



The 21st-Century University
October 22, 2007

Frederik Ohles, President, Nebraska Wesleyan University

Nebraska Wesleyan University has always been a university college and it's strong today because it has the flexibility of a university and the heart of a college. Fifty years ago many small, private collegiate institutions in this part of the country could aspire to be another Amherst, Wellesley, or Swarthmore. Not any more. That kind of dreaming is dangerous.

The day of the free-standing college that only offers bachelor's degrees to youngsters, especially the traditional liberal arts college with a tightly focused curriculum, is gone. Fifty years from now there will only be a few such institutions and they'll all be very wealthy. Most successful institutions will be complex universities that address multiple generations with blends of academic programs, partly traditional, partly innovative, partly preparation for productive work, partly preparation for a life worth living.

Nebraska Wesleyan is a private institution devoted to public service, proud of its roots in Lincoln, ready for the challenges of the 21st century. We educate students as young as 16 and as old as 76. We graduate students from our four-year residential program with equal numbers of majors in the liberal arts and in professional programs. We offer three vibrant, carefully selected master's degrees, in nursing, historical studies, and forensic science.

For all universities, whether tax-supported or independent, being ready to serve and thrive in this century means being (1) a generator, (2) a circulator, (3) a calculator, (4) a collaborator, (5) an incubator. Now a few thoughts about each of these five "-ators" of the 21st century university.

The Generator

The University is an energy source. It generates workforce leadership, intellectual leadership, cultural leadership, and community leadership, all of which is fuel for our national well-being. I'm sure you know that the political climate today in Washington, where I had the privilege of working for the past three years, is tightly focused on post-secondary education as workforce creation. And workforce creation happens most efficiently in two-year institutions. That's an excellent starting point, and we have very fine community colleges in Nebraska, starting with Southeast, and yet preparation for entry level jobs is not everything this country needs to compete globally.

The global economy requires people who can negotiate, with enough imagination to see well into the future, beyond what's in front of their eyes. The global economy requires people who are sympathetic to other cultures and other values, self-regulating, self-motivating. That's to say, university graduates with a strong foundation in the liberal arts who are ready to learn again and again in order to be successful in the five careers each of them will have between the ages of 25 and 75. The best universities are generators of opportunity for learners of all generations.

The Circulator

You don't get to where you need to go by staying where you are. Nebraska Wesleyan University is a place that takes students from inner-city Chicago and turns them into civic stalwarts of Lincoln, Nebraska; students from small towns, farms, and ranches and turns them into tomorrow's leaders in their home communities or into financial experts in Omaha, Kansas City, and New York. We're committed to becoming more diverse, sustaining our openness to students whose families have limited means to pay for an education, getting learners whose whole lives have been in Nebraska out into the world. In all of these ways our University circulates ideas, talent, human kindness and creativity, pride and respect.

Nebraska Wesleyan University cherishes its relationship, from the beginning, with Nebraska Methodists. Today Methodists are our third-largest group of students, nearly equal in number to Roman Catholics and Lutherans. They study and live with students whose

traditions are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or just plain skeptical. That's another form of circulating people and ideas that our University values.

The Calculator

Higher education, by nature, is not motivated by efficiency. It's a people-intensive enterprise. Producing a mind and a spirit for a lifetime will never be like making a precision weld or optimizing the path of a parcel from assembly line to destination. Still, there are bills to be paid, choices to be made about where to invest scarce resources, alternatives to be considered between fixing up fifty-year-old structures designed before fiber optics, wifi, and surge protectors or building something new.

At Nebraska Wesleyan we spend two-thirds of our operating budget on payroll and benefits. That's an investment in people for the sake of learning. We take 25 percent off the top of gross revenues to fund financial aid before we even have an operating budget. That's another investment in people for the sake of learning. We get 5 percent of our operating funds from endowment earnings and 3 percent from current gifts. The arithmetic is ugly: 90 percent of the resources we need come from students and their families. We must change those proportions and I'm working hard, with other people at Nebraska Wesleyan, to increase contributions from friends and alumni and ease the burden that rests on students and their families.

The Collaborator

Nebraska Wesleyan University is lucky to be in Lincoln. This city is a draw for students who have grown up elsewhere in Nebraska. We're lucky to be here in other ways too.

The University (when I say "the University," I mean mine—I don't think that word is trademarked, is it?) the University in University Place has wonderful partnerships going with Lincoln Public Schools, Mourning Hope, Lincoln's Symphony, NET, our neighborhood association, and the Lincoln Police Department. We're delighted by the many internships our students find with businesses and industries here. We're proud members of the Nebraska Independent Colleges Foundation, the Associated Independent Colleges and Universities of Nebraska, our athletic conference, and Division III of the NCAA. We benefit from professionals in many fields who teach courses for us, particularly on advanced topics where their experiences give students valuable insights. All in all, we're a gregarious university.

The Incubator

Creative people have always been found on campuses. Creativity is at the center of being a university. We are, after all, in the idea business. We create ideas and we apply those ideas to life and work.

Universities are an important source of innovation. The software product SPSS was born in a large university and tested in small colleges that reported their results back to the inventors and made it better. Cortisone came out of a liberal arts university's chemistry department.

At Nebraska Wesleyan we're working hard at our own incubator projects. You may have seen the article last spring about two of our physics majors with an invention that benefitted homeland security. A student club manages several hundred thousand dollars of the endowment. We're investing in Northeast Lincoln neighborhood spruce-ups because what looks good today will be valuable tomorrow. We have a stunning costume library with more than 40,000 items, available to community theatres and school programs at very reasonable rental fees. Our intramural and recreation programs are run by students with their own well-articulated staffing plan.

Summing up

There's no turning back the clock to some idyllic time when a small college could set itself apart from its surroundings, let ivy grow up the sides of the tower, and thrive on good will and good feelings.

Nebraska Wesleyan sends energetic graduates into the world, many into the economy of Nebraska, some into business, government, education, social service, and industry right here in Lincoln.

We aim to grow our diversity, including the geographic, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic diversity of our students, while maintaining our local roots.

We're in a business that requires quality. Our kind of quality will always be expensive. I'm determined to lead Nebraska Wesleyan in a way that's anything but shy about

how good we are and what a good investment we are for private dollars that serve the public good.

We're deeply intertwined with this city, with the church, and with our professional associations.

At Nebraska Wesleyan good ideas grow and new ideas find a hospitable, nurturing environment.

If you haven't been to campus lately, please stop by. I'll be delighted to welcome you to one of Nebraska's finest.