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## PROLOGUE

# Putting the pizzazz in undergraduate education

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If I were to choose a topic for an academic article strictly on its pizzazz rating, I'd probably write about some fascinating, life-altering research project or a whiz-kid National Merit Scholar or an Indiana Jones-type professor just back from a dig in the Gobi Desert. And our readers would say, "Gee, that's interesting. I had no idea there was so much exciting stuff going on at the University."

However, if I were to choose a topic on its value to students—on the basic, meat-and-potatoes ingredient that makes the University the University—I'd crank out a few thousand words on "undergraduate education." It would take more effort to elicit the same reader response because it has been a while since our attention has been drawn in that direction, but the result would be worth the endeavor.

As early as 1970, the drafters of the state's long-range blueprint for higher education inked in the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University as graduate, research institutions with token, academically elite undergraduate enrollments. No doubt endless studies went into this recommendation, but the concept always troubled me. Perhaps my concern began with a transfer honor student who many years ago spent a night on our living room couch, his plane from the East Coast having arrived too late for him to check into the dorm.

The young man's father was a barber in a typical Oklahoma town, and his family was going deeply into debt to supplement his freshman scholarship to a prestigious school of science and technology. Once there he discovered that the professors who had drawn him to this institution did not teach undergraduates. He also learned that admission to its graduate programs, his ultimate goal, was on a "national" basis; he had a better chance

with an OU undergraduate degree.

Unfortunately I don't know the end to this story. I hope the young man had such a marvelous undergraduate experience at OU that he decided to stay for graduate school, then went on to great professional and personal achievements and today is one of our most generous benefactors. It happens—most often with alumni whose ties are forged as undergraduates.

But much more significant than their potential as donors is the vigor undergraduates bring to the academic community. Whether they are traditional 18-year-olds direct from high school or single mothers returning to school or retirees seeking to revitalize their lives, no state-supported, comprehensive institution of higher learning should be without them.

The University has done a pretty good job in recent years of stressing the importance of its graduate, research, national scholar and faculty endowment programs. Graduate enrollment is up, and sponsored faculty research has nearly doubled since 1989. Already first in the Big Eight, OU should rank third in 1994-95 among public universities nationwide in National Merit Scholar enrollment. Endowments now support 107 faculty positions. We even have a few explorers in battered felt hats out in the field making astounding discoveries. Surely it is time to turn the spotlight on teachers and students in the undergraduate classrooms.

The Boren administration has indicated that undergraduate education at OU is about to receive its pizzazz injection. Such a shift in emphasis is a common topic of conversation, and a committee has been appointed to investigate ways to "enrich the undergraduate experience." If the cause can survive the study, we may be on to something here. —CJB