher education. It inspired William Preston Few to celebrate the "full, untrammled pursuit of the truth" through "excellence that dwells high among the rocks and service that goes out to the lowliest." It led one of Wellesley's early presidents, Alice Freeman Palmer, to say, when someone asked, "Why go to college?" : "We go to college to know, assured that knowledge is sweet and powerful, that it emancipates the mind and makes us citizens of the world."

This passion for knowledge is as deep and hungry as any other human passion, and it shows itself in comparable ways. Athletes are driven by a passion to excel, to know the thrill of victory or the deep

reward of the "personal best." They know that to get there means pushing your body beyond its limits, and that the rewards make all the long hours of practice, the punishing physical demands, the soreness and tiredness well worthwhile. Artists are driven by a passion to create, and may undergo enormous deprivations to succeed at this, living in the proverbial garrets, abandoning home and family, exploring bizarre regimens and undergoing rigorous training, to find the perfect way to express their passion through paint or music or poetry or sculpture.

Scholarship, when you love it and give yourself to its demands, is like that. It offers moments of exhilarating discovery when you finally hit on the evidence to confirm an insight you knew had to be true, or come across something that you could not possibly have known that all of a sudden transforms your world. To describe that experience, the only helpful analogies are to other powerful human passions. Scholarship in those moments is like the pure sharp love of parents for the newborn child, or the thrill of an explorer finding a new continent or planet. It was Keats who reminded us that intellectual discovery can be like contemplating the Pacific after a long and arduous journey, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

Yet like all worthwhile human enterprises, like athletics or art or parenting or exploring, scholarship also includes long periods of hard work, tedium and bone-tiredness, wrong turns and false starts, losses and disappointments. Knowledge comes not easily, but through wrestling with an idea or a problem until things come into focus and you can see the world from an angle you never saw before. The sweetness and the power come from a well-crafted argument or an elegant equation, from a long day in the laboratory or the library, knowing something that in a real sense no one has ever known before, because no one has ever put things together in precisely the same way.

As with athletics or art or parenting or travel, sometimes the best experiences are enhanced by being shared. Sometimes the passion is collaborative, as in a laboratory where the work of the whole team comes together, or a seminar where the ideas that emerge are better than any single member could ever have thought alone. At other times, the work is rigorously solitary, the scholar in the library or the study thinking hard and long, finding an answer on a walk on the beach or run through the forest.

Such passionate experiences, such deep rewards, happen to scholars of all ages, from the first year undergraduates who suddenly see the world from a whole different perspective to the emeritus professors who finally find the words for something they have been wanting to say for a long time. Such experiences are different from the feeling that you get when you score an easy point in a debate, or get a good grade on a paper on which you haven't really worked very hard. These deeply rewarding experiences come from stretching yourself mentally, taking intellectual risks, putting in the long hours and intense energy that are required to know.

For those of us who have chosen scholarship as a profession and dedicated our lives to its distinctive requirements and rewards, there is an element of faith and fervor here that started us out and keeps us going. This sustains us through all the messiness of petty faculty quarrels and bureaucratic red tape and students or colleagues who

just don't get it - or worse, don't care. Occasionally we need to remind ourselves, and each other, that this is what it's all about.

Teaching transforms lives and carries our civilization forward; research saves and improves lives everywhere; scholarship can mean providing service that goes out to the lowliest, acting responsibly as a citizen of the world. But most fundamentally, the love of learning is an end in itself, one of the few human enterprises that truly deserves that honorable standing.

I think about the deep rewards of this vocation each commencement when I salute the Bachelors of Science, Art and Engineering. As I welcome them to the company of educated men and women, I always hope that a goodly portion of them have caught the fever and will spend their lives pursuing philosophia. I also hope that many of those who have chosen other professions and vocations will nonetheless have experienced something of this passion here at Duke, and that the sweetness and power of knowledge will enrich their lives in the decades to come in ways they could never have foreseen.

And it is very much in my mind as I welcome our newly-minted Ph.D.s, doctors of the love of learning, as they join the company of scholars -- past, present, and future - in our continuing search for truth.

In a few months I will return happily to the scholar's study, to rediscover my intellectual roots in the great works of political philosophy. I'll attempt to distill some of what I've learned in the past ten years into insights and nuggets that will make sense to others and help advance our common goals. I know that it will not be easy; being a university president is a demanding job, but no harder, in the end, than sitting down before a blank computer screen to begin to craft what you want to say about a subject of great importance to you and to the world, to say it wisely and powerfully. But I look forward greatly to that stage of my journey.

And I look forward as well to following with deep and affectionate interest the future course of this great university I have been fortunate to lead. Duke is extraordinarily blessed in the deep loyalty of many people who care about this special place - alumni, students, faculty members, administrators, trustees and employees. I have no doubt that because of that loyalty, and the restless visionary passion that has always inspired this institution, Duke will continue to move from strength to strength among the universities of the world.

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