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DRAFT – 10/2/2001

The Land Grant University Movement and IANR
Animal Science Seminar Series
John C. Owens
Oct. 10, 2001

"The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking we were at when we created them."

That quote, attributed to Albert Einstein, epitomizes for me the importance of land grant universities in the 21st century, and whenever I hear someone say that land grants are obsolete – which, occasionally, I do hear – I want to pull that quote out and say "here – read this." When all the problems in the world have been solved, then – and only then – will land grant universities be obsolete. Maybe. I'm not really willing to commit to the idea that the day of obsolete land grants ever will come, but if all the problems in the world are one day solved, then maybe – maybe – I'd consider it.

Let me repeat that Einstein quote again: *"The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking we were at when we created them."*

I, personally, look to land grants to continually provide opportunities to move us to different levels of thinking, as I believe they have done since their beginning

with the Morrill Act of 1862, and I look to the people in this room to keep us on that track. I look to everyone working in land grant universities today to research, teach and extend the knowledge needed to deal with the problems people are facing, and to build the basis on which those who follow us will stand to solve the problems of the future. Here in the Institute we focus on the concerns and opportunities our constituents face in the areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness, natural resources and human resources.

Nobody has to be around me very long before they know I am a fervent believer in the land grant university mission, and a great admirer of the 19th century Vermont Senator, Justin Smith Morrill, whose Morrill Act of 1862 created land grant universities. In fact, I have the web shrine to Justin Smith Morrill bookmarked on my computer.

I also am a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Morrill Act into law on July 2, 1862. I consider the Morrill Act one of the most far-sighted and far-reaching pieces of legislation ever passed by the United States Congress. I believe the land grant universities it created are just as vital – perhaps even more so – as when they were first begun.

I often quote the Morrill Act, and am particularly fond of the phrase ***"the Leading Object,"*** which has appeared on several glass doors leading into buildings

on campus all ready, and will be appearing on others shortly. Each time I see that phrase it reminds me of the importance of our land grant mission, and I hope it will do the same for you. It also reminds me of all those people who have carried out that mission before you and I ever got here, whose work has led us all to this point and place and time, and I think of those who will come after us, and who will build on what we've done, and do, and yet will do, in our lives.

I'd like to share a quote with you from the Morrill Act today, a quote that begins with ***"the leading object,"*** and this is it: ***"the leading object*** *shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."*

It sounds commonplace to us now, but what an elegant vision the Morrill Act contained. In fact, I think you could liken it to an education revolution, when you consider the times in which it occurred.

Prior to the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, higher education in America was predominantly available to the rich and well-born. The Morrill Act put into motion a system to train the children of working class America or, as the Morrill Act

put it, "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes."

Someone once asked the late historian James Michener what he believed were the most important pieces of legislation ever enacted by Congress, and he cited the Morrill Act and the GI Bill – both of which put higher education into the hands of those to whom it might otherwise have been out of reach.

OK, you may say, that was then. But why do I think land grant universities are so important today?

I think it because of the land grant mission. Land grants were created specifically to meet the needs of the residents of each state, to take the resources of the university to the people of that state, and to do the research and provide the knowledge, through classroom teaching and through extension, that those in the state could use to better make the decisions important in their lives.

The need for that has not decreased; in fact, I would argue it only increases as the issues people face seem to grow more and more complex – issues that affect those both in rural and urban areas. These are issues and concerns people look to their land grant universities to address; issues that deal with a number of diverse needs.

One of the beauties of the land grant system is that there is at least one land grant institution in every state, and because we are public institutions with a mission

to develop and disseminate information people can use in their lives, we have a nationwide network of research results and education being shared.

Whenever someone asks me why land grant universities should do research today, when private industry is doing so much of it, I don't have to think twice to reply that private industry is doing proprietary research, looking for a very specific return on their dollar, and they feel no obligation to share the results of what they've learned.

Land grant institutions do. We are a public institution, we are of service to the public, and we believe the leading object of the work we do is to advance knowledge through discovery. Then we add that new knowledge we've discovered to the knowledge and skills already being taught in our classrooms, and we extend that new knowledge to those who can use it across our state.

Of course, we also work with industry. Here in the Institute we like to say we are partners with Nebraska, and industry is part of Nebraska. Agricultural Research Division Dean Darrell Nelson tells me that 15 percent of our total research funding is from industry, and in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2000, ARD faculty spent $8.22 million of industry funds on research. In doing that, industry received information they need while we also provide knowledge we believe of benefit to society.

I mentioned earlier that we are partners with Nebraska, and as a fervent believer in the land grant university mission, I am firmly convinced that those land grants that disenfranchise their local partners are on the road to a meaningless, irrelevant existence.

I believe we must reach out to those who are our traditional clients, and I believe we must seek other audiences, as well – people who may not traditionally look to us, but for whom we have expertise useful to them. I also believe we have a part in serving as a bridge between those two groups, a bridge on which they can find common ground and increased understanding. This is certainly a role I think we can play in understanding the concerns and needs of consumers, and working with our partners in agriculture and agribusiness to understand and meet those needs.

I believe it important that we always include our clients in the process of helping set the direction of our research and extension programs; we must always listen to what our constituents have to say. If we don't meet their needs, we haven't fulfilled our mission. I am a firm believer in service to the state, and I believe there is much we can do to serve Nebraska. I also think that any land grant university that pursues prestige or exclusivity to the detriment of service to every day, ordinary people is in big trouble.

Happily, I believe IANR has a strong tradition of service to the state, and I believe the land grant philosophy is alive and well within the Institute. In fact, I've had the privilege since coming to Nebraska to hear that voiced by people who also have come here from other places, and each time I hear it, it does my heart good.

At the CASNR fall faculty meeting in August I noted that I personally think it would be difficult to find a land grant university with any stronger traditional agriculture program than ours here in the Institute, and that is something I think bears repeating. As I've looked at our programs within the Institute and talked with people about them, I think the Institute's teaching, research and extension production agriculture focus was built correctly in Nebraska. I applaud the people who built it, as well as everyone in the Institute who continues to build on our strengths today. This is fabulous work we are privileged to do.

It concerns me, however, that not enough people seem aware of that today, and as a result, not as many students come to us to help them prepare for their future careers. If you were at the CASNR fall faculty meeting, or at the IANR conference in March, you know that I am adamant that we must increase our student enrollments within the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. Both the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and CASNR have capacity for more students, and we must do everything we can to fill that capacity. We have so much

to offer students in career choices and excellent learning opportunities and faculty dedicated to helping students learn the skills that will help them live their lives successfully. We know what we do is important. We know that everyone must eat to live, and they must have a world fit to live in, so the bedrocks of what drive the Institute – food, agriculture and agribusiness, natural resources and people, from individuals to families to communities – will be with us always. In many ways, our work is at the core of life. Safe food. Safe water. Safe environment. People. There is excitement in what we do. Challenge. Importance. Possibilities – including the very real possibilities of valuable and well-paying careers for our students.

That is a message each of us needs to spread. That is a message of the College, and a message of the Institute.

Within IANR, as we go about our land-grant mission, research, teaching and extension are interwoven. What affects one, affects us all. The reality of enrollments is this: people in decision making roles associate the quality of a college and its programs with the robustness of that college's enrollments. The same is true for each department within the college. When enrollments are down, we run the risk of decision makers deciding the focus of our college is less important than it once was, and that simply is not true.

We cannot let ourselves down, we cannot let our students down, we cannot let our constituents down by any action that would suggest agriculture is no longer important in Nebraska today. Of course it's important. One in four jobs in this state is related to agriculture in some way. That importance needs to be reflected in our student enrollments, and we each need to do our part to increase those numbers. Then, once new students recognize the opportunities available to them here and come to study with us, we need to do our part to retain those students, and to help them succeed. I am pleased with the dedication I see CASNR faculty show toward fostering student success.

One thing I think all of us in land-grant institutions must do to remain vital throughout this century and into the next is constantly scan and recognize the changes occurring in society. I think this is very important for our partners throughout the state, because if we can recognize the issues coming toward them while those issues are still just on the horizon, we can do the research and develop and disseminate the knowledge that will help them deal with and handle those issues as they arrive. We can work with them to maximize opportunities and minimize damage.

On the college front, I think recognizing changes constantly occurring in our society and looking for new areas of study within our focus areas allows us to

respond to those changes by building on our traditional strengths. This allows us to attract students who might not before have thought of a career they'd gain studying with us.

An example of this is the new professional golf management program being proposed in Agronomy and Horticulture that builds on our strong turfgrass program. This would build on a traditional strength to attract new students to our college.

I believe there are possibilities to look for new areas of study within animal science, too, and that is why I'm asking this department to consider an equine science program, and a program in companion animals. I welcome your thinking on other areas in which we can grow.

I am convinced such expansions are important because I believe expanding our offerings will allow us to build on and preserve the strength of our traditional programs. I also believe that such expansions also widen people's views of the variety of careers CASNR degrees encompass.

We cannot allow the strengths of the strong programs in which we take such pride to erode or languish because of misunderstandings as to their continued importance. We must do all we can to preserve and build on our strong suits, and I firmly believe adding new programs will build our base to preserve our strengths,

not dilute them.

I also believe that when those students our new programs bring us leave this campus they will do so well-prepared for the careers they've chosen, and with a better understanding of the importance of agriculture and natural resources in the world. I think that's good for them, good for us, and good for the constituents with whom we work.

Let me end my prepared remarks today, before we open the floor to discussion, as I began it, with this Albert Einstein quote: *"The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking we were at when we created them."*

As participants in the land grant system, we have the responsibility and privilege to pioneer new knowledge and new ways of thinking to be of service to the state and the world. I believe Justin Smith Morrill would be proud of the work his vision wrought. I know I certainly am proud of the work we do here in Nebraska as we fulfill our land grant mission.

Thank you.

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