From Merger to Maturity: the University of Maine in Perspective

Donald R. McNeil
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An address by
Dr. Donald R. McNeil
Chancellor, University of Maine
before the
Newcomen Society in North America

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Donald R. McNeil, Chancellor of the University of Maine, delivered the following address on the occasion of the Newcomen Society in North America’s honoring of the University on Friday, June 28, 1974 in Orono, Maine.

Dr. McNeil has served as chief administrative and executive officer of the University system since its inception by merger in 1968. The University, composed of seven separate campuses, currently enrolls some 25,000 students and employs approximately 3,500 full-time personnel.

Dr. McNeil is well-known in national educational circles. He presently serves on the Board of Governors of the Public Broadcasting Service, the Board of Directors of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, the Executive Committee of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, as a Commissioner on the Education Commission of the States, and as a member of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

This address was delivered at a luncheon at Stewart Commons on the University of Maine at Orono campus, at which Dr. McNeil was guest of honor. The Newcomen Society in North America is a membership supported corporation chartered for the study and publication of Business, Industrial and Institutional History and Achievement. The University of Maine was last honored by the Newcomen Society in 1953.
NEWCOMEN ADDRESS

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"Should usefulness... or virtue... or higher knowledge be the goal of our education?"

That was the question Aristotle raised 2,000 years ago and that remains one of the central issues of our time.

Cardinal Newman argued vigorously, "The purpose of a university is not to achieve social or political objectives, not to inculcate religion, or to provide training for material advancement but rather to teach general knowledge—the acquisition of which would be an acquired illumination, a personal possession, an inward endowment."

The Newcomen Society of North America is here today to honor the University of Maine, a land-grant institution whose mission originally was "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts."

From those small beginnings in 1865, the University has grown and changed to a seven-campus institution enrolling 25,000 students and specializing in a variety of disciplines.

Since the establishment of the School of Law and the absorption of Portland Junior College in the late 1950's, this University has been altering its scope continuously, amending its mission, and expanding its physical entity. The 1968 merger of the land-grant university at Orono with the five state colleges is undoubtedly the most significant and momentous action in the history of public higher education in the state of Maine.

The merging process was a painful one. We all bear its scars. Yet, from the heated cauldron of argument, analysis and assessment, there was forged a new institution, characterized most noticeably by the dynamic processes of redefinition—of function, mission, method, and target audiences. As a result, new goals, different delivery systems and modified structures were created.
That dynamic process of change is still going on. Diversity of programs and equality of access are the basic operational cornerstones of the merged University system. And as we today witness the results of these changes, it is appropriate to pause in retrospect and to review some of the more salient developments of the last two decades.

In the winter of 1953, Dr. Arthur Hauck addressed a gathering very similar to the one sharing this occasion with us today. It was an assembly distinguished by the presence of many of our own predecessors in Maine higher education, leaders of business and industry and officials of state and local governments.

The setting was the embryonic stage of what has been termed the ‘‘Golden Age of Education’’—triggered by the impetus of the G.I. Bill which sent thousands of veterans to college in Maine and across the country—many of them first generation college students who had not aspired to a post-high school education before the federal government made it possible. The respect they gained for higher education was transmitted to their children who flooded our colleges and universities throughout the Sixties.

Higher Education was no longer restricted to that small percentage of Americans who could afford to pay the costs, or to those who, because of a favorable background (and sometimes family pressure), were able to go to college. Sons and daughters, and adults too, flocked to the campus. Higher education became a vital force in the lives of millions of Americans.

I stand before you today in a very different setting. The advent of the Seventies has brought us to the twilight of that Golden Age. From all sections of the nation come unsettling reports of declining enrollments, increasingly frustrating and difficult financing, residence halls with empty beds, well-trained young teachers and Ph.D.’s contesting for a diminishing number of academic appointments.

In addition, the ferment of the Sixties which catapulted our campuses into intellectual activism led our students to a questioning of established commitments, to a struggle for understanding and reason, to a social conscience of a magnitude seldom experienced in this country. That ferment has subsided.

But my purpose today is not one of painting a portrait of gloom for higher education in our country or our state. Rather, it is to pay tribute to the twenty years of progress and academic enhancement which have occurred since the members of Newcomen last honored this University.

Any tribute to the University must be expressed in terms of the two historical dimensions encompassed by the last twenty years—characterized as the pre-merger and post-merger Univer-
sity of Maine. The pre-merger period, from 1954 to 1967, since Arthur Hauck's Portland Newcomen address, was marked by the dawning of a modern era of education in the state. That period, shaped by the inspired and able leadership of the distinguished Orono Presidents sharing this honor with us today—Dr. Hauck, Dr. Ed Young, and in absentia, Dr. Lloyd Elliott—witnessed the doubling of enrollments and impressive improvements in faculty salaries, the additions of a multiplicity of new disciplines and program sequences, the establishment of our fine School of Law, the incorporation of the Portland and Augusta branches, and the acquisitions of Dow Air Force Base for the Bangor campus and of the Darling Center. Undergirding this growth was a cooperative relationship with the Legislature and state government.

These were times of rapid growth and the challenge of keeping abreast of the increasing demands of a citizenry that wanted all the benefits of a strong postsecondary education system. The University of Maine responded to that challenge as promptly as its resources would permit.

But this very growth produced a growing sentiment in legislative halls and in the minds of the taxpayers that directed the concerns of our leaders in the mid-Sixties to questions that were to reshape the University. The questions were a part of a chorus of similar alarms sounded across the country expressing concern for apparent runaway growth and duplication of offerings, and urging serious efforts for coordination and planning, for increased economy and accountability, for new directions in programs and different population targets. Those questions resulted for us in the Coles Commission, followed by the Lund Report—not strangers to most of us here.

The realization of birth has, from time immemorial, been joyous, awe-inspiring—epitomizing the essence of creating and bearing witness to the complex integration of mutually supportive systems. The analogy captures the spirit of the late Sixties in higher education in Maine—that period of merger and the ultimate birth of the new University system.

The flexibility of the law creating the new system gave those of us to whom the operational responsibility fell the freedom to improvise, conciliate and build new relationships. Our Governor and the 103rd Legislature deserve grateful tribute for affording us the benefit of judgment and independence in the difficult task we undertook. The merger of the five state colleges and the three campuses of the old University was completed with the separation of Augusta and the Portland-Gorham merger.

Likewise, it was a dedicated, courageous group of men and women who constituted the Board of Trustees of the University
during the merger period. Those Trustees resolutely faced frequent criticism, arbitrated strong differences of opinion, patiently attempted to help the people of the state understand the complex process that was uprooting their traditional University and the state colleges.

When I came to Maine in the winter of 1968 as the first Chancellor of this new, merged university, it felt good to be part of a new revolution in New England higher education. I saw immense potential. Obviously, the first step was to assess where we were and where we wanted to go.

The result was the creation of the Higher Education Planning Commission, or HEP Commission, which undertook the defining of a new direction for this University in every discipline and area of concern—from equal opportunity of access to academic programs, to the delivery of services, to radical changes in some campus missions.

No such chronicle can be complete without some characterization of that first administration that took up the reins in 1968 charged with making this fragmented concept a reality. Win Libby, Mel Scarlett, Cliff Wieden, and Paul Judkins all had a hand in those early months. The dedicated loyalty, wisdom and vision of Stanley Freeman and Herbert Fowle—as Assistant Chancellors of this University—were the mainstays of those first tumultuous years. The timely juxtaposition of Stan Freeman’s thorough, steady and low-key approach to coordinating the search for quality improvement and academic maturity among widely disparate institutions, coupled with Herb Fowle’s strong, decisive leadership in putting together the complete financial and management facets of the operation, were remarkably productive forces. As Vice Chancellors, they continue to be so.

That first Administrative Council—Cliff Wieden of Aroostook State College, Mack Sennett of Washington State College, Joe Fox of Fort Kent State College, Ken Brooks of Gorham State College, Einar Olsen of Farmington State College; Win Libby, Dave Fink, Lloyd Jewett and Ed Godfrey, the heads of OPAL, or Orono, Portland, Augusta and the Law School, remind one of the inevitability of change and how briefly we all step across the stage of higher education history.

It was imperative that that first team be a determined and unflappable one, for the storms and conflicts, as expected, were numerous. We all felt very personally, as well as professionally, the hostility of various internal, external and political constituencies. What we termed a “merging process” was in reality an uprooting, a threat to an old order, and infinite confusion to many of those around us. Along the way, we encountered conflicts over
tenure, over the change of campus names, over academic freedom, over student participation in the decision-making process, over our public relations, over the demolition of the barn at Portland, to name only a few.

The merger within a merger—of the two campuses at Portland-Gorham—likewise stirred the ire of many who resisted a new identity not only as part of the new system, but within their own campuses as well. Separation anxieties, on the other hand, posed different problems in the case of the Augusta campus establishing itself independent of Orono.

The external resistance and strife found expression in diverse forms—the heart-rending defeat of our first two bond issues, student demonstrations and legislative controversies. But we have weathered them all well. My colleagues and friends have, with me, faced adversity, and our confidence in the future remains unshaken.

And now that the dust of old storms has settled, what do we face?

The melding of our various components into a statewide system of public higher education has been a positive factor in the development of this state. I have only to point to the elevation of quality of programming, of our cooperative relationship with the Legislature and State Government, to the control of duplication, to the greatly expanded research activities, to the rapidly growing numbers of Maine citizens filling our classrooms, to the increasing excellence of our faculty, and to the vitality of experimentation and progressive thrusts being initiated on all our campuses as we seek constantly to bring the best possible education to the people of Maine.

And these results are well documented in the specific accomplishments which all campuses and this administration share.

In the area of expanded opportunity, the touchstone of our philosophy, our increase from an enrollment in the pre-merger years of 1967 of 17,634 to our present enrollment numbering 25,200 is clear testimony to the health of this University, especially in light of the fact that enrollments elsewhere in the country are on the downswing. Last year, we were eighth among land-grant institutions nationwide in increased enrollments. For several years we added an enrollment equivalent to that of Bob Strider's Colby College each year.

And we have worked to broaden our audience among the potential student population, as well as increase its numbers. We have instituted scholarship programs that allow our native American Indians greater access to education at the University of Maine.
As a result, approximately 70 native Americans in the past three years have embarked on academic programs on our campuses.

We have successfully courted the "adult" population through continuing education offerings at non-traditional times, and through the development of two-year programs in different parts of the state. The enrollment growth at Bangor and Augusta, with the latter helpfully expanding opportunity in the Lewiston-Auburn area, has been significant. The sudden surge of enrollment when Portland-Gorham, together with SMVTI, began to take opportunity to York County in the form of the York County Community College Services, is also a signal to all of us of the vast needs yet to be met by our University.

Yet expanded opportunity means more than this. It has been, and is, and will continue to be, the goal of this institution to extend opportunity to those who cannot afford it. We must smash rigid economic barriers to opportunity. In fact, approximately 30% of our 25,000 students are from families with incomes less than $6,000 while 70% are under $12,000. This says nothing for the thousands of low-income people who have yet even to try our offerings.

Further, we can point to tremendous improvements in quality in this University. Faculty and curricula generally determine that indefinable term "quality" in higher education. The stories told by most of our campuses are enlightening ones. The University of Maine at Machias has increased its Ph.D. faculty members from one to fourteen in the past six years. The Aroostook County campuses both demonstrate great improvement. Fort Kent currently boasts eighteen Ph.D.'s of its twenty-four faculty members. Presque Isle has twenty-five Ph.D.'s now, compared with seven in 1968. Farmington's growth has been equally dramatic—from six doctorates in 1969 to thirty-five in 1974.

To attract a faculty of this calibre to institutions where faculty salaries are admittedly below those of sister institutions in New England states, requires bold leadership. And our Presidents and their academic officers and departmental chairmen have exercised that leadership well.

In the pursuit of truth, one hallmark of a major university is the emphasis given to research and the productivity which results from its efforts. In this area too, the strengths resulting from union have manifested themselves on every campus in the form of publications, participation in regional and national meetings of learned societies, and, more specifically, in the creation and implementation of several "pacesetting" research centers including the Quaternary Institute and the Darling Center at Orono, for example, and the Center for Research and Advanced Study at Portland-Gorham.
In addition to the daily service to thousands of school children provided by ETV, the intellectual and cultural life of Maine has been enhanced by the outstanding programming established by the Maine Public Broadcasting Network—programming of such quality that several of its special programs were accepted and produced for national educational television audiences.

Recent program expansion has included plans for a Medical Education Program, large expenditures for capital construction, remedial programs for the disadvantaged, a realigning of teacher education resources to offer students a broader instructional base, a Teacher Corps Program, and Cooperative Education (or work and learn) Programs.

One priority which Trustees identified soon after the merger was that of providing less than baccalaureate opportunities for students who did not aspire to, or need, the traditional four-year experience. We have achieved impressive results. At this time, thirty-three two-year degree programs are operational—some with an "open admissions" provision in order to insure that any high school graduate might have opportunities for University matriculation. More than 2,100 Maine students are currently enrolled in University two-year programs. This has been done in complete harmony with the vocational technical institutes, thereby avoiding duplication and overlapping.

The evidence of progress pervades many other areas in this complex institution. The recent strong reaccreditation reports for the Augusta and Machias campuses are good examples. The accreditation of UMPG and Fort Kent and the accreditation of the professional Schools of Nursing and Law are indicative of the growth of quality in this institution.

Figures speak for themselves. In 1973, we graduated 800 students more than we did in the spring of 1969. Our Physical Plant is currently valued at $125 million as compared with $92 million in 1969 in spite of two bond issues defeats in the early years after the merger. And presently some 2,500 courses are being offered across the state in our classrooms.

Another tremendous gain that both justifies and confirms the wisdom of those who sought to make this University a single entity is that of fiscal control and management. In the difficult process of synthesizing a variety of accounting, budgetary, planning, research and data processing systems, and fashioning an efficient, consistent and comparable administration of the business side of this operation, we have modernized and saved money in the years since the merger. There is much left to be done, and we continue to fight for improvement despite a handicap of limited resources. Meanwhile, we are ahead of many agencies in program budgeting.
and accounting. With those gains we must now look ahead to the challenge of the 70's and 80's. What will be the issues confronting us here in Maine as we emerge from our merged state, guided as we are by our 3 major principles: opportunity, quality and freedom?

From my perspective, 6 key issues—all of which have great potential influence on the future of our educational system, and ultimately on our lives—stand before us.

First, there will be an increased demand for accountability. Program budgeting, faculty workload, relevancy, competency and proper management of resources will be uppermost on everyone's mind. We will do everything we can to improve our cooperation with others who share in the responsibility of financing and managing this University.

Second, there will be a determined push to place an additional burden on the student to pay an increased share of the education in our publicly supported University.

The long tradition of our land-grant University enabling us to give low-cost, high-quality education is in peril, and we shall fight to preserve that splendid tradition.

Our taxpayers support this University, and ability to pay should not be a deterrent to any of our citizens.

Third, and somewhat related to the argument over high tuition, is the growing feeling that we are educating too many people. We shall resist this attitude with all the force at our command. In a democracy, equality of educational opportunity is the very foundation on which our entire social system rests. Rather than restricting the academic marketplace, we must be identifying, cultivating, and bringing into the educational mainstream thousands of our citizens not yet there.

Not everyone will go on to higher education. There is a self selection process; there will be some who, because of attitude, temperament and ability, will not choose to attend. But no citizen—young or old—should be denied the opportunity to pursue knowledge beyond high school to the extent his or her ability and desire permits.

Fourth, there will be an increasing demand to take educational programs to the students, to modify present approaches and methods; to innovate with credit for experience, use of media, interdisciplinary approaches, variable hours and methods of instruction, and a much greater use of counseling resources to aid the individual. We will, in the future, place a great deal more emphasis on the adult and the part-time learner.

Fifth, the states and the nation will have to agree on how much each shall contribute to this low-cost, high-quality system. Because of its tax base, the Federal Government, I predict, will
assume a larger financial interest in higher education, and as a result, will demand greater coordination. While admirable in concept, coordination has dangers—bureaucratic control, standardizing toward mediocrity, size that defies comprehension, and a limiting of the institutional and individual will to be different, to criticize and to progress.

Sixth, in planning, public and private institutions will face the challenge of working more closely together and that will be compounded by the need for all of us in postsecondary education to ally with other sources of strength—state agencies, such as the Department of Educational and Cultural Services.

Throughout all of these issues must run a common theme—that of trust—trust of each other, trust of ourselves and trust of the learning process itself.

Knowledge in and of itself is neutral. It can serve the tyrant and it can serve the saint. We are now living in the space age—but there are many kinds of space. There is the space between planets, the space between nations, the space that exists between bigotry and tolerance, and the space between ideas. In addition, this knowledge must assure that our ethics keep pace with our technology and politics.

The University of Maine is a growing institution, a living institution. As such, it is subject to the difficulties usual to the developing organism: it has had, has, and will have, its ailments. It will have sudden spurts of energy, then stand frustratingly, in a temporary torpor. But it will expand and prosper in the future as it has in the past. Within the unknown complexity which is our future, certain truths remain indelibly stamped on the institution which is the University of Maine.

One, we must not fear change. The courage of risk-taking is perhaps most salient to our challenge in a world characterized by Toffler’s image of “Future Shock”. As John Gardiner said so eloquently, “Creativity requires the freedom to consider unthinkable alternatives, to doubt the worth of cherished practices.”

And Max Webber’s words echo that: “The Challenge is to be courageous in our road building, to consider the unthinkable, to reach out for the impossible.”

Two, we must constantly reassess our missions and the demands of the people. If we lose touch with the trust of the people, if we become too self-propelling, too enamored of our strengths and successes, we will lose our usefulness to the state of Maine. A good University never attains its long-range goals in a dynamic society such as ours. Rather, it attains success only by virtue of its ability consistently to adjust its vision, reorder its priorities, and reassess
its effectiveness as a cornerstone institution in this society's development.

But in reassessment there must also be resilience. The University must be expected to meet the immediacy of contemporary demands by an effective and prompt development of some of its resources while retaining the vigorous ability to return to the traditions and ultimately to criticize itself even beyond the agitations of those from outside.

Three, we should respect the needs of every man and every woman who would seek us out. To do that, we must direct our educational thinking away from the lock-step traditional 17-to-24 age group syndrome, with scraps to the adult or continuing education as a kind of conscience-salving excuse. Education is for anybody at anytime. Drop in, drop out, come when you need us, leave when you don't. We must realize that "credit" and "sequence" and "prerequisite" often can be meaningless barriers to the person interested in investing personal resources in learning something the University has to offer. We must begin to view ourselves in a new role, characterized by our capability for extending learning in a more flexible, variable and exciting way.

Four, we must never cease our demand for excellence—in ourselves and in our mission. Our legacy is the present and future health of our world.

I believe that the University has a responsibility to educate all persons to their potential, to insure productive lives, promote humane relations and conditions and remain a bastion of strength for freedom in a way no other element in society can.

You, the citizens, have given us this responsibility. It is awesome to us sometimes, but we accept it.