

*Preparing Nevada's Pioneers
in the 21st Century*



Milton D. Glick, President
University of Nevada, Reno
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This is a homecoming of sorts for me, coming to the Silver State of my father's birth. I find myself privileged to accept a role that I did not expect at this juncture of my life. It's been said that, "It's never too late to be who you might have been."

It is truly a great honor to be at the University of Nevada, Reno.

In the 60 days I have served as president, I have met hundreds of Nevadans from across the state. Peggy and I have been warmly welcomed wherever we've visited. What I see before us is unlimited possibility and optimism in a place that seems to have invented both.

Our Land-Grant Legacy

I stand before you under the wide expanse of the western sky on this Jeffersonian mall and in front of the University's first building—Morrill Hall—a building that pays homage to a man, Justin Morrill, who believed as we do in the transformative power of education.

The mission of all universities is to educate and to discover. But the Morrill Act of 1862 created a new kind of university—land-grant universities like the University of Nevada, Reno. These new land-grant institutions were charged with providing education in the liberal and practical arts for the children of the industrial class. The Hatch Act and Smith Lever Act expanded this mission to include applied research—particularly in agriculture—and to disseminate this research to every corner of the state through cooperative Extension.

The tradition was furthered by the G.I. Bill; a bill that many elite schools opposed but that the land-grant universities wholeheartedly embraced. We all know how incredibly successful the G.I. Bill was in stimulating America's economy and providing enormous career opportunities to our returning veterans; veterans who gave birth to this country's enormous middle class. Civil rights legislation that followed expanded educational opportunities for minorities and women who had previously been denied access. All of this legislation has shaped the America we know and benefit from today.

But, how can we continue to expand educational opportunities and apply advanced learning in the 21st century?

This morning, I would like to talk about what I see at the University of Nevada today and the opportunities and challenges we face going forward.

Discovering Our University's "Myth"

I believe Nevada's pioneering gene is alive and well—and I am particularly thrilled to see it on this campus: in our faculty who teach and pursue research; in our students, who work diligently at achieving their educational goals; and in our staff, who have achieved an impressive level of productivity and who are responsible for the day-to-day operation of this beautiful campus. I am honored to be one of you, and I plan to continue to call upon everyone's pioneering spirit.

Noted corporate executive and author Max De Pree said "The first job of a leader is to define reality."

While it's true that I want to discover this reality, I also want to discover the myth, or aspirations, of what I see as fundamentally a quality institution.

The best universities have about them a myth which they continually strive to achieve. This myth is the story that we tell and must keep telling. Universities are places of words—and words shape our destiny. When the community comes together for common goals, it greatly empowers us to become the university we want to be.

De Pree also compared leadership to jazz, as it "combines the unpredictability of the future with gifts of individuals." He offered that the leader of a jazz band has a "beautiful opportunity to draw the best out of the other musicians."

Today will be the formal start of many conversations about our university which will help me to understand and articulate the "melody" of the campus. Already, I have participated in many conversations with faculty, staff, students and community leaders. I have been gratified to find that all of these stakeholders are willing and anxious to participate in these discussions about our university, to talk about its hopes and dreams, and even more important, there is a willingness to do what it takes to achieve this vision of our future.

In the days ahead, I will continue to listen closely for our university's story...the story that I will learn...and that I will tell over and over.

There are three areas I wish to address: one, our role in improving educational opportunities and attainment at all levels in our state; two, the issue of growth; and three, the need to further stimulate positive economic diversity and development, and to support a vibrant creative culture here.

Our Role in Educating Nevada's Citizens

First, let me address the need to improve the quality of education in the Silver State. How do we encourage more Nevadans to pursue post-secondary education? How do we attract Nevada's best and brightest to study at its universities, stay in Nevada, and contribute to its future? How do we make Nevada a compelling destination for students, families and businesses? When we increase the number of outstanding students, it improves the educational experience for all of our students, and the State of Nevada wins. When we create a more diverse student body, one that reflects the people of the state and our nation, Nevada wins. When we break down and remove the financial barriers to higher education in our state, Nevada wins.

Today, the likelihood that a 9th grader in Nevada will achieve a baccalaureate degree by age 24 is too low. We should strive to be among the top states in educational attainment. Our collective future—the health and well-being of our state and our nation—depends on it.

The University of Nevada, Reno has seen tremendous growth and successes during the past decade, particularly with the introduction of the Millennium Scholarship in 1999. The Millennium Scholarship represents a significant investment in the future of Nevada and it is a building block for our future prosperity. It has been a key driver in our enrollment growth—from a student body of about 12,000 in 1998 to nearly 17,000 today. I'm especially pleased to see the diversity of our students has increased dramatically, an increase in under-represented minorities by about 55 percent. We have more to do in this regard, but the trajectory is right.

We will seek to retain and graduate every student. To be clear: *We will seek to retain and graduate every student*—not by lowering standards, but by elevating expectations and supporting each of our students. In other words, we will take pride in who we graduate, not just in who we admit.

We will start where we are and we will create our destiny; refusing to accept only the circumstances offered us. We will strive to recruit the best and brightest from Nevada and beyond. While we will continue to have students who come to us having demonstrated their ability to succeed, we will have others who come to us with the determination to succeed—it will be up to us to unlock their full potential.

It is tempting to focus all of our efforts on being highly selective; however, for the benefit of our state it is our responsibility to facilitate an educated citizenry. Ultimately, the kind of student we turn out will be driven by the quality of the experience we provide. It is our duty as a land-grant institution to keep our doors open and give those Nevadans who can succeed the opportunity to do so.

We recognize that the universities are one part of a larger, interconnected whole. We do not live in an ivory tower. We will continue to work side-by-side with K-12, the community colleges, businesses and elected officials to help improve high school graduation rates, post-secondary education rates, and baccalaureate degree completion rates. Our work must start before students reach our doors and it never ends; the public university serves from cradle to grave. It must—and in fact, there is no greater privilege.

Our students recognize that they are ultimately responsible for their success. The university will provide the opportunity and the resources necessary for success, but our students must be partners. We will teach, inspire, excite, encourage and support, but they must be willing to do the hard work and make the necessary sacrifices to graduate.

A university in the twenty-first century must reflect diversity in all of its dimensions: race, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and political persuasion. No university can be great unless it reflects the profile of the state it serves and the nation as a whole. Being diverse means being inclusive; as an institution, it means increasing accessibility and accountability to all Nevadans. It is important that we educate students from all backgrounds and that students have the opportunity to associate with fellow students of all backgrounds.

Part of the purpose of a university education is to understand the many cultures that make up this nation and the world. Interacting with students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds enriches a student's university experience and contributes to personal growth. Exposure to new and different people, ideas, and cultures changes us all in profound ways. It opens our eyes and minds to a world beyond our imagination.

Access to a variety of perspectives encourages active intellectual engagement that sustains beyond the classroom to the workplace and community. We live in a world that grows smaller every day—our students must be prepared to live and work in that world. Being open to diversity creates connections and connections create conversations and conversations generate new and creative approaches to the issues that we face as individuals and as a society.

The Imperative to Grow

The second part of our ongoing conversation will be about the need to grow and it is incumbent upon me to share why and how I believe we must grow. We need to expand the size and quality of our student body, as well as our research programs. We are at a competitive disadvantage on both research and education frontiers as we are competing with institutions much larger than our own. I believe that growth is essential for social, political and quality reasons. However, how much to grow and how to grow is a conversation that needs to be explored by all of our stakeholders.

One reason we must grow is to respond to the projected changes in the population of Nevada. In order to meet long-term goals of the state, we, along with our sister institutions, will need to do our share to educate the growing number of college-bound students. Already too few Nevadans pursue post-secondary education, and the number of college-aged students is increasing dramatically.

Growing the student body gives us the chance to improve the student profile in quality and diversity. It opens the doors to more Nevadans, increasing participation in post-secondary education for our state, and improving Nevada's position economically, socially, and culturally.

Moreover, in order to effectively compete as a research institution, we need more faculty members, and that means we need to grow. So we will grow, but we must do so thoughtfully. Through thoughtful growth we can bring fresh ideas and additional strengths. Growing the faculty gives us the advantage of new blood.

If we are to contribute to the economic diversification of the region, it is important that we be competitive at the highest levels in research. Today, we are disadvantaged because of our size. We have a very high quality and productive faculty and this is a point of pride for our institution and this state. However, the institution has too few members to compete effectively at the national level.

The University's academic portfolio has both deepened and expanded, and research program funding has nearly quadrupled in the past decade. I've been struck by the quality and interdisciplinarity of the research pursuits here—and that research opportunities are so readily extended to undergraduate as well as graduate students.

Just one example of this interdisciplinary approach is environmental studies, an area that draws on the strength of faculty from across the entire university including the sciences, humanities, and the social sciences as well as our natural surroundings. Our particular environment gives us a living laboratory to contribute to the global understanding of the urbanization of desert areas, water use and conservation, and the continuing transformation of mining practices.

With our historic, strategic partnership with the Desert Research Institute, our proximity to Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Nevadas, and both the high and low deserts of our state, we are well-positioned to advance our reputation in areas that range from fire, water, and earthquakes to alternative energy sources (such as geothermal and biofuels), plasma physics, neurobiology, and nanochemistry. Our research is also focused on creating a healthier population in Nevada, improving literacy, and helping small businesses succeed. This sets the stage for our future growth. We will build on our strengths—an institution with selected areas of excellence, and a supportive and growing community with a high quality of life.

We are making significant investments in new facilities—facilities that will allow us to expand the university's capacity to teach and discover, including the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center, the Joe Crowley Student Union, a new building for math and science, a biomedical sciences center, the Lifelong Learning Center in Las Vegas, and a growing Redfield Campus in south Reno.

To be competitive, we will need to grow, and we will need to draw on our history as pioneers and blaze new trails into areas where we can be first and best. We will also recognize the breadth that must be present in a great university. For those who are not fortunate enough to live within the university, I want to emphasize that the competition in research and scholarship is intense. To be a leader requires extraordinary dedication. The competition is already intense among institutions much larger than our own. We will need to compete beyond traditional boundaries—beyond this state....beyond this country. For example, the Chinese have announced their intention to build 500 research institutions. To not compete is to lose one's edge. We will compete with intensity but in positive ways. The University of Nevada, Reno will strive to become the best it can be without diminishing others.

Fostering a Creative Culture and Stimulating Economic Development

The third focus of our conversations will be the relationship of this university to its surrounding region. Universities serve the state and the nation and all great universities are nurtured by surrounding communities...and in turn, enhance the quality of life. The success of a university is inextricably tied to the success of its community. The traditional “college town” is an important aspect of many of America's most livable cities. A joint effort of community and business leaders with the university can build a vibrant intellectual community.

Let us have one community built on the strengths of the university, industry, business, community organizations, and the pioneer spirit of the state. I would hope to see a soft permeable border between our campus and community, including private sector investment in mixed-use properties at the edge of the campus and engagement by the university throughout the communities we serve.

I hope that we can build a campus town in the best sense of the term: a place where you can feel the intellectual and creative excitement that universities produce and nurture—a place where ideas flow freely, a place where culture and the arts thrive, a place where debate on the issues of the day are welcome. There may be uncomfortable conversations but the university must encourage this. Our goal is to provide a place where we make students safe for ideas, not ideas safe from students.

We want our campus to be a destination for our students and others who live and work in this area, and we want to partner with the community to make it happen. We want a place where all of us can learn and grow along with our students. We recognize that learning happens not only in the classroom but in other spaces where people gather: coffee shops, public spaces, workplaces and cultural venues.

The Next Comstock Lode

We are about to embark together on the next step toward our future. Before we do, I want all of us to take a moment to enjoy this time and place. There is much here to be proud of. This institution, through its excellent faculty, staff, students, and alumni, has made significant impacts statewide...and worldwide. We need all of you to join us and be part of this institution's future.

Who are the new pioneers? Who are the new Basques? What will the land of adventure do for an encore? The possibilities are as vast as the open sky. The Silver State boasts a tremendous wealth of knowledge in mining, agriculture, tourism and gaming industries as well as its historic entrepreneurial spirit. There is a tradition of risk-taking and trailblazing in Nevada. The challenge before us is to transform this storehouse of expertise into knowledge economy offerings. The industries that have provided prosperity for Nevada's past will continue to be major contributors, and we will work together to ensure the creation of a more diversified economy so that Nevada's future is as bright as its past.

Where is the next silver rush? The next Comstock Lode is not in the hills of Nevada—it is in the minds of Nevadans. We need to join together to ensure that our college-*aged* population becomes a college-*bound* population. Already I have seen the riches on which our future prosperity will be built. Let us not miss this opportunity. Let us not waste this precious resource.

Working Together: Collaboration, Conversation and Civility

As I said earlier, in my short time here I have met with many Nevadans and the conversations have been fruitful. The future holds more such conversations: we will talk through many issues as we strive for the university of our imagination while we honor the university of our past. I, for one, am looking forward to this task.

A great university is one in which its members engage in the dialogue of the day and disagree without being disagreeable. While the leader of a jazz ensemble chooses the music and finds the right musicians, the beauty of the performance comes from the collaboration of the musicians. It is my hope that a hallmark of the University of Nevada, Reno will be its civility. Through conversation, we can create a common vision for our university and chart its course into the future.

Thoreau said “that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he had imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Let us walk confidently in the direction of this vision and live the university life that we imagine so that all of Nevada can enjoy the fruits of our labors. We will strive for an even more engaged, vibrant campus and stronger linkages with the community and state. We will look to our many investors and stakeholders to strengthen our university—and we will do our best to provide a clear return on that investment in the form of quality, accomplishments, and contributions to the communities we serve.

I ask all of you to participate in these conversations, and I ask you to invest in the university. For our supporters this may mean dollars and engagement; for faculty, staff, and students it means continued commitment, hard work and determination; and for the business community it means commitment to common goals...remaining open to the future. There are many ways to become investors in this university. Come to our university; participate in what the university has to offer, be part of its future.

Help us meld this university into the surrounding area in a way that makes all of us better and stronger. If you will invest your time, talent and resources, I know we can create a portfolio from which all Nevadans will benefit.

I return to Max De Pree’s advice: “The first job of a leader is to define reality.” He continues, “The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.”

From here on, I will serve you and this great university, and will owe each of you a great indebtedness for your commitment and effort in every success.