

CA COMMON Family

As his 20th work anniversary and OU's 125th anniversary approach, President **David L. Boren** reflects on leading Oklahoma's flagship university through two decades of challenge and change.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP



A

s night gave way to dawn on Monday, March 9, University of Oklahoma President David L. Boren had expected to be preparing for the OU Teach-In, greeting scholars and authors in an annual celebration of American history. Instead, he was making history by standing in solidarity with hundreds of students outraged by a video that has placed OU in the midst of a national crucible on race relations.

“Real Sooners are not bigots. Real Sooners are not racists,” Boren said in the rain-misted glare of news cameras, a declaration now made familiar by countless viewings across the media spectrum. “Real Sooners love each other and care for each other like members of a common family.”

That same love is what brought Boren to OU two decades ago. In March 1994, he caught friend Terry Sanford on his way into a meeting. The University of Oklahoma Board of Regents had offered Boren his alma mater’s presidency, and he needed advice.

PREVIOUS PAGE - Students have been at the heart of David L. Boren’s 20-year tenure as the university’s 13th president. “One lesson you keep learning is that students must come first. They’re the very reason why we’re here,” he says.

“Is it a five-minute question?” asked Sanford, whose life paralleled Boren’s as a former governor and U.S. senator for North Carolina. Boren had served as Oklahoma’s governor and, as a 15-year veteran of the U.S. Senate, was considered one of the nation’s most influential policy leaders. But Sanford also had been president of Duke University. Boren sought his unique perspective.

“That’s not a five-minute question, that’s a two-minute question,” Sanford replied. “Take the job before they change their minds. If you truly love a place, there’s nothing more rewarding than investing your life in the next generation.”

David Lyle Boren and First Lady Molly Shi Boren have spent every day of the past 20 years doing just that. As OU prepares to celebrate its 125th anniversary, the university’s 13th president is leading the way into a third decade of unprecedented growth and vitality, and has changed the very face of three campuses. Two billion in private giving, a 500 percent increase in endowed positions, and more than 30 new programs or initiatives are a resounding vote of confidence, as are ever-increasing floods of outstanding students, teachers and researchers who have chosen OU during Boren’s tenure.

Voices far from campus also are confident of Boren’s impact. “If I had to list 10 living Americans who I most admire, David Boren would certainly be on that list, and he would be up high on it,” says noted historian and author David McCullough, who twice has headlined OU’s annual Teach-In and served as OU’s 2009 commencement speaker.

“I’m often asked if I see any signs of hope, anything that makes me feel that we are not doing everything wrong,” the two-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and winner of the National Book Award says. “I tell them, ‘Go out to Norman, Oklahoma, and see the university and what is going on there, and all the innovation, and all the excitement and all the pride, and the looks on the faces of the students. That will set you back on track if nothing else will.’”

President Boren looks upon the challenges and accomplishments of the past two decades with a profound sense of gratitude and pride. “Our 20th OU anniversary is a meaningful milestone, to both Molly and me,” he says. “We are people who are very rooted and from pioneer Oklahoma families. We both have that sense of wanting to give back to the place that has given so much to us. I feel that Oklahoma has given me virtually every meaningful thing in my life.”

“I viewed coming to OU as a calling,” Boren reflects. “It was a time that I was seeking to invest the rest of my life into something I loved and cared about. To be able to devote your life to something that is so rewarding and gives you so much satisfaction is a wonderful thing.”

In the beginning many doubted OU and Boren were a



President Boren answers questions from a television reporter in the early morning hours of March 9 after joining students protesting the video containing racist chants. “All of us will redouble our efforts to create the strongest sense of family and community,” Boren later said. “We vow we will be an example to the entire country of how to deal with this issue.”

good match. The university had gone through three presidents in nine years, and the OU community craved stability. “It was feared that a person of David Boren’s wide experience, intelligence and political abilities would be offered numerous attractive and lucrative job opportunities in private enterprise or in politics and that he would quickly be tempted to leave Norman as soon as the right chance came along,” says OU David Ross Boyd Professor David W. Levy.

“Twenty years have now passed and those who were worried then – including myself – have seen that the worry was misplaced,” admits Levy, who is one of the university’s most respected teachers and has a distinct vantage point as OU’s official biographer. “He has stayed at his post through good times and bad, and the results of his leadership over those two decades can be seen wherever one looks across the campus.”

Boren believes continuity has been a key to his success. “It takes a good amount of time for all the leaders of the university to develop trust in each other, and that’s all the way from students to faculty governance to the administrative side of the university and the alumni. It has meant a lot to me to be able to stay at OU as long as I have, to help provide continuity to the university in all areas and to continue to build the sense

of teamwork that comes from years of working together.”

The work has been arduous but rewarding. OU’s student body is the highest academically ranked in Oklahoma education history and, nationally, the top public university enrolling National Merit Scholars. In addition, *The Princeton Review*

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continues to name OU number one for student cost and academic achievement.

Boren also is proud of the fact that OU is the only public university in the United States to win the prestigious Davis Cup two years running for a record-setting enrollment of United World College international freshmen. International enrollment has risen more than 22 percent since 2009 and represents Boren’s ambition to broaden student experiences. OU now boasts nearly 200 Study Abroad programs in 50 countries.

“Over the past 20 years we’ve gone from less than 2 percent of our student body having the opportunity for a study abroad experience to almost 30 percent,” Boren says, adding that he hopes “virtually all” OU students will have the chance to study abroad someday. “The world is going to get more interdependent, not less. Being a truly international institution becomes more and more important.”

Boren’s international aspirations found focus in the College of International Studies, one of five new colleges launched during his presidency. Another is the Honors College, embodying Boren’s commitment to attract outstanding students and retain excellent faculty. The Honors College has tripled the size of its student body and offers the value of a small,

The Borens’ outstanding support of the arts helps students like Brett Young, Zeek Wright and Amanda Carrick take advantage of unique opportunities, including when OU was invited to perform a combined ballet and chorus of Joseph Haydn’s *The Seasons* at The Palace Esterházy in Eisenstadt, Austria, last fall.



Wendy Mutz



Photo Provided

Tiled rooftops and spires become a familiar sight for students who spend a semester on OU’s campus in Arezzo, Italy. OU has the largest number of U.S. students in Arezzo; one in five OU Study Abroad students will spend time there.



Robert Taylor

The National Weather Center makes OU the weather capital of the world and anchors the \$288 million University Research Campus, which has bloomed during the Boren years to include the Stephenson Research and Technology Center, Stephenson Life Sciences Research Center and 15 private companies.

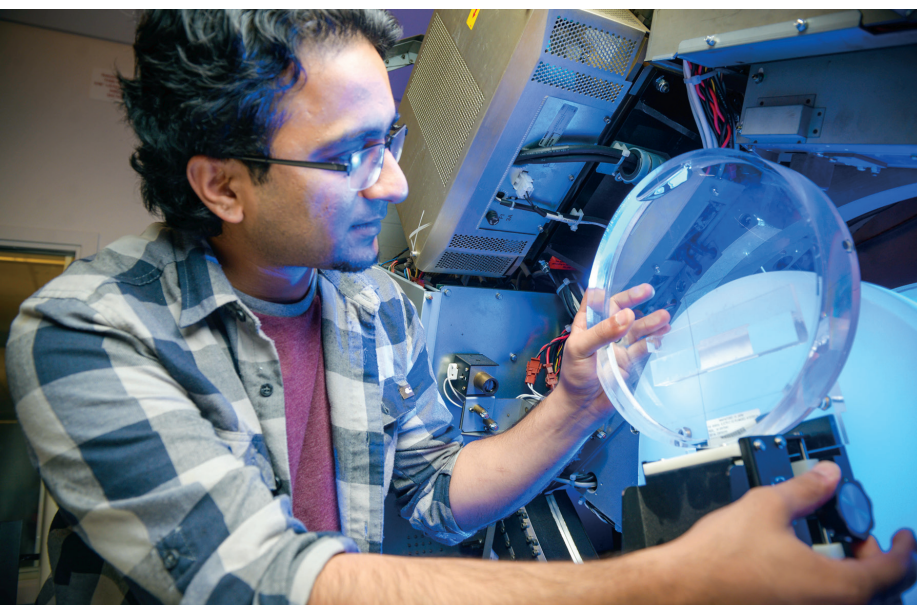


Photo Provided

OU students explore biomedical engineering, a new program that is rapidly growing to meet demand in the medical field. Biomedical engineering is one example of OU's ability to adapt to changing educational needs during the Boren years.

liberal arts university within a large, national research university. It is led by Dean David Ray, who Boren describes as "a great faculty leader."

"As the academic standards of each incoming freshman class have continued to climb, the importance of the Honors College grows," Boren says. That growth includes such initiatives as the new Presidential Teaching Fellows Program, which will provide annual stipends to university professors instructing exclusively in the Honors College.

Other new initiatives focus on fostering innovations that will yield opportunities for OU and the entire state. "I'm a great believer in a broad, basic education in the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. That should never change. But we also have to adapt," Boren says. As an example, he points to OU's burgeoning program in biomedical engineering, a high-demand medical field that has largely been ignored by universities.

OU has eagerly seized opportunities to serve the public through medicine and the sciences; in fact, the university was the first Oklahoma public institution to achieve the Carnegie Foundation's highest tier of research activity. In Norman, the \$288 million University Research Campus boasts 15 private companies, plus the Stephenson Research and Technology Center, the Stephenson Life Sciences Research Center and the \$67 million National Weather Center. The Schusterman Center at OU-Tulsa hosts the OU School of Community Medicine, the first of its kind in the nation, while the Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City features such nationally groundbreaking facilities as the Harold Hamm Diabetes Center and the Stephenson Cancer Center, Oklahoma's only Phase I clinical trials site.

OU has been transformed in physical ways, as well. Under the guidance of OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren, all three campuses have been designed as beautiful spaces for learning and inspiration. Landscaping, green spaces, sculpture, fountains and more than 25,000 trees planted since 1994 have enhanced the university. In 2014, a national digital media group named the Norman campus one of America's most beautiful college campuses.

“I believe one’s environment has a huge impact on them, and we’ve had countless students and faculty say that the landscaping was a major part of their decision to come to OU,” Mrs. Boren has said. “I believe it also helps make people more productive and consider this beautiful space sacred ground.”

Beautiful spaces at the vastly expanded Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History also have enriched the university. Together, these world-class collections expose students and the public to new

Community and service have been at the center of Boren’s presidency since his very first day. For years, he has flatly stated that he feels the breakdown of community is one of the United States’ most serious challenges and called for a “national intervention” starting with colleges and universities.

In a quote that now seems almost prescient, Boren said, “One of the greatest problems in our country is that we’re too divided, too fragmented, too polarized.” A slew of successful community initiatives

have resulted from Boren’s concerns during the past two decades, including exponentially increased volunteerism through The Big Event service day; resurrecting cherished OU traditions that had been lost; and starting the Faculty-in-Residence program in student housing, which offers students a live-in teacher, mentor and friend.

Addressing unity and division also poses opportunities. In March, Boren announced the creation of the Vice President for University Community, who will overlook diversity programs and strive to make OU life more inclusive.

“All of us will redouble our efforts to create the strongest sense of family and community. We vow that we will be an example to the entire country of how to deal with this issue,” he says.

A unique, inclusive community within student housing will soon be part of Boren’s legacy. New “residential colleges” patterned after those at Harvard, Yale and Oxford will build community via living facilities with internal dining halls, study rooms, seminar rooms and faculty offices. Each will have its own motto, crest and intramural teams. Two residential colleges already are in the design stage

and will feature traditional, Gothic structures with courtyards. Boren hopes several more will follow. *continued*



Robert Taylor

OU’s three campuses have been transformed during President and Mrs. Boren’s two decades of service. Mrs. Boren’s involvement with the addition of sculptures, fountains, green spaces and more than 25,000 trees recently led a national digital media group to name the Norman campus among America’s most beautiful college campuses.

realms of creativity and discovery. In 2014 the Sam Noble Museum was presented the prestigious National Medal for Museum and Library Science.

Also enhancing campus life is athletics, and during the Boren era OU teams have won more than 55 conference titles and eight national titles. More important, OU student-athletes are attaining their highest-ever grade point averages, graduating in record numbers, and providing more than 1,500 hours of community service each year.

President Boren addressed the OU community within hours after the release of a video of fraternity members singing a racist chant. Later that week, Boren announced the creation of a new position—vice president of university community—who will cultivate and oversee diversity programs.

A letter from the President

I have been very proud of the way that our students, faculty and staff have come together to show their support and express their values. As we know, one of the great strengths of our University community is our ability to engage in open and honest discussions about difficult issues in a productive way. In recent days, I have been touched by the thoughts and perspectives you have shared. It is clear that our love of OU is strong.

As the University continues through its disciplinary and other processes, please continue to treat every member of our community with respect. If you become aware of any threatening behavior or other circumstance of concern, please notify OUPD immediately by calling 911. Retaliation and/or threats of violence will not be tolerated. Maintaining the safety and well-being of our community is of critical importance as the healing process continues on our campus.

The University of Oklahoma is a leader in American higher education. This important ongoing dialogue and our actions going forward afford us another opportunity to demonstrate the great strength and core values of our University community.

David L. Boren
President, The University of Oklahoma



A bird's-eye view of the future OU residential colleges reveals a classic design and setting bordered by Lindsey Street, Asp Avenue and Jenkins Avenue. The residential colleges are patterned after those at Harvard, Yale and Oxford and will feature internal dining halls, house "masters" selected from OU's faculty, and their own mottos, crests, and intramural teams.

The residential colleges will be limited to upper-division students. OU's current residence halls are full with freshmen, Boren explains, and between student housing and Greek organizations fewer than 2,500 upper-division students now live on campus. The president maintains students who choose to live on campus bond more closely with one another and the university, and research shows on-campus students have higher grades and are more likely to graduate on time. "Over time, I would like to see our sophomores, juniors and seniors continue to live on campus in larger and larger numbers.


"As we have seen recently, the real work of creating a sense of family and community never stops," Boren says, adding he hopes that students' community experiences will shape the world they enter after college.

Some visions are more fundamental. "One of the things I really hope is that OU will remain relatively affordable. It may be one of my greatest concerns looking forward," he says. "As state governments across America cut back their share of financial support and as more of the cost falls on students and

families, it is of deep concern for me that we could be closing the door of opportunity on many talented students in the future.

"When we fail to develop that talent, we damage the well-being of the country. Our commitment to a quality education is basic to our commitment to equal opportunity as Americans."

Boren's view is tempered by two decades of challenges and hard work – both in and out of the national spotlight – that have been rewarded with unrivaled success and progress for Oklahoma's flagship university and the students, faculty, staff and alumni who call OU home. But the university's 13th president knows that there is still much work to do.

"Every institution is either moving forward or it is sliding back," he says firmly. "It is never going to sustain the status quo for very long. One lesson you keep learning is that students must come first. They're the very reason why we're here." 

Anne Barajas Harp is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.