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WKU

The 21st Century Land Grant University

In 1862, U.S. Senator Justin Morrill championed landmark federal legislation, known as the Morrill Act, to create America's system of Land Grant colleges and universities. This legislation set aside land in each state to establish a college which focused on agricultural and scientific research and solving drastic problems which affected our nation's economy. The Act evolved from a long-term, comprehensive, national, economic development strategy. Senator Morrill's legislation was eventually defined to expedite a practical higher education which fueled an industrial revolution across our nation.

In 2006, as WKU celebrates its Centennial, we in America enjoy the grandest quality of life on our planet. We produce many of the world's scientists, and we collaborate with colleagues across the globe to shape scientific and social policy. The technology which is driving global economic conditions has, indeed, changed over the last 144 years. America's collection of colleges and universities—land grant and others—has provided a birthplace and a proving ground for America's solutions to war and peace, manufacturing, transportation, food production and quality, communication, space exploration, and information technology.

WKU was not established under Senator Morrill's legislation. Rather, our institution was established by the Kentucky General Assembly in 1906 to meet the growing need to educate an emerging population across the Commonwealth, to produce teachers and provide a strong core curriculum. Throughout our first 100 years, WKU has served the Commonwealth well. It has grown into a full-scale comprehensive university with strong disciplines, not just in education, but also in the life and physical sciences, arts and humanities, business, and health and human services. In recent years, it has even produced the nation's top-ranked School of Journalism and Broadcasting. A vast array of undergraduate and graduate programs have produced nearly 100,000 graduates from campuses in Bowling Green, Glasgow, Elizabethtown, and Owensboro.

I suggest, however, in our 100th year, that the Commonwealth of Kentucky needs WKU more now than at any time since our founding. As we celebrate our Centennial, we are challenged to transform WKU into an institution which offers a relevant applied curriculum, focused on identifying and solving the problems which affect the quality of life throughout Kentucky.

At WKU, there is a strong link between tradition and transformation. Throughout 2006, we will celebrate the many rich and proud traditions and values which define the distinctiveness of the Western Experience. In a very real sense, however, this crucial transformation fits well with our traditions. WKU has always had a tradition of service to the Commonwealth which created it, but sustaining that tradition in the 21st Century requires the transformation in which WKU is currently engaged. The only way that WKU can meet its future responsibilities to the Commonwealth is to expand its historic mission.

The nation's conditions are different than those faced by Senator Morrill in 1862, but the needs and responsibilities of a comprehensive university are similar. WKU, and other comprehensive universities like WKU, are the stewards of the places in which we are located. Western's region extends throughout our region of Kentucky, but it also extends to everyone in every place within our reach as an institution. Typically, that reach would be the 25 or 30 counties close to our four campuses, but it also may be anywhere across the Commonwealth or across the globe. WKU faculty, staff, students, and alumni are at work nonstop improving economic, scientific, civic, and social conditions which affect populations across our nation and our world.

WKU's new mission, the fundamental impetus behind our transformation, is to serve as the proper steward of our region. Our responsibility as a university is to take the existing knowledge in our classrooms and laboratories and apply it to the identification and solving of problems within our reach. Educating students, once the essence of our mission, is now an inherent means to a much more noble and more important end. Our new mandate is to drive the economic vitality of our region while also serving as the intellectual and cultural leader for our citizens. Our new mission is focused on applied research and relevant public service. Civic engagement is our duty. Improving lives is our responsibility. That is what our focus shall be in our second century of service to the Commonwealth. That is what Senator Justin Morrill had in mind in the 1860s. The difference today is that our mission is self-imposed rather than federally mandated. The gravity, however, of our mission is no less important.

While speaking at WKU in 2003, Warren Buffet described a university as a collection of minds and buildings which hold the future. A transformed WKU will boldly lead the Commonwealth into an uncertain future. We will gather the resolve, the resources, and the confident optimism to firmly embrace such meaningful leadership.

This is why the 21st Century Land Grant Institution is a contemporary label that I have applied to comprehensive universities like WKU. These are the universities where practical education is applied to solutions which will drive the economy and quality of life enjoyed by those who live and work in regions which surround those campuses. Some call it mission creep; I call it mission sprint. We shall pursue this new mission as fast as our faculty can carry us and as boldly as our state and federal governments, our alumni, and our friends can provide the means to do so.

Gary A. Ransdell