

Discovering Our Destiny

Robert Duffett, President

Dakota Wesleyan University

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Introduction

Chairman Musick, Ambassador McGovern, Mayor Claggett, Dr. Noseworthy, Dr. Billion, Dr. Messer, Dr. Beddow, Dr. Ewing, Dr. Wagner, Rev. Kor, Rev. Eberhart, Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Shilling, Ms. Houser, ladies and gentlemen. I am thankful to the Board of Trustees of Dakota Wesleyan University for giving me the privilege and honor of serving as the 19th President of Dakota Wesleyan University. As I have said before, let me reaffirm again to all of you, I will give my best effort and all the talent I have for the unique and glorious vision of Dakota Wesleyan University.

I am thankful to all of you who have come today, not to celebrate or applaud the inauguration of a new President, but to reaffirm and recommit ourselves to what has been, what is, and what will be accomplished here at DWU.

So to the Board, I say thank you. I have been President for almost one year, and I love the work and mission. To family and friends, primarily from Ohio and Minnesota, Illinois and Arizona, I am deeply touched you came to share in this special day. To Connie, David and Allie, I love you. We share a great life together. To the members of First United Methodist Church in Mitchell, Dakotas Conference Churches, the Bishop's staff, and the National United Methodist Church, I say welcome. We at DWU so value our intellectual and spiritual partnership. The bringing together of mind and spirit, faith and reason, mission and education, makes my heart beat fast.

To members of the Mitchell community -- welcome. Our history has been intertwined from the beginning. I have often said that what is good for Mitchell is good for DWU, and what is good for DWU is good for Mitchell. Welcome, as well, to fellow Presidents and representatives of other colleges and universities.

I am thankful that four out of five former living Presidents of Dakota Wesleyan University are here. President Wagner, it has been a pleasure to get to know you this year. You served DWU well during two crucial times. You left your church to raise money for what is now Smith Hall, after College Hall suffered a devastating fire. You were Interim President in 1971. In a short period you provided stability and confidence in the future.

President Messer, you were the first native South Dakotan and second alumnus to hold the office of President. You upgraded academic quality and were committed to academic freedom. You were South Dakota's youngest college President when inaugurated and its oldest in tenure when you left in 1981.

President Beddow, you were the second native son, and second lay person to serve as President of DWU. You served during our Centennial celebration in 1985. You were unusually successful in bringing together "town and gown" -- the community and the University. The L.B. Williams Elementary School is a notable example of that partnership. The Christen Family Recreation Wellness Center was built during your tenure.

President Ewing, congratulations on your inauguration as the tenth President of Mount Union College. I was glad that I was able to attend. You gave six strong years of leadership to DWU. You balanced the

budget, doubled the endowment, and grew enrollment. You left the place in good shape. It's an honor to follow in your footsteps.

And, like all of you, I am having the privilege of being trained as a President by Gordon Rollins. If this was the church, we Presidents might be called Bishop; but Gordon is the Pope!!

Many thanks as well to my executive colleagues, faculty and staff, and most importantly, to our students. In the end, all the fund-raising, pomp and circumstance, and plans of the Trustees, are for you, the students. It may not always feel that way, but when we ask you to push farther, jump higher, revise that paper again, redo an experiment, and look at something from a different perspective, we are indeed doing our best to develop you intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Our task today is to review the past, reflect on the present, and recommit ourselves to those enduring values that give shape to this institution of higher education.

On a warm, sun-splashed, June day in 1888 with white billowing clouds, Dakota University – as we were called then - held its first commencement; a full year before South Dakota was admitted to the Union. Four people graduated that day. From the viewpoint of history, success was written all over them.

One of those graduates, Oliver Murray, was a brilliant student, eloquent orator, and accomplished musician and singer. He composed his own music and penned his own lyrics. Murray was ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church and was a pastor in one of the leading congregations in Chicago. He also may have been a first class "suck-up." He married Hattie Brush, daughter of the first DWU President, William Brush. Historians say she was as equally talented as her husband. A voice instructor, she also sang before the crowned heads of Europe.

Three others graduated that day; all from the Normal Department, the equivalent of our Education Department: Emily Rodgers, May Skinner and Beulah Windle. Little is known of Ms. Rodgers and Ms. Skinner, other than they married well and moved to the west coast. Ms. Windle married a well-to-do Mitchell businessman and lived here all her life. She attained regional fame in her own right as one of South Dakota's most prominent poets.

Those four graduates, and Hattie Brush, say much about the kind of institution we were, and continue to be today. Thirty two years before women ever had the right to vote, Dakota University was admitting and graduating women on an equal status with men – half a century before most Ivy League schools. Already, we see the enduring values of our education shaping lives, which in turn, helped shape society. The success of our first graduates should not be a surprise. They were not just teachers and ministers, but artists, writers, poets, musicians, and leaders. Our Methodist Episcopal forebearers, long since passed, had high expectations for this university, and high expectations for those who study here. Words like mission and vision were easily tossed around then, because, literally, our school was born out of mission and vision -- expectant and excited about what could be.

The DesMoines Conference and the Northwest Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church claimed this part of the Dakota Territory as their Dakota mission. Over the years they sent several itinerant ministers to organize Methodist classes, precursors to churches. With the westward expansion of America, railroads that came through Mitchell on the way to the Missouri River, and the discovery of gold by George Custer in the Black Hills, the population of the Dakota Territory swelled.

Almost immediately Methodist Episcopal leaders began to discuss the need for a university in the Dakota Territory. First they decided to support Cornell College in Iowa, but soon decided that the Dakota Territory needed a university of its own.

Thus, at the 1883 Annual Conference of the Dakota Mission, a historical and far-reaching decision was made. The Committee on Education adopted the following motion:

“Recognizing the necessity of education in laying the foundation of a new country, and believing that our church, born in a college [referring to Wesley as a graduate of Oxford] . . . should lay broad and deep the foundation [for] such a university. A university shall do honor to the generation that founded it, and give ever increasing power, both spiritual and intellectual to the generations to come.”¹

This motion passed with such enthusiasm that three cities in South Dakota fought it out for the privilege of hosting a university. Institutional historians say, “. . . the final battle was on. . . . Wit, wisdom and oratory were the weapons used. It was a bitter struggle between . . . Titanic intellects . . . ”² The Bishop himself, almost as a referee to this intellectual boxing match, warned that only one, not three, Methodist Episcopal universities should be started. In the end, the decision was made to place the university in Mitchell and classes started in the fall of 1885, four years before South Dakota was admitted to the Union.

Our founders had grand ambitions for Dakota University. The articles of incorporation call for not only departments in liberal arts, science and education, but also an agriculture school, an engineering school, a law school and a medical school.

I am moved by the vision, mission, passion and leadership of those who began this university. But I am most intrigued not with what they wanted to accomplish, but *why* they wanted to do it. I am struck by that phrase that we should start a university because it “gives ever increasing power both spiritual and intellectual to the generations to come.” Why not start a college to keep up with the Lutherans or Baptists in Sioux Falls? Why not start a university for upward mobility, so their kids could get away from the harsh prairie? No, the reason for this university

was to bequeath to the generations that followed “ever increasing intellectual and spiritual power”.

Hold on to this phrase – ever increasing spiritual and intellectual power to posterity. This phrase jumps out from the past, grabs us in the present, propels us to the future. It is precisely this vision that drove us through the decades for the last two centuries. Our forebearers knew, saw, and experienced what a university could do and can do. And when they tried to describe the potential of a university education, they resorted to using language more appropriate to an electrical generation plant than a traditional university.

You see, they knew that a university education created power in two ways. First, there is power in ideas. Our type of education emphasizes the power that comes through study, reflection, reason and contemplating great ideas. Then and now, our education emphasizes the intellectual abilities of writing, speaking, critical thinking, problem solving, understanding humanity, ethics, learning how to learn, and taking fuzzy problems and thinking your way to, if not a solution, at least being able to frame the

¹ O.W.Coursey, *A History of Dakota Wesleyan University for Fifty Years (1885-1935)*, (Mitchell, SD: Dakota Wesleyan University), 20

² *Ibid.*, 23

problem and offer tentative solutions. Our type of education, called a liberal arts education, is leadership education at its best. Let's admit it, the term liberal arts is confusing and a turn off for many people. Most don't know what it means, and some who may be more politically conservative wonder if there is such a thing as conservative arts. The term itself, in this context, comes from the Latin that means "free." It was applied to those people from the upper social and economic ladder of Greek and Roman society who literally were free to study. They were unlike most who worked hard at menial, physical jobs to eke out a living. In ancient Greece and Rome, liberal or liberated students studied the arts of grammar, logic, astronomy, music, geometry and rhetoric. At that time, philosophers debated whether true education should have any end other than the joy of study. Some argued that a "liberal" education was necessary to provide effective leadership for the state. Others argued that a liberal arts education ought to develop individual talent, areas of excellence, potential and personal happiness.

Our vision at Dakota Wesleyan University refracts aspects of both schools from classical Greek and Roman Society into a Christian synthesis. We affirm that ideas have power and liberal education is still the best type of education for personal fulfillment, leadership, development of individual talent, and service to society. But can our type of education get you a job?

Several years ago, 113 officers of several large corporations in America were surveyed on factors that "become important to success as a college graduate employee progresses to middle and top positions in your company." The traits most singled out, in rank order, were:

1. Verbal communication skills
2. Ability to identify and formulate problems
3. Willingness to assume responsibility
4. Interpersonal skills
5. Reasoning ability
6. Creativity
7. Ability to function independently³

That survey discovered that as you go up the corporate ladder you increasingly need the skills, aptitudes, and abilities that a liberal arts education provides.

In another study, the Illinois Bell Telephone Company analyzed the educational backgrounds of its management. They divided their managers into seven levels. At the lowest level were over five thousand managers. The highest level had only ten managers. Here is what is most interesting for our purposes. Of the ten managers at the very top of Illinois Bell, six of them, or sixty percent of the top brass, were liberal arts majors in college⁴

Although these studies were done twenty years ago, it is very clear that not only can you get a good job with a liberal arts degree, but you may end up as the CEO of the company.

I am delighted to point out the career-enhancing features of a liberal arts education. But I am deeply concerned that college students elevate their stress levels by deciding too soon what their major should be and what they should do for the rest of their lives.

³ Michael Useem, *Liberal Education and the Corporation, The Hiring and Advancement of College Graduates*, (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989), 92

⁴ Ibid., 96-97

I recently met with a father and his son. The son will be a first-year student at Dakota Wesleyan next fall. In our conversation the son confessed that he had no idea what he wanted to major in or what he wanted to do for his life's work. I told both, "Relax. Let your education help develop your talents and clarify motivation and passion." I assured them that we would help the young man find his place in the sun so he could better discern what vocation to pursue.

If I am concerned about too quick a decision on majors and vocation, I am even more troubled about ethics, character development and how we instill in young adults those enduring personal and social values that make America great.

My concern came sharply into perspective when I recently read about the experience of Professor Richard M. Hunt, who taught a course on the Holocaust at Harvard. He is dismayed that so many students have what he calls a "no fault" view of history. This view says that the rise of Nazism was inevitable; no one could stop Hitler, and therefore, no one is responsible for Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibór.⁵ I do not think this "no fault" view of history is endemic to students at Harvard. This same malaise is evident in many high school and college students' views on politics, public leadership and service, and voting. Each year fewer college students even bother to vote. Alexander Astin of UCLA's Annual Survey of American Freshmen [sic first year college students] may provide a clue why so many of our college students have a "no fault" view of history and contemporary events, don't vote, and care little about public life and service. Thousands of students think their vote or involvement won't make a difference.

The vision of DWU takes direct aim, and is at odds with, the prevailing social and political "so what, whatever, it really doesn't make a difference" attitude. Our educational vision is to throw new perspective on chronic social problems, prophetic and moral light on our moral and ethical failures and inspiration that steels our will to greater obligation for the common good.

Liberal education with its emphasis on history turns on its head the notion that one person or one vote doesn't matter. Quite to the contrary: from history we learn that the only way the world is changed is by one person, one vote. The world is changed when one person speaks to the moral yearnings of the many; where leaders, and those they lead, together provide moral uplift to culture, nation and world.

Do you still doubt that one person speaking to the moral yearnings of a nation can create moral uplift and change history? Let me give you a few examples.

- How about the person that wrote, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all humanity is created equal"?
- Or the person who said, "Fourscore and seven years ago... whether that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall perish from the earth"?
- Or the one who said, "I have a dream... that my four little children will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character"?
- Ambassador George S. McGovern called the nation in his 1972 acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Presidency to "Come home America to our enduring constitutional values."

The power of ideas embodied in a liberal arts education helps our students see visions, dream dreams of what could be, and fires their imagination that as a society we can do better.

⁵ Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character, How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1991), 303

So our forebearers bequeathed to us a vision that a university will give ever-increasing power through the power of ideas. The second way to attain ever-increasing power is through the power of Christian mission.

Throughout my entire adult life I have been deeply committed to the mission of the church and the life of the mind through my personal commitment to church-related institutions of higher education. I have strongly advocated for the importance of the life of the mind as a pastor in Minnesota, New Jersey, Iowa and Illinois; and as a seminary and college professor, college dean, university provost, and now university president. I have doggedly challenged the church-related institutions I've served to better and more intentionally live out their intellectual and spiritual identity.

Many of you have heard the standard stump speech that I've been giving for years. Church-related higher education did not start when student numbers were down, the budget looked bleak, and an enterprising college president tried to rob both the high school Sunday school class and the collection plate for "noses and nickels." Rather, the history of higher education until the middle of the last century was the history of the church. Simply put, western universities in Europe and America, imitated by the rest of the world, were the sons and daughters of the church.

While ancients debated whether liberal education could have any legitimate utilitarian end or be for personal enrichment only, Christian leaders and theologians from the German, English, French and Italian universities added the intellectual tradition of the historic Christian faith to the curriculum, along with the classic liberal arts curriculum. The churches started, supported and encouraged these universities because this type of education was commonly viewed as the best guarantee to prepare a person to think well, live well, act ethically and effectively lead church and state.

Dakota Wesleyan University comes from this type of university that embraces the spiritual dimensions of life and reaffirms *the power of Christian mission*.

In this old affirmation we actually are chic, trendy and, to use the phrase of an old country/western song, "We were country before country was cool." We have a holistic view of education that is concerned with the intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual. Don't come to Wesleyan just to get a degree. No, no! Come to Wesleyan to learn how to learn, how to study, and how to live. Come to Wesleyan where your parched soul can be refreshed from the wells of Christian faith – *the power of Christian mission*.

Our educational vision springs from the theological vision of what we sing at Christmas – Immanuel, God with us. It is not merely an assertion, but a living reality that God is not only with us, but also for us. God is not just for the United Methodists or those of us at church-related colleges. Rather, God is calling DWU, the church, and people of good will toward the renewal of our world. This renewal of the world was predicted by the prophet Isaiah, demonstrated by the life and ministry of Jesus, and affirmed by Martin Luther King Jr. when he said in his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech, "Every valley will be filled, every mountain made low, the crooked straight, the rough smooth, and all flesh will experience God's renewal together." So profound is God's presence with us and good will toward us, that death itself will not have the last word among us. In the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, in almost the last verse Jesus says "Behold I make all things new" -- *the power of Christian mission*.

When drought wiped out the crop and, as the children played, Mom and Dad wondered if there would be enough to eat that winter; when rain flooded fields and there was not enough money to replant crops;

when prairie fires not only burned crops but barns and houses and killed animals; when dust turned skies black on sunny summer days; when grasshoppers were so numerous they looked like thunderstorms up ahead – it was the promise of God with us and for us, the hope of a better, more habitable world for all of God’s children, that motivated these simple people to start a university to give ever increasing power to generations to come. How did they accomplish that then, and how do we accomplish it today? *It is through the power of ideas and the power of Christian mission.*

But what does this mean today? We have been bequeathed a legacy writ large. If I were to write a book about the history of Dakota Wesleyan University, both looking back and looking into the future, I would entitle the book, “The Impossible Possibility”.

Who were these crazy people who lived in sod huts, but built the first building at Wesleyan out of granite? Why were they so audacious as to think that simple persons with an education from here could work with God to make the world a better place? We don’t have a billion dollar endowment, others have more impressive facilities, and those on the coast call the Dakota Territory “fly over country”. The demographics for traditional college-age students in South Dakota is bleak, and there are dire predictions in the land about small universities in America.

Yet maybe our impossible tasks are possible because of power from the intellectual and spiritual synergy of our educational vision -- the power of ideas and the power of Christian mission. This power has transformed, is transforming, and will continue to transform lives. My goodness, who talks like this – intellectual power, Christian mission, the power of ideas, come and help change the world for the common good? Aren’t we suppose to go to college to get a job, have a few laughs, make friends, and maybe find a spouse?

At the end of the day, we at Dakota Wesleyan University walk a different path. Yes, we would like to be named and applauded for our reputation and to sit high on the perch of *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. But we walk a different path. Educational quality comes not from a popularity contest, but rather from quality classroom instruction, excellent advising and rigorous educational and intellectual expectations. Popularity and reputation never taught anything, never gave a patient his/her medications, and never helped lead a student to an intellectual or interpersonal discovery. We walk a different path.

Yes, we want our students to get a good job when they graduate, and they do. But we walk a different path. With our growing partnership with the Gallup Organization we want to help students better discern their talents so their education develops them for unusual effectiveness in their career and joy in their personal life. We walk a different path.

Yes, we welcome conversation about ethics and values, but we walk a different path. We have been named by the Templeton Foundation as a “character building college” and we continue to think of ways to bring sharper focus to ethics in our curriculum. Further, we have initiated a new program called Champions of Character, an intentional effort to shape, mold and develop the character of Wesleyan athletes as part of athletic participation. How radical! Imagine that -- using college athletics to develop and shape character; rather than hide boorish, lewd, and immoral behavior! We walk a different path.

Yes, many church-related colleges have walked away from their founding group, and in some cases, the founding group walked away from the college, but we walk a different path. We also walk a different path from those schools that say they value Christian mission and church connection, but oddly betray that heritage and behave like a penitentiary of mind, body and spirit. We warmly embrace our United Methodist family, all Christian groups, and people of goodwill. We say to all Dakotas Conference

United Methodists, whether you went to Wesleyan or attended another college or did not attend college at all, we consider you all alumni of our school because we share the same heritage and mission. We walk a different path.

Conclusion

At the Honors Banquet two weeks ago, two students lectured on their research findings. Both will graduate Sunday and will go on to graduate school. One did research on cognitive dissonance, the other about genetic engineering, or specifically about genetically altered crops. At the end of their lectures they were pummeled with questions – most from faculty who found their research so engaging. The questions and their answers ranged from biology, to psychology, to sociology, to public policy, to values, to philosophy, to religion, to fear. The students handled the questions well, and the discussion was so lively, that Dr. Paul Almjeld, Honors Advisor, had to literally (like a football referee) call time out and dismiss the group. Dean Willis commented that it doesn't get any better than that. I agree.

As we walked home, I said to Connie, “In the end it all comes down to this – a community of students, who think through the implications of powerful ideas guided by great faculty, coaches and mentors who are teaching them to research, write, speak, handle questions on their feet, and engage in critical and inferential reasoning.”

That night I saw an example, admittedly a good one, of what we are doing. I think these students, and the thousands who have gone here in the past, have experienced the reality of ever increasing spiritual and intellectual power due to the power of a DWU education. This is our path. This is our destiny.

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