
PROLOGUE

Are Oklahoma's Best Graduates Becoming an Endangered Species?

Preservation has become one of the catchwords of the last two decades. Organizations have sprung up nationwide to preserve and protect the relics of our historic heritage, from works of architectural and artistic beauty to the Statue of Liberty herself. Even more vocal have been the defenders of our natural environment: spare the trees, cleanse the air, purify the water, guard the wilderness, protect the ozone layer, preserve endangered species.

Oklahomans have been slow to take up with such concerns. Our history is so close at hand, problems of crowding and pollution so recent that perhaps we can be forgiven for being late to the party. There is one issue of preservation, however, that has existed in Oklahoma for generations, and we continue to ignore it to our peril: the constant exportation of our best young people to other states better equipped to provide for their futures.

One of David Ross Boyd's first tasks when he established the University of Oklahoma before statehood was to convince the settlers to keep their youngsters at home for college rather than sending them back to the places they previously had called home. Sixty years later George L. Cross was still working on the problem, not so much for quantity of students but for quality. He was perplexed that so many of the natural leaders in Oklahoma high schools were being lured to out-of-state colleges, a movement which the President's Leadership Class and its imitators at other institutions throughout the state have helped to curb. (See story on Page 18.)

In subsequent years the University has put the same sort of imagination and industry into attracting the best from all other categories of students — the academically and artistically gifted, those with special talents in science or math or languages or health-

related professions. Given the financial restrictions under which these programs have operated, the University has been amazingly successful, and the quality of OU's top students is a testimony to that success. Just ask anyone who has worked with them on campus or in the summer internship programs around the state.

Now comes the hard part. While there will always be the lure of bright lights and faraway places, a number of our most able graduates, both native Oklahomans and out-of-staters, would like to stay here. In addition, many of those whose careers will take them away initially would like to be able to return eventually. The prospects could be better.

At a recent gathering of business people and OU's outstanding seniors, a suitably impressed Oklahoma City civic leader asked the president of a major student organization, "What would it take to keep you in Oklahoma?" She answered without hesitation, "A job."

The realization is growing in both the public and private sectors that the economic development of Oklahoma depends in large part on the presence of a strong system of education, kindergarten through Ph.D. The presence of the University of Oklahoma, for example, certainly played a major role in the recent announcement by Hitachi of the location of their new plant in Norman, likewise location on North Campus of Earth Observation Satellite Corporation's first ground station for commercialization of the U.S. government's LandSat satellite system.

Strengthening education in an economic downturn requires courage and renewed confidence. But the state can't wait to support education until the economy is healthy — or Oklahoma will never have a healthy economy. —CJB