

# *This Is a Special Place . . .*

## **An Inaugural Address**

**by David L. Boren**  
**13th President of the University of Oklahoma**

*Editor's Note: On September 15, 1995, more than 6,000 guests gathered on Parrington Oval for the inauguration of David L. Boren as the 13th president of the University of Oklahoma. At the conclusion of his formal investiture, conducted by University Regents Chairman G. T. Blankenship, the new president was introduced by one of his predecessors, President Emeritus Paul F. Sharp. The following is President Boren's inaugural address.*

**I**t is a great honor to be introduced by Paul Sharp, ninth president of this University, one who served it with great dedication and who, with his wife, Rose, continues to be a truly important part of the University family. When I served as governor, he was my strongest ally in the fight for more resources for higher education. He is a recognized leader in higher education, not only in our state but also across the nation. As a teacher he has trained scores of top administrators at our greatest colleges and universities.

A few weeks ago, as I spoke to our new freshman class, I tried to put into words why this University is a special place. I said to them, this is a special place because you will meet people here who will change your life.

I know that is true because it happened to me. When I was a law student here, I closely observed our president, George Lynn Cross. I don't know if he knew that I was watching him, but I was. What I saw had a great impact 30 years later on my decision to accept the

regents' invitation to become your president. I saw him stand up for intellectual freedom. I saw him taking as much time to have coffee with the greenest new student as with the most brilliant professor. I saw him treat every person with dignity and respect like members of the family. I saw him invest his life here, in us and in this institution, instead of treating it as a stepping stone for personal advancement. His example caused me to ask how I could invest my life in a cause greater than myself.

In many ways, his example and that of others at the University brought me here today.

This is a special moment. It is not special because of the pomp and ceremony, or because of the installation of this university president. It is special because it is a rare opportunity for all of us to come together to talk about things that truly matter.

A university is a place where we feel connected to our past. It helps us understand who we are. Day after day, as I sit in the president's office, I think back to David Ross

Boyd, the first president, who was recruited by mail to come to lead this University in 1892. He was a remarkable man. As a child he helped his father in Ohio bring slaves to freedom through the underground railroad. He brought with him a deep respect for all the cultures and peoples of the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, including those who were here first, our Native Americans. He never had seen Norman, then a dusty town of 900 in Oklahoma Territory. When he arrived and stepped from the train, he expected to see great and imposing buildings. He asked to be taken immediately to the campus. He was brought to this spot, and as Chairman Blankenship has said, he found nothing but open prairie, not a building, not even a single tree for five miles in any direction. Imagine this man who had been called to come to take the job as president of a university, standing there, looking around at bare, open prairie, and yet he was not defeated, and in his mind's eye he saw only possibilities.

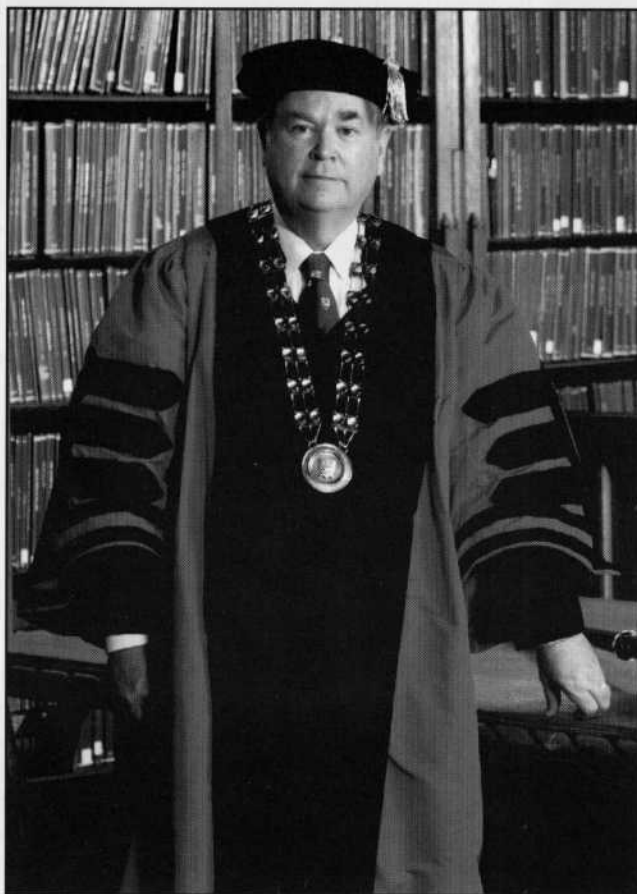
He set out to recruit a faculty for a university not yet built. If you want to know the kinds of people he had the audacity to recruit, look at the names of the main ovals on this campus. This oval is called Parrington Oval, and it is named for Vernon L. Parrington, a graduate of Harvard recruited by Boyd to be chairman of the English department and, as chairman of the English department, President Boyd thought that he was obviously the right person also to be the football coach. Later he was to win the Pulitzer Prize for his great work in American intellectual history, *Main Currents in American Thought*.

Boyd had the courage also to recruit to this virtually nonexistent university another great scholar, Alfred Heald Van Vleet, for whom the south oval is named, a brilliant scientist who was a graduate of Leipzig and Johns Hopkins. He went on to found the first natural history museum in this part of the world.

I have in my office a little oak book case, which was one of the few things that David Ross Boyd brought with him. In it were 53 books sent free to him by publishers. They constituted the first library of the University. I look at it, and I look over my shoulder through the window behind me at the largest library in Oklahoma with over 2½ million volumes, and I think about how far we have come. I think about our current library's great collections in western history and the greatest collection on the history of science in this country, which is

housed there, the only place in the United States where we can see notes written by the hand of Galileo, and I think about how far we have come.

I think about David Ross Boyd in his buggy out recruiting stu-



dents in log cabins and sleeping on the floors of sod houses, and I think of the students we just enrolled who made this University first per capita in the nation of all public universities in the number of National Merit Scholars on our campus, and I think about how far we have come. Above all, I think about how this institution has helped define what America is all about—a place where ability and tenacity and spirit and community can take you a long way. A place where

even poverty-stricken pioneers have the *right* to dream and an opportunity to realize those dreams.

As I think about how far we have come, I think about all that we owe to those who came before—to great leaders like Boyd and Brooks and Bizzell and Brandt and Cross and those who sit with me on this platform who continued to care for this place, Sharp and Banowsky and Van Horn and the great professors and the scholars who have served here and who, with dedicated staff members, continue to serve here.

Now this institution has been placed in the care of all of us—officers, faculty, staff, students, alumni and citizens. We are now its stewards. It is our turn to love it, nurture it, preserve it, revitalize it and prepare it to serve the next generation even better than it has served us.

That is our task. How shall we accomplish it? First and foremost, we ourselves must understand the mission of the University, and we must tell others why it

is important to them.

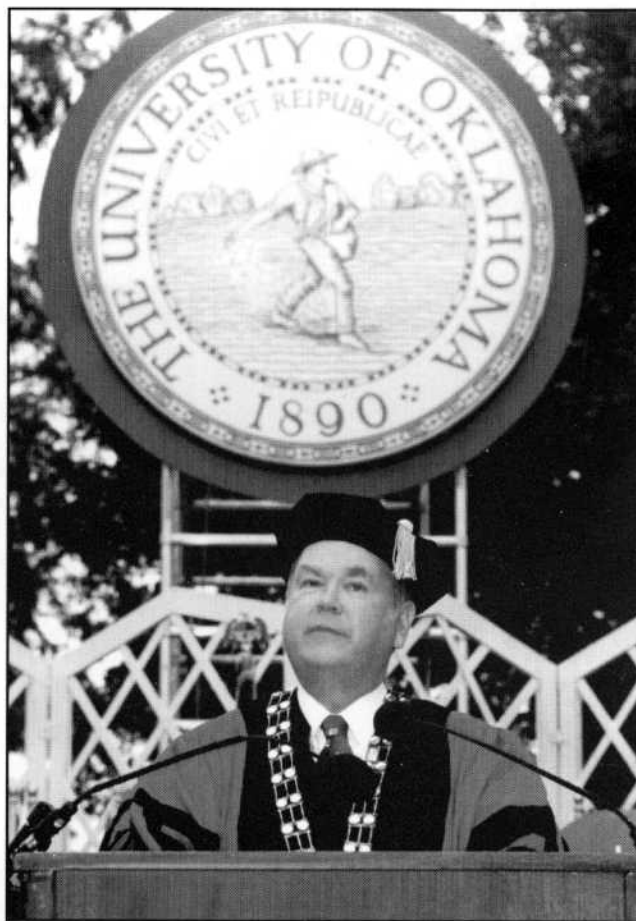
One could speak of its obvious impact on our material well being. It is clear that there is a direct correlation between those regions which have the highest per capita number of years of education of their citizens and those which have the highest per capita incomes. This University helped create economic growth by bringing almost \$100 million in external research and training grants to our state last year. *Continued*

But, while the University is important to us economically, we all must come to understand its importance in a more fundamental sense. No institution is more important to our future. The University is the linchpin of our society because it is the point of contact between generations. It is at the University that the values, experience and collective wisdom of one generation are passed on to the next. If it does not happen at the University, it will not happen at all, and the values and wisdom of a generation will die with it.

Because it is the point of contact between generations, the University is the greatest creator of intellectual energy and creativity in the entire society. Students as well as professors contribute to this exciting and crucial process. In a great comprehensive university like this one with graduate programs and research, the process is even more invigorating. Students and faculty interact in the discovery of new knowledge as well as in the discussion of our current body of thought.

Perhaps I could best illustrate this point of contact by telling you what one of the actors who came to our campus last spring to participate in a unique experiment said to me.

We produced here the world premier of a new musical, "Jack," about the life of President John F. Kennedy. Half of the actors and actresses were professionals from the New York stage. Half were our students.



**"The University is not here merely to amass information; it is here to advance knowledge and to teach students how to think and how to seek knowledge for themselves."**

I walked up to one of the great professional actors in the cast, an Emmy and Tony Award winner, and thanked him for sharing weeks of his time and so much of

his talent with our students.

"Oh, no, I am the one who gained the most," he said. "To have been exposed to so much energy and freshness brought by the students will now help me play roles in ways that I could never have envisioned without seeing them through the eyes of a new generation. It's been the most exciting few weeks of the last 20 years of my life," he said. The University is truly the point of contact.

We also must understand ourselves and explain to others that never in our history have great public universities like this one been more important. As power shifts from Washington to the local level, the major intellectual influence on policy decisions no longer will be exercised mainly by a few think tanks in

the nation's capital staffed primarily by the graduates of a small number of private universities. The quality of our lives will be impacted by many more policy makers, at the local level and in the private sector, who mainly have been trained at major state and public universities like this one. For the sake of our future, we must achieve the highest possible standards of excellence.

At the same time, many of the most talented young people in our society come from families that cannot afford to pay for expensive private education. More and more of these students with the best minds in the country are coming to our University. That is why we must develop honors programs at public universities that will match



the intellectual challenge provided by well endowed, private institutions.

To be good stewards, we must bring back some old-fashioned values that we have lost. We must concentrate on the mentoring and nurturing of our students. Today more and more of our students come to us without the strong support of traditional families or sheltering communities. They desperately need the mentoring which only faculty can give in the classroom, in the laboratory in the course of research and, above all, on the park bench or at the dinner table outside the formal education environment. If this is the point of contact between generations, we will never succeed unless mentoring is recognized and valued as truly important. No students should ever leave this campus without having had a chance to share their hopes and dreams with faculty members who know them by name and care about them as individuals.

To be good mentors and indeed to be great educators, researchers and scholars, we must not be diverted from our principal mission by the information explosion which is occurring around us. We must not confuse information with knowledge. While there is far more information available to us, we are not necessarily wiser because of it. As chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I saw the quality of our intelligence decline as the volume of information grew until it completely overwhelmed our ability to analyze it and determine what was important.

Because of the information explosion in their disciplines, faculty members are under pressure to neglect their mentoring roles and to lose the focus of their scholarship and research. The University is not here merely to amass infor-

mation; it is here to advance knowledge and to teach students how to think and how to seek knowledge for themselves. While we live in an age in which technology can and should be used efficiently to share information, we must not allow technology to overwhelm the core of what higher education is all about. The University, as a place where learning occurs within a community through the direct personal interaction of faculty and students, will never be obsolete. Especially in an age in which we desperately need to develop the ability to think critically and to interpret the mass of information inundating our society, it is vital that it be preserved.

Finally, we will fail in our duty to society if we do not pass on to the next generation the ability to create communities. We all know that we do not grow if we do not get to know people who are different from ourselves. We grow only when we get to know and understand those from other cultures, other backgrounds and other perspectives. Indeed, our curriculum also must be enhanced to give students new opportunities to study other languages and cultures. That is why we are creating at the University of Oklahoma a center for international and area studies.

We grow, as the poet Burns said, when we learn to see ourselves as others see us. We grow when our assumptions are challenged. Diversity must become our strength. In our University, if we cannot create a true community with our own diverse racial and ethnic groups, and with American and international students alike, how can we ever hope to rebuild the spirit of community in the nation and world around us? In short, we must learn here how to argue and how to challenge each other but, even more important, we also must

learn how to respect and love each other.

When I left the U.S. Senate to come home to join you at the University, I, too, like David Ross Boyd, saw great possibilities for the future of this institution. After several months here with you as part of this family, my conviction is even stronger that we all will live to see these possibilities realized. Since coming here, my enthusiasm has increased day by day, and I have drawn strength from your talent and your commitment and the strong foundation which is already in place.

I am convinced that *together* we can demonstrate that public universities can have honors programs that can match the intellectual challenge provided by well endowed, private institutions.

I am convinced that *together* we can create new initiatives to prepare our students to be leaders in the international environment in which they will live.

I am convinced that *together* we can demonstrate such a strong commitment to mentoring and nurturing that our example will help all of American higher education regain something which it has lost.

I am convinced that *together* we can make diversity our strength, that we can build real community, that we can learn how to argue and challenge each other without forgetting how to respect and to love each other.

I challenge each one of you to join me in creating a shared vision for our future. I challenge you to help us build on our strengths. I challenge you to join me in seeing the possibilities. I challenge you to join me in this quest for excellence!

*University, live on!* 