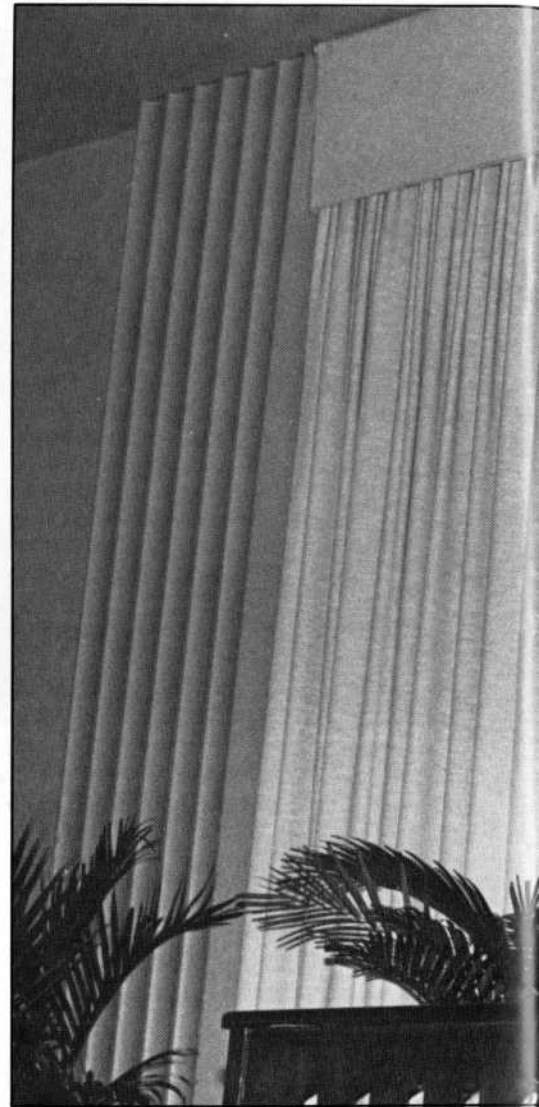


MEETING AAU STANDARDS:

# IS THIS TRIP WORTH THE TROUBLE?

a speech to the faculty  
and administration  
of the University of Oklahoma  
by ROBERT M. ROSENZWEIG  
President  
Association of American Universities



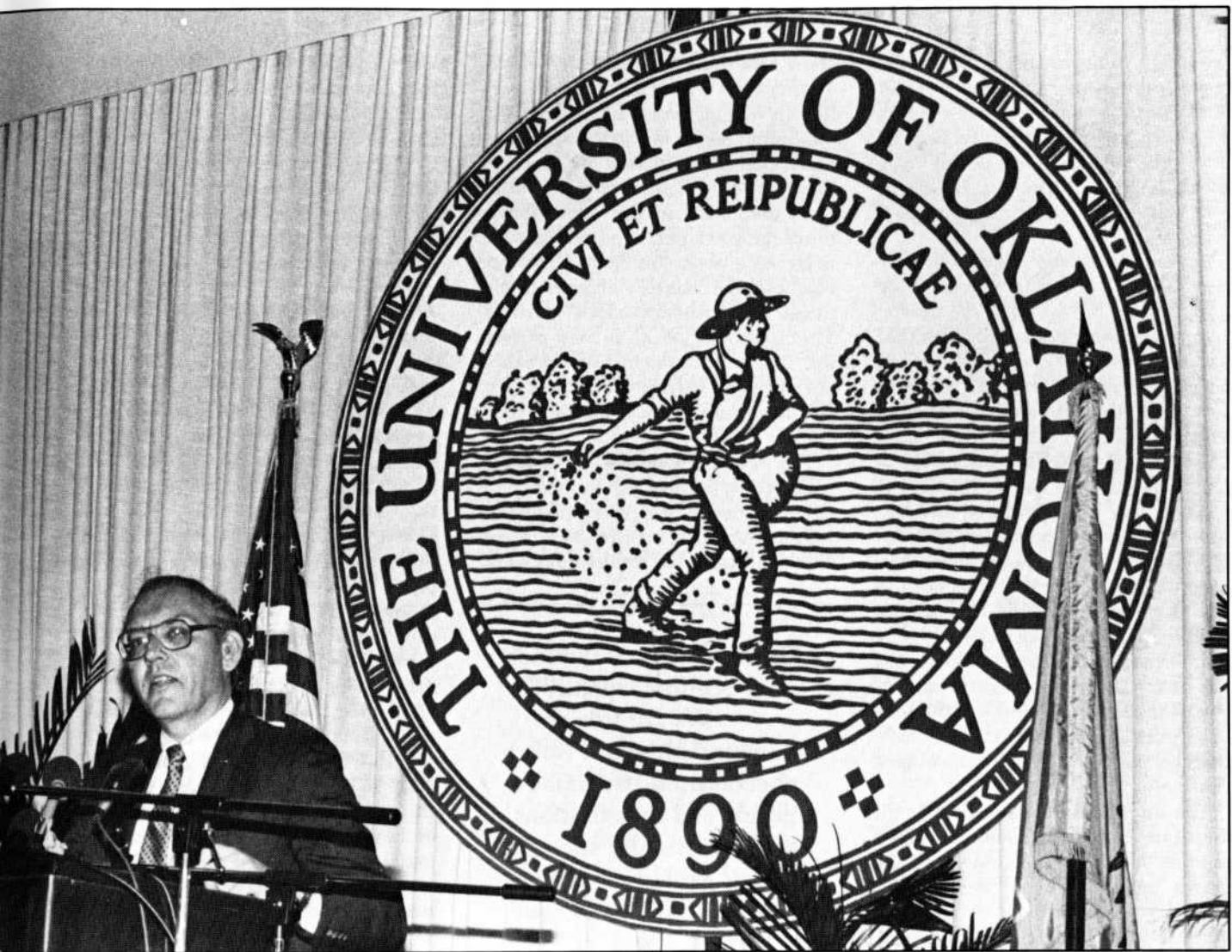
As I grow older and the lure of travel grows weaker in competition with its trials, there are fewer and fewer occasions that would tempt me to undertake a quick, long-distance, turn-around trip just to give a speech. High on the list of things that still have the power to bring me running is a celebration of the commitment of a fine university to become a finer university. When Bill Banowsky called to invite me to speak at the University of Oklahoma, I confess that my first reaction was to begin to think of graceful words to say, "No, thank you." But then he told me what it was all about, and I am sure that he could feel my resistance weakening as he became more eloquent in describing his hopes for this university.

I was hooked, but I have to tell you that not even Bill Banowsky's powers

of persuasion would have done the trick were it not for another fact, which he could not possibly have known: I am a university junky. I love universities; I suppose that I am even addicted to them. They are, to me, the most exciting, most challenging, most frustrating, most important institutions we have in our society. They are the educators and trainers of the young, the generators of knowledge as well as its main repositories and transmitters, the spark to the engine of economic growth, an essential underpinning of our national security and our health, and a main center of the creative energies that keep our society alive and moving forward. And in addition to all of that, they are also the exemplars — in some cases the last and best remaining exemplars — of values that are essential to the

conduct of a free society.

There is nothing in that catalog of virtues that I consider hyperbolic, but these are certainly large claims on behalf of institutions that also have demonstrated from time to time their full share of shortcomings and most of the weaknesses to which institutions populated by human beings are prone. Since you did not invite me to rain on your parade, I think that I will not dwell on those matters. Instead, I would like to share with you some observations about the particular — one might say peculiar — nature of universities, especially those that have grown up in this country. I won't hide my reason for choosing this topic. I know that you in Oklahoma are grappling with important questions about the future of your universities. I want to persuade



you, if, indeed, you need persuading, that your concerns are not parochial or merely regional, that the matters you are dealing with are of national and international concern, that you are acting in a long and valuable tradition, and that the success of your efforts is important not only to the citizens of Oklahoma, but to the entire nation.

I think it is fair to say that the American research university has no parallel anywhere in the world. Although its origins are in some respects Germanic and in others British, the flavor and texture of our universities are distinctively American. I count three main distinguishing elements. First, ours is the only system of higher education in the world in which both governmentally controlled and indepen-

dently controlled universities flourish. I think that this has given our universities, public and private alike, an unusually enterprising and entrepreneurial outlook. One can hardly imagine a successful modern nation without a strong commitment to education which is expressed through publicly supported institutions. But equally, it is hard to imagine this nation without its equally vital set of privately supported institutions. Their presence in the mix adds the vitality that competition provides and the initiative to experimentation from which all can learn. It is not an accident, for example, that the earliest and strongest connections with science-based industry were forged by two private institutions, Stanford and MIT, and that many others, both public and

private, have followed their example.

A second salient characteristic of American universities is what might be called their "permeability." Far from being the remote and isolated institutions that have existed in other countries, our universities had admitted wave after wave of society's concerns. The most striking example is found, of course, in the Land Grant Act and the universities it spawned. The Morrill Act owed at least part of its impetus to the unwillingness of then-existing public and private institutions to accommodate the needs of agriculture and infant industry for trained people to do their work.

But that is only an early dramatic example of the broader phenomenon. We have made our universities the instruments for the fulfillment of purposes as diverse as curing cancer,

reaching the moon, giving life to a national commitment to equal opportunity without regard to race or ethnic origin, and most recently, helping to repair the competitive disadvantage which America suffers in comparison to some of its main trading partners.

At times, this easy response to society's wishes has led to an unhealthy stretching of the fabric of the university, to assuming responsibilities that are not properly academic, and to adopting practices that are inconsistent with academic norms. But more often than not, universities have flourished as they have responded to high expectations. The willingness to respond has both produced intellectual stimulation and called forth resources that might otherwise not have been available. The trick has been to find ways of responding that do not compromise the essential autonomy over intellectual matters that lies at the heart of every successful university. It is one of the genuine triumphs of our educational system that we have learned how to do that trick almost routinely.

The final characteristic that I will mention is the unusual, indeed unique, set of relationships that has grown up between our universities and our governments. I have frequently tried to describe these relationships to foreign visitors, and I have concluded that even the best description of which I am capable is hard to comprehend, because our arrangements grow out of political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances that are simply peculiar to us. That odd mixture of state, local, national, and private financing on which virtually all institutions depend is, at best, puzzling. And try explaining the notion of tax subsidies to a Chinese visitor. There is much more than a language barrier at work there.

No one would or could invent the arrangements that now exist, and that may be one of their chief virtues. Another is that they seem to work. Let me mention one special feature that is especially important to universities, and may have particular meaning to this university, namely, the way in which the federal govern-

ment distributes funds for research. That system of distribution rests very heavily on judgments of the quality of individual pieces of work proposed by individual investigators (or teams of investigators). Compared to the practices that bear on the allocation of funds for other public purposes, what is striking about funding for science has been the relative absence of the usual constituency-based politics. The record is certainly not perfect, but it is a record marked by extraordinary self-restraint on the part of politicians for more than three decades.

The strong emphasis on intellectual quality in funding decisions is, I believe, one of the most important reasons for America's postwar scientific dominance. In intellectual work,

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there is simply no substitute for quality, and the willingness to settle, knowingly, for less than the best guarantees that the best will not emerge. When compromises are based on political considerations, whether those of an ideological nature, as in the Soviet Union, or grow out of electoral politics, damage is deep and systematic because it comes to pervade the entire system.

But there is another characteristic of a system that rewards quality and the promise of quality that is especially hard for a democratic nation like ours to deal with. That is that rewarding quality also tends to reinforce quality. To put it crudely, the rich always seem, if not actually to get richer, at least to stay rich. We are terribly ambivalent about this phenomenon.

We admire people and organizations that consistently succeed, even while part of us resents and is suspicious of their success. There is a powerful force in our society that wishes to believe that important human qualities are — or ought to be — distributed evenly throughout the population, even as our daily experience tells us that they are not.

The problem is certainly not limited to universities, or indeed, to politics. Try as they might (and for commercial reasons, they try very hard), no professional sport has found a way to distribute success evenly throughout their leagues. For all the talk about parity, it is a pretty safe bet that at the end of the season, the Cowboys, Raiders, Dolphins, and Steelers will be somewhere near the top of the NFL, and that the Dodgers, Orioles, Celtics, and Lakers will be in contention in their leagues. Over time, those with the best management — or something — win more often than the others, no matter how the rules are changed to prevent it.

But there is a secret hidden in all of that. It is that the best can fall and that others can rise, and that the very system that makes that difficult also makes it possible. In my own professional lifetime, I have been close witness to three instances in which universities moved from the middle of the pack or lower into the upper part. Those three are Stanford, UCLA, and UC San Diego. There are other examples from elsewhere in the country; I happen to know those best because I was closest to them.

While two of those are public institutions and one is private, I believe that their successes have common elements. One was strong, local, public support. In the case of the UC institutions, that support came primarily from the state; in Stanford's case, it was private philanthropy. A second was the availability of funds from the federal government which could be laid on top of the base that was locally built to provide the extra resources that high quality demands. They were able to win those funds precisely because an essentially nonpolitical distribution system made it possible for their emerging areas of quality to be recognized and rewarded and to

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serve as a base on which other areas of quality could be built.

But something else was at work, too, because other institutions, including others in California, had those advantages and did not capitalize on them. What distinguished these three was, I believe, a sustained record of commitment to the goal of quality — a commitment that was embodied in and carried by strong and effective leadership from the faculty and top administration.

I do not wish to oversimplify what is surely a complicated and even mysterious phenomenon, but I do insist on the point that the evidence that it has been done justifies the conviction that it can be done. Moreover, there are signs that our long national neglect of the institutional underpinnings of intellectual quality may be coming to an end. There is a growing recognition that the system on which we depend will not continue to produce first-rate work unless we begin to reinvest in the facilities, equipment, and young people that, together, form the base on which intellectual and scientific productivity rest. If that is so, then there will be new opportunities for institution building. Judging from recent state actions all over the country, the governors and legislatures of a large number of states appear to share my view, and there is encouraging evidence of a recognition in Washington that we cannot indefinitely continue to buy research and training of the requisite quality from a set of institutions whose capital and human assets are depleted.

It seems to me not unreasonable to hope that a decade from now we will see a broad improvement in the quality of university training and research, and that we will also see that some institutions have made greater progress than others. Which ones those will be, I have no way of knowing, except that they are certain to be those institutions in which the leaders and the supporters genuinely believe that the game is worth the candle and recognize that it is a long, difficult and costly game.

If I am correct about that, then it seems to me worthwhile to try to explain why the rewards from a univer-

sity that becomes better than it is so vastly exceed even the high cost of achieving that goal. The reasons are of three kinds, and each is of particular interest to a different group. First, to those who are closest to a university that is committed to high intellectual achievement, that is to say, to faculty, students and administrators, I can testify from personal experience that there is no more exhilarating atmosphere in which to work. If I can indulge in a bit of autobiography, I look back on my years at Stanford in the '60s and '70s as the most exciting of my professional life. There was about the place the hum of possibility. The belief that people had, a belief that was grounded in the evidence of their senses, that good ideas had a chance of fulfillment

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**“The one indispensable requirement for success in any area is the ability to attract and maintain first-class talent and to educate and train their successors. It is not possible to do that without a university of high degree.”**

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served to stimulate good ideas. There were some that were not so good, too, but in such an atmosphere even mistakes can be instructive and useful, so long as they are not allowed to become entrenched.

I hope that I am not simply romanticizing a bit of my own life, but I believe that you would hear similar testimony from many others who were there during that period. What I can say with no need for corroboration is that having a part in the development of that university will always be a source of pride.

Next, there is a wider circle of interest in university quality. Since the University of Oklahoma is a public university, let me, as a kind of shorthand, define that circle as including the taxpayers who pay so large a part

of the bill. There is good reason to believe that the capacity to generate knowledge is connected with economic success. I don't want to overstate that point, because to do so risks disappointment and disillusionment. Investing in a university is not a guarantee of riches, and there are compelling reasons for taxpayers to invest in their universities that are not based on the prospect of economic return. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to justify the investment in fundamental inquiry in terms of specific return. It is in the nature of such inquiry that the costs of doing it are local, while the benefits may accrue to anyone who reads the literature and has the wit to use it. Precisely for that reason, we have concluded that the costs must largely be borne publicly because the returns to any given investor are chancy.

Having said that, it is then necessary to say that any state that does not invest in the capacity of its universities to engage in high-quality fundamental inquiry will find itself at a serious disadvantage. In part that is because inquiry attracts those who need new ideas; in part it is because quality attracts quality; but in largest part it is because high-quality inquiry requires and attracts high-quality people. The one indispensable requirement for success in the modern world for any area is the ability to attract and maintain first-class talent and to educate and train their successors. It is not possible to do that without a university of high degree. That seems to me to be the argument of self-interest, if you will, that justifies the large investment of scarce public funds in activities that most of us barely comprehend. It requires an act of faith, but since it is a kind of faith that is based on works, it is not really all that mystical.

Finally, there is a circle of interest in universities that includes all of us on the campus, in the state, and in the nation. Healthy societies refresh themselves by repeated and sustained attempts to fulfill their finest traditions. In American life, the frontier, both as a fact of economics and geography and as a metaphor, has been central to much of what is best in us. It allowed us to develop a sense of the

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## Good Citizen Roy Guffey Saluted on 4th of July By Dallas Times Herald

*Editor's Note: Dallas Times Herald reporter Felix McKnight found the perfect subject for his 1984 version of the annual, obligatory Fourth of July feature story — OU's special ambassador to the State of Texas, Roy Guffey. Thanks to the Dallas reader who sent Sooner Magazine the following article, reprinted courtesy of the Dallas Times Herald.*

Roy Guffey is a splendidly structured 81, a storied high school and University of Oklahoma athlete of other days, an indestructible man who has to take his foot off the accelerator to maintain rhythm with the pace-maker they installed to regulate his heartbeat a few years ago.

More than all of that, he is the purest citizen you will encounter in a rundown of the thoroughbreds. ("A citizen is what you're supposed to be. To hell with all that other noise," he says.)

He can, and does, write the President of the United States, members of Congress or anyone else he feels

should hear the gut feeling of the man, or woman, on the street. He is a cinch Fourth of July subject.

Roy Guffey is not a conservative nut with a one-way mind, but an Oklahoma farm boy now turned successful independent oil operator who spends his time, and money, lobbying for basic principles that benefit all the people.

And he's damn good at it.

He worries, first, about a staggering national deficit caused by debt, and he rightfully traces it from there to here in nailing today's woes. He has tables and charts and data and mountainous correspondence to shore his convictions and conclusions.

To frame this man in the unadulterated perspective, he has been writing Sen. Lloyd Bentsen about the national debt misery. He respects Bentsen, but wants him to do something about it. Like, now. From his last letter to the Texas senator:

"Your concern about reducing the federal debt is well taken, though very late. Reducing the debt or balancing the budget is like the yardage made between the 20-yard lines in a football game. Looks good, sounds good but doesn't put any points on the scoreboard.

"Crossing the goal line with the

football in your hands is the only way you can put points on the scoreboard — which means, paying off this horrendous debt year by year by year, systematically, and keep on doing it.

"So far, no one has the courage to even talk about it, let alone do anything about it. A 5 percent tax on manufacturer's sales may sound pretty high — and it is — but the generation that incurred this debt rightfully should pay all of it back that it can.

"No need to explain the influence of the 'next election' as the No. 1 reason for not even trying to solve this most important problem — the most important of any you can think of."

To Roy Guffey, the old Oklahoma Sooner tackle of the class of '26, who later played for the professional Buffalo Bisons in Red Grange's first year in the original National Football League, you just go hardnose and painfully honest to settle things.

In 1921, when a student at Shawnee, Oklahoma, High School, Guffey found an old discus and decided — after football season — he wanted to get into track and field. Shawnee didn't have a real track and field team — until Guffey.

He went it alone; got a ride to the state high school meet, scored 10 points in the discus and shot put and beat the seven-man Oklahoma City high school team, 10 to 9, on total points.

He hasn't changed.

He is a quiet benefactor for good. He is a churchman, family man and avid sports fan. He still works every day, and he has the respect of the petroleum industry. Who would want to buck him?

Not long ago he wrote Ronald Reagan and enclosed four articles he felt would be good reading for the President. He commended Peter Grace's jolting commission report on government waste and spending and suggested that "I firmly believe that unless we start paying off our federal debt, regularly, it won't matter a whole lot about our other problems . . ."

Have a full Fourth of July, citizen Guffey. You seem to know what it is all about. And you're rugged enough and right enough to draw few opponents.

## The AAU: Is this Trip Worth the Trouble?

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possibilities of life and of the excitement of exploring them that others have missed. With the closing of the actual American frontier, we have sought periodically to find substitutes for it that provide the same sustenance. Politicians appeal to it, and our space program has consistently appealed to what the old television program "Star Trek" called, "Space, the final frontier."

All of that is well and good, some of it healthy, some of it harmless fun. But it seems to me to miss a genuinely important point, and that is that the true modern metaphor for the frontier is the explosion of knowledge that has marked the greater part of the 20th century. In a world in which space and time have been com-

pressed, a world in which the concept of "limits" has come to dominate the views of serious people, a world in which that essential sense of possibility can so easily be overwhelmed by dismal daily realities, it is the process of discovery — the application of the human mind to the task of understanding and mastering the universe of phenomena — that has sustained that wonderful feeling that the present and the future hold opportunities even more splendid than those of the past. That, it seems to me, was the essence of the frontier, and universities are our main instruments for keeping this frontier always open. That is a calling worthy of a great and free society, one in which the University of Oklahoma and its supporters can join with enthusiasm and profit.