

INSTALLATION ADDRESS



ACHIEVING
EXCELLENCE

GREGORY L. GEOFFROY

PRESIDENT
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER THE SIXTH

TWO THOUSAND AND ONE

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PRESIDENT, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

President Newlin and members of the Board of Regents, State of Iowa; members of the Iowa General Assembly; President Spanier; President Koob; representatives of higher education institutions and societies from across the nation; faculty, staff, students, and alumni of Iowa State University; friends, colleagues, and special guests...

Kathy and I and our family are extremely grateful to you for being here to share this proud moment in our lives and this historic day in the life of one of the nation's great educational institutions. In the entire 133-year history of Iowa State University, this is only the fourteenth time that a new president has been installed, and I want everyone to know how very proud and deeply honored I am to be that individual.

I also want you to know that I am ready—ready to accept the responsibility that you have bestowed upon me; I am eager—eager to accept the challenges that lay before us; and I am excited—excited to help lead this university in fulfilling its land-grant mission of service to the people of Iowa, and in its ambitious and noble quest to become the best land-grant university in the nation. Iowa State University is ready to move to the next level of greatness, and I am ready to lead it there.

I have received tremendous support for this new challenge and this role from the people who are assembled here today and from many others throughout the university community, and that is deeply appreciated. Equally important is the strong support from my family—my wife, Kathy, who is sharing this adventure with me as she has done throughout my career, and my children, Michael, David, and Janet, who is here with her husband Jason.

Not only is it an honor to become a member of the community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni that is Iowa State University, but it's also an honor to become a member of the broader community that is Iowa. As I have traveled to different parts of the state, I have been enormously impressed with the quality of the people that I have met—their friendliness and warmth, and their sincerity and genuineness. Iowans like

to say that the rich soil of Iowa is the state's greatest resource, but I believe its greatest resource is its people.

Being an Iowan means many things.

It certainly means embracing hard work, from the very beginning when the first settlers had to break through the thick prairie sod to reap the richness of Iowa's soil. And that work ethic is as strong as ever in the people of Iowa today.

Being an Iowan also means being down to earth—literally and figuratively. There is no falseness here; no pretentiousness. Just honest, hard-working people, who expect to be treated fairly and honestly.

Being an Iowan also means having a strong sense of community and caring about your fellow citizen, as evidenced by Iowa's strong support of things that are most important in providing a high quality of life for the citizens of this state: the environment, quality health care, programs and services to support the less fortunate in our society, and, of course, education.

And being an Iowan certainly means having a deep appreciation for agriculture, from its role in shaping Iowa into the great state that it is today, to its continuing importance in the state's economy.

But Iowans also realize that while agriculture will continue to play an important role, the future success of Iowa depends upon greater diversification—diversification of our economy and diversification of our people. These are two of the important challenges facing Iowa, and they are challenges that the State's land-grant university can help Iowa meet successfully.

It is the proud land-grant heritage of this university and its continued commitment to that ideal and all that it embraces that attracted me to Iowa State, and that convinced me to join you when that opportunity came. There isn't a university in the nation with a richer history and prouder heritage of contributing to the evolution of public higher education in the United States, or one with a greater potential for being a leader in its future development.

Washington, D.C., may have been where the land-grant movement began with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, but Iowa is where the land-grant movement took root, when the people of this state became the first in the nation to embrace its revolutionary concepts and ideals.

What the people of Iowa embraced was the ideal of access to higher education—access not just for a privileged few, but access for all, regardless of race, gender, or social or economic status.

They embraced the ideal of providing students with an education that would give them the tools to be successful as a professional and as a citizen and leader.

They embraced the ideal of doing research not just on the mysteries of the universe, but also on the mysteries and challenges of growing crops, raising livestock, building structures, and manufacturing.

And they embraced the ideal of connecting with people—with farmers, with business people, with factory and industrial workers, with families, in all parts of the state, and in communities of all sizes—to put the knowledge resources of this new kind of land-grant university to work for them, to help them improve their lives, and to help them build a better quality of life in their communities. This connecting with people is the ideal we today call “engagement.”

It was at Iowa State where two of the most important parts of the “engagement” mission of the land-grant university began—the Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension systems.

It was also at Iowa State where some of the most important scientific advancements of the 20th century occurred because of this land-grant ideal of applying our scientific knowledge to real-life issues, real-life problems, and real-life challenges, from its leadership role in the development of hybrid seed corn to the pioneering work of Henry Gilman in organometallics and plastics; O.R. Sweeney in ethanol fuels; Jay Lush in scientific animal breeding; Frank Spedding and Harley Wilhelm in purifying rare earth metals; and John Atanasoff, inventor of the electronic digital computer.

This is an incredible record of accomplishment and contribution—to science, to education, and to the development of our modern world. And it can all be traced to the people of a state who believed in the power of these revolutionary new ideals of a land-grant university, and how they might be used to make their state—as well as their nation and the world—a better place for all.

This is why I am so profoundly proud to be a part of this state and this great university with its proud history.

But it is not the past that is my focus today. It is the future, and more importantly, our vision for the future.

We have such a vision, which is wonderfully articulated as the aspiration of the University's Strategic Plan. It is to become the very best land-grant university in the nation. This is an ambitious aspiration, but it is an aspiration that is most important to the citizens of Iowa to have their university achieve.

Studies of economically successful regions across this nation have shown that at the core of virtually every one is a nucleus of one or more strong research universities, and these research universities are the essential drivers for that economic success. These research universities generate the talented workforce needed by modern industries, and these research universities conduct frontier research that fuels economic development.

The future success of Iowa as a state is thus closely linked to the success of its two complimentary research universities—Iowa State University and the University of Iowa. And if Iowa is to be highly successful—if it is to achieve the vision mapped out in the state's Strategic Plan – Iowa 2010—it is essential that these two universities be among the very best in their mission areas.

The goals of Iowa State's Strategic Plan are clear, and they are without question the right goals for this land-grant university. It is our heritage, our tradition, our responsibility, and our commitment to the future to pursue the goals of excellence—excellence in learning, excellence in discovery, and excellence in engagement.

Before outlining my priorities for the pursuit of these goals, I want to highlight one important aspect of my approach to leading that quest.

I very strongly believe that a university is first and foremost a community of scholars. Our strength is found in our collective knowledge, experiences, and insights, and we are at our best when we work openly, collegially, and collaboratively. I have followed this principal throughout my entire career in higher education and it has worked well for me and for the institutions I have served, and I intend to continue it here at Iowa State University. I will articulate the goals and paint the vision, but we will work collaboratively in developing the strategies to achieve them. That is the great tradition of the community of scholars.

Now, let me establish my priorities.

My first priority is academic excellence, because I so strongly believe that our success in everything else that we do flows from that.

Academic excellence derives from excellent academic programs, and excellent academic programs derive from excellent faculty. If we are sincere in our desire to make Iowa State the best land-grant university in the nation, we must develop more academic programs

that are counted among the very best in their fields and that are led by the most talented faculty in the nation. Iowa State already has a number of world-class programs, but we need many more if we are to become the very best land-grant university.

The only way to accomplish this is by having the best people in these programs—the best scholars, the best teachers, and the best researchers... the best faculty. To this end, I will make the recruitment of top faculty—and retaining them once they are here—a top priority of my administration, through the provision of competitive salaries, facilities, and excellent students and staff to work with.

Improved academic quality must be the goal of every department and unit within the university, and we must set our standards and expectations high, across the board. But we do need to identify those programs that have the highest potential for being among the very best in their fields, and then work to achieve that high level of excellence. As I will outline in a moment, one strategy that we will use is to establish several new high-impact interdisciplinary initiatives.

My next priority is to provide our students with the best education possible to equip them well for future success, and ensure that we continue to *Challenge Students to Become Their Best*. That is our theme for the current academic year, as it needs to be for every year.

In addition to having an outstanding faculty to lead our students through the learning process, we must also ensure that we provide our students with an outstanding living and learning environment, from the best housing to modern classrooms and laboratories with broad access to information technology, to enrichments to their total educational experience with a broad-based program of internships, study abroad programs, and leadership opportunities.

One area that needs increased attention is in ensuring that more of our students complete their degrees in a timely fashion. We currently graduate only 62 percent of our students six years after they enroll as freshmen—a number that is far too low, even though it is near the average of our peer land-grant universities. To address this issue, I will direct that we mount a focused effort to raise that level to 70 percent over the next five years. As part of that effort, we must be more vigorous in promoting and expanding our “Soar in Four” program that guarantees that participating students will graduate in four years, if they adhere to a set of guidelines and requirements.

We also need to develop a greater entrepreneurial sense in more of our students—to their benefit and to the benefit of Iowa in this modern world. This must become a greater facet of our educational programming, and we must develop special opportunities

for out-of-class enrichment around this theme, including the establishment of learning communities focused on the development of young entrepreneurs.

A third priority is to have Iowa State be a more fully “engaged” university, a university that is even more connected and involved with the people we serve—the people of Iowa. Although we do this very well now, we must ensure that we continue to meet the educational needs of constituents throughout the state via our distance education offerings; that we adhere to the time-honored land-grant tradition of conducting research that addresses the needs of the people of Iowa; and that we maximize our opportunities to extend the knowledge and resources of the university to help the people of Iowa put that research and knowledge into actual use, to help Iowans live better, safer, more productive, more prosperous, and more rewarding lives.

Becoming fully engaged means becoming even more connected with the people, the businesses, the institutions and the communities of Iowa, and we must focus on creating an extensive array of partnerships with government, business, and the nonprofit sector.

One approach that we will use to address all of these priorities and the goals of the university’s Strategic Plan, is to establish several new interdisciplinary academic initiatives like the one that the university is aggressively pursuing in the plant sciences. I like to call these “Big Impact” initiatives, because they can have a huge impact on improving the academic quality of all of the departments and programs within the interdisciplinary umbrella, and because they can have a big impact on the state of Iowa, as catalysts for economic development and through addressing issues of concern to Iowans. The Plant Sciences initiative is an excellent example, and we will continue our very strong focus in this important area; but we will also establish a few additional initiatives to focus our efforts in other areas.

They need not be on the same scale of the Plant Sciences initiative, but they must be interdisciplinary and clearly aimed at increasing the excellence of our academic units. And they must also be well aligned with our land-grant mission and should have the capacity to generate significant amounts of support from outside the university.

I have asked Provost Richmond to begin the process of working with the faculty, department chairs, and deans to identify such initiatives. I understand that our faculty are developing exciting proposals in areas like food safety and food security, biorenewables, animal genomics, nanotechnology, and human computer interaction, among others. Our challenge, I know, will be to choose the two to three initiatives to pursue among all of the excellent ones that will be submitted.

Whenever you set an aspiration to become the best, the overriding question becomes: How do you know when you have achieved that aspiration? Unlike intercollegiate athletics, there is no poll that determines who's Number One. But there are two important approaches that we can use.

First, we have several important benchmarks in our Strategic Plan to measure our progress in the different areas of our mission, and we will use these to ensure that we are constantly moving forward and to compare our performance with our peers.

But I believe that the most important measure is how we compete for the best people and the best programs. When we compete nationally for programs and activities that are aligned with our interests, and when we routinely win those competitions, then we will know that we have arrived. And more importantly, when we go head to head with the other great land-grant universities in the country in competing for the most talented faculty, for the very best students, and for the best staff, and when we "win" those competitions more often than we lose, then we will know we have arrived.

I believe deeply that the quality of this university is only as good as the quality of its people, and we must work tirelessly to bring to Iowa State University the very best faculty, students, and staff, and then ensure that we keep them here when they catch the attention of others. Because of this, I have asked the Iowa State University Foundation to embark on a special fund-raising initiative that will have "Investing in People" as its principle theme. The major focus will be on raising funds for undergraduate scholarships, for graduate fellowships, and for endowed faculty positions, all of which are important tools for bringing the very best people to the university and for keeping them here.

I am pleased to report that the governors of the Foundation eagerly endorsed my request, and that this will become the focus of a fund-raising effort that we will begin immediately, and that will carry over into our next major fund-raising campaign that will start in a couple of years. My wife, Kathy, and I have targeted our own giving to this objective, and we have recently begun funding a faculty fellowship in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to assist in the recruitment and career development of an aspiring young faculty member in that college.

Finally, I also need to mention the importance of having very strong support from the state of Iowa if we are to be successful in our quest to become the best land-grant university in the nation. The current budget difficulties of the state are creating enormous challenges for us as we strive to maintain our current quality, much less advance toward our aspiration, and we sincerely hope that some way can be found to address the state's fiscal difficulties that does not place such a heavy burden on the Regent's universities.

We certainly hope that we can count on the state to provide the level of support we need once the budget cycle turns around, and we all know that it will.

This aspiration to become the nation's best land-grant university is not a new aspiration for Iowa State University. It was the focus of the university's first strategic plan, adopted in 1991, but the foundation for this aspiration dates back much further, to the very beginning of this institution.

I believe the people of Iowa had this aspiration in mind when they first accepted the Morrill Act in 1862, thus committing themselves to these new concepts—these new ideals of access to higher education for all, of practical and liberal education, and of research and service to help others.

These are the ideals that we reaffirm today through our commitment to achieving excellence in learning, discovery, and engagement, for by achieving excellence in the fulfillment of these land-grant ideals, we will not only achieve excellence as a land-grant university, we will achieve our aspiration of becoming the best land-grant university in the nation. That is what we aspire to, and that is what our leaders and the people of Iowa expect us to achieve.

To the elected representatives of Iowa, the president and members of the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, and to the Iowa State University community: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to serve as the fourteenth president of Iowa State University, and this opportunity to contribute to and continue one of the greatest legacies in the history of the land-grant movement. And thank you for your support, counsel, advice, and assistance in working together—collectively, collaboratively, and collegially—toward the achievement of our goals and our aspiration to become the best.

It's an honor, a privilege, and a thrill beyond compare.

Thank you.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY