Becoming the World’s Most Powerful Learning Environment

An Invitation to Partnership

Inaugural Address by
Edward M. Hundert
President, Case Western Reserve University
January 30, 2003

Mr. Chairman; members of the Board; city, county, state and federal officials here today; faculty, students, staff, alumni, honored guests, and all friends of Case Western Reserve University, I accept this mantle of the presidency and the responsibility it represents with gratitude and reverence, and a profound optimism for the future of this great University.

Thank you all for those wonderful greetings and also for that introduction from my mentor and friend, Dan Federman.

It’s a source of personal and University pride to have representatives from so many great institutions of higher education here today. Thank you all for coming, and thank you again to those who participated in today’s colloquium on “Great Universities and their Cities.”

There are with us today many people who have been part of my life for a long time (including some since the day I was born) – family and friends who, as a true sign of the love we share, traveled to Cleveland in January to be here. I very much appreciate your sharing in this occasion.

There are many people to thank at a moment like this. First and foremost, I’d like to thank my wife Mary, who makes possible everything wonderful in my life, and our three amazing girls, Carol, Anna, and Laura, who are all here today.

When I think of how many people in this situation have only wished both of their parents had been there to share the moment, it’s with tremendous joy that I want to thank my parents, who are here today, for their love and support.

I’d like to thank all of my teachers and mentors – and also my students, who have, truth be told, taught me even more than the teachers.

I particularly want to thank all the faculty, students, staff, alumni, members of the board, and members of this community who have already become swept up in the excitement of what we’re building here together. I’d like to thank the University’s senior administrative team, the Deans and Vice Presidents, for their incredible work. And I want to thank by name my right hand, Ellen Caruso, whose dedication and professionalism inspire me every day.

In the spirit of today’s colloquium, let me add my thanks to our many institutional partners, the people who lead the hospitals, museums, institutes,
companies, and other agencies with whom we partner to achieve the remarkable potential described in the sessions throughout the day.

And thanks also for the incredible way the community is already getting behind these relationships with philanthropic support. Throughout our history this University has always been aided and encouraged by generous individuals, foundations, corporations, and city, county, state and federal government, and so I want to thank all our benefactors for their support.

But of all the groups I’ve mentioned, I especially want to highlight our faculty. My own adventure as a student in higher education took me through some great universities – Yale, Oxford, Harvard – but I can tell you that I would take our faculty hands down as colleagues, as friends, and as collaborators in research, education, and service to society. The vision I’m going to discuss today could not even be imagined, let alone brought to reality, if it were not for this incredible community of scholars.

And, finally, I’d like to thank all the previous leaders of this great University whose work created the remarkable foundation on which we now can build, especially Ag Pytte who is here today, and particularly Jim Wagner for his steadfastness and wisdom as Interim President during such a pivotal time in the University’s history. Jim’s willingness to partner with me in leadership is one of the key ingredients that will enable us to achieve the bold aspirations that I’m going to discuss here today.

I’d like this address to be remembered not as an investiture, but as an invitation – an invitation to partnership, an invitation to join in creating the most powerful learning environment in the world.

During the many dozens of lively sessions I’ve enjoyed over the last six months around campus and around the country, as we’ve all worked together on the new vision, mission and values statements you have in your program booklets, the most energizing experience for me has been the debate about whether we are bold enough to “strive to become the most powerful learning environment in the world.” Can we really dare to articulate such an ambitious goal for ourselves? What would it mean to become the most powerful learning environment in the world, and, equally important, how are we going to get there from here?

Well, that’s exactly what I’m here to talk about today.

We’re going to start with the remarkable assets we already have. And I’m mostly talking about people, amazing people! We have wonderful students, staff, and faculty – faculty who view their roles in teaching and in research as inseparable. We have a committed, passionate team of administrative leaders, a devoted staff, a dedicated board of trustees, and incredibly loyal alumni.

We also have the support of our elected officials, from city and local government to Columbus and Washington, along with many other civic and business leaders in Cleveland, Northeast Ohio, and beyond who are looking to partner with us in a bright future for this institution, for this region and for all of higher education.
We have our unique location here in University Circle, with more potential for productive partnerships in one square mile than any other campus in the nation. We have an exciting campus master plan to create a dynamic living-learning environment. And we already have dozens of top ranked academic programs across our eight schools that have earned national and international reputations for excellence and leadership.

So, we’re going to start with all those wonderful ingredients, and then we’re going to focus all of our collective talent, attention and resources on a vision – a vision that starts with a commitment to combine experiential learning with rigorous scholarship in undergraduate, graduate, and professional education to produce educated learners – and that includes students, faculty, and staff alike – educated learners who are awake to new possibilities.

The British author, H.G. Wells, not one to mince words, once described human civilization as a race between education and catastrophe. So, even as a research university with a unique and vital mission to produce new knowledge, we’re going to start with education.

In our statement of mission and values, we talk about striving to lead the nation as the research university where the challenges of creating new knowledge support the values of a liberal education. What better place to become an “educated learner” than at a research university, where the faculty are driven by that wonderful combination of curiosity and rigor in thinking that leads both to discovery and to learning!

What do these “educated learners” look like?

My favorite description of the educated learner is William Cronin’s essay entitled “Only Connect,” an E. M. Forster allusion Cronin chose because educated learners see connections that others don’t, connections that allow them to make sense of the world and stay awake to new possibilities.

When educated learners listen, they hear: they know how to pay attention. When educated leaders read, they understand, and not just when they read great works of literature, but when they read the newspaper – and not just the front page either, but when they read the arts section, the business section, the sports section, the science section, and the editorial page.

Educated learners also know how to talk, and they can talk with anyone. They can talk with a child or a nursing home resident. They can talk with a factory worker or a corporate president. And what’s more, educated learners are likely to talk to all those people because they are curious – they are curious about everything!

Educated learners can think: they can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems, and they respect rigor – not for its own sake but as a way of seeking truth. And seeking truth is important to educated learners because truth is what helps them get things done in the world, as they work passionately to leave the world a better place than they found it, because that’s what educated learners do.
I believe our best researchers are the people who are the most exacting listeners and readers, the people most curious about the world around them, the people who are most rigorous in their thinking, who use their knowledge to get things done in the world, and who follow Forster’s injunction to “only connect” in that almost mystical way that liberal learning gives people the power and the wisdom, the generosity, and the freedom to make connections. So I say what better place for students to get this kind of education than here at Case Western Reserve University, where they see it in their teachers every day? As Albert Schweitzer once said, “By example is not a way people learn behavior; it’s the only way.”

Education requires an ingenious balance of support and challenge. We can all remember times in our own education when we weren’t learning as much as we might because we had too much challenge and not enough support, and other times when it was because we had too much support and not enough challenge.

When we talk about experiential learning, we’re talking about confronting learners with big challenges, the challenges of messy, real world problems that ignore the boundaries of academic disciplines. Experiential learning is not about the students grasping the problems, but about the problems gripping the students, because in the end a good problem solves you, not the other way around. That is why we need to invest a new campus center and in our libraries and in new dormitories and in the best advising and mentoring program – to support our students (to ratchet up the support) if we’re going to offer a more experiential learning environment (which ratchets up the challenge).

This experiential learning idea is not about some passing fad. This is about the social, moral, context-dependent way the human brain evolved to learn! It shouldn’t be surprising that our art history department produces more graduates who go on to work in art museums than any other graduate program in the nation: our art history department is in the Cleveland Museum of Art – again, the power of partnership!

This broad view of experiential learning was, at the undergraduate level, the overarching theme of the report of the President’s Commission on Undergraduate Education and Life as well as the debate about our General Education Requirements – both faculty-driven efforts – that first caught my imagination during the presidential search process a year ago. A faculty prepared to take on these issues is surely a faculty already striving to create the most powerful learning environment in the world!

One of the outcomes of those debates and reports was the launch of a pilot curriculum involving 150 members of this year’s freshman class, a curriculum called “SAGES,” the Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship. I had the joy of co-teaching one of these freshman seminars, entitled “The Life of the Mind,” and I can guarantee you that Tuesday afternoons with my SAGES group were the highlight of every week of my first semester here.
Our students are amazing, and they come here asking some important questions that weren’t being asked by students a decade ago, starting with the fundamental question, “What will it take for me to make not merely a good living, but a good life?”

One of the most important parts of the SAGES pilot curriculum has been a commitment to extensive assessment and continuous improvement, which is the only way to produce successful curricular innovation. This is what our friends in industry call rapid prototyping: you’ll never get the innovation more than 75% right on the drawing board, so you have to create the prototype, as we’ve done for a first cohort of 150 students, and then commit to rigorous assessment and continuous improvement.

To make the process work, we must be bold. I believe we must expand SAGES over the next two years to include the entire entering class, so that it becomes the undergraduate curriculum of Case Western Reserve University. And this doesn’t mean just expanding the number of students in SAGES, but also emphasizing more fully its advising and mentoring components, its experiential and interdisciplinary components, and especially the integration of undergraduates in appropriate ways into the graduate and professional fabric of our University.

This integration of our undergraduate experience with our strengths in graduate and professional education represents our strongest secret weapon in striving to become the world’s most powerful learning environment. This has to be not an undergraduate initiative, but a higher education initiative. By finding new ways to draw our extraordinary graduate and professional faculty into our undergraduate experience, we can provide the depth and breadth of faculty-student contact that inevitably leads to those transformational senior capstone experiences in research laboratories and community clinics, in businesses and theater companies, and field work at NASA or in Tibet.

So, Jim Wagner and I plan to launch this spring a Presidential Fellows Program for General Education and Scholarship, faculty selected carefully to expand and enhance the SAGES curriculum. The program will make a national statement about our commitment to undergraduate education.

The selection committee will seek applications from the graduate and professional faculty and also from appropriate members of the community, professionals, scientists, and humanists who might lead specialized seminars. The program will also designate members of the faculties that currently teach undergraduates when the SAGES commitment would take them beyond the usual expectations of teaching, research, and service. Those who are selected as Presidential Fellows will receive a special stipend because of the commitment they will make. And I’m pleased to say that a group of our alumni has already pledged to begin to fund and ultimately endow the Presidential Fellows program starting in the next academic year.

To become the world’s most powerful learning environment over the next decade, we need to launch this program now and offer an enhanced SAGES curriculum.
for the entire entering class by 2005. Even with rigorous assessment, we may make mistakes along the way. But, I say, if we make mistakes, let it be because we were moving too fast and not because we were moving too slowly.

At the same time, we need to make an equally bold and immediate commitment to invest in the arts, humanities, and social sciences as important areas of scholarship and as an essential foundation for preparing morally and socially responsible life-long learners.

We have numerous areas of national and global leadership in the arts, humanities and social sciences right now, and we need to reinvest in those, just as we need to reinvest in our historical strengths in engineering and the life sciences to achieve national and global leadership.

This University, like many others, grew exponentially in the post-Sputnik era, when the federal government invested massively in the growth of high-tech, low-concept areas of research, in the belief that this would stabilize the balance of powers and make the world a safer place.

One of the most sobering lessons of September 11th is that – even as we continue to support ever more promising research in science, technology, and biomedicine – we have to increase our investment in the high-concept, low-tech areas of scholarship that really do hold the key to a more peaceful world.

In the last 30 years, where has the nation’s investment for the arts, humanities and social sciences come from? Overwhelmingly, it is from enlightened foundations and individual philanthropists, often through gifts to the discretionary funds that university presidents piece together.

Well, I’m pleased to announce that in my first six months, we have been the recipient of remarkable generosity, with nearly $5 million given to the University in unrestricted presidential initiative funds so far, including dollars committed personally from our trustees and from extraordinary commitments made by area foundations.

And I am very pleased to announce that I plan to invest all of these presidential initiative funds in the arts, humanities and social sciences. These funds will support and expand faculty and graduate student scholarship – in partnerships with other great institutions whenever possible – and support an expansion of the SAGES program as the curriculum for all undergraduate students over the next two years.

Some people will say: “Hey, this is Case Western Reserve! What about fuel cells and sensors, and bioengineering and neuroscience, and entrepreneurship and non-profit management, and all the things we’re known for?”

While I campaign every day for all those extraordinary programs wherever I go and have become extremely proud of every one of them, it is in a way because of our strengths in engineering, biomedicine, and professional education that we must invest in the arts, humanities, and social sciences! The modern revolution in science demands – indeed compels – our attention in new ways. As science illuminates the human
condition, many of the biggest new questions cannot be answered by science. These questions demand insights, as they always have, from the philosophers, historians, linguists and other creative thinkers that illuminate the essence of who we are as human beings.

But having said that, we must indeed also build on our existing strengths if we are to achieve our bold aspirations for national and global leadership. Our leading programs in engineering and biomedical research and medical anthropology, and astrophysics, and organizational behavior (just ranked number 1 in the world!) and in nursing, social work, medical, dental, and legal education, and others, have defined and will continue to define the leadership role that we can and must play. And so I challenge all of us, not only to increase our focus in achieving leadership in our areas of strength, but in connecting these areas to the rest of the University and to society at large.

Let me tell you a story. We recently announced the appointment of Ralph Horwitz as our new Dean of Medicine. He will inherit no fewer than six departments that already rank in the top 10 in the nation. Surely if there is a place where we should invest in our strengths to secure a leadership position, it is in building one of the greatest academic medical centers in the nation, which we are now working on together with all our extraordinary hospital partners.

During one of his visits, Ralph said, “Now, Ed, there’s one other thing we still haven’t talked about.” I’m now listening for some hideously resource-intensive new topic. Ralph continued, “If I come, I want us to become the nation’s most influential innovator in medical education and biomedical research, but I also want to lead an effort that will cut across all the inter-related areas of the University to redefine the social contract of American medicine with a renewed commitment to the public’s health.” Music to my ears!

I believe we are uniquely poised to redefine not just the social contract of American medicine, but the social contract of the American research university! This is why we convened today’s colloquium on partnerships with other institutions and agencies outside the walls of what must no longer be an ivory tower. This is why we’ve invested so heavily in our tech transfer program, and this is why we’re so proud of our Supplier Diversity Initiative. If we can indeed be the best university in the world at learning all the lessons from today’s colloquium, we will see more and more top faculty and students turning down offers from other great universities to come be part of this transformational learning community, and they will be redefining their fields of scholarship as they go.

What I’m talking about here is a different meaning of the term “interdisciplinary,” and I want to say a word about that. Our remarkable faculty is so naturally inclined to pursue scholarly work unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries that they challenge us to create an environment where this is supported rather than inhibited. This is one of the reasons I believe we need to become the most efficiently run
university in the world: to get our own self-imposed bureaucracies out of the way of our faculty who have shown us – now under the boundary-crossing symbol of the magnificent Peter B. Lewis Building – that they are ready to develop innovative national programs that combine entrepreneurship with engineering, or medicine with law, or history with non-profit management.

This is all easier said than done. The organization of almost all modern universities grew out of a 19th century, largely Western European understanding of the way the natural world, the social world, and the human mind are organized. The ultimate triumph of that understanding through the 20th century is that we now have learned so much that we know that nature, society, and the mind do not correspond to any of the cleavages represented by our schools and departments! So universities throughout the world are now coming to the brilliant conclusion that they need to refocus on interdisciplinary work. As my three daughters would say, “duh.”

The message of today’s colloquium is that we must strive not merely to work across the boundaries of departments within schools and schools within the University, but across the even more difficult but more powerful boundary between the University and the rest of the world. So, as we focus on building upon our historical strengths; as we invest in the arts, humanities, and social sciences; and as we create a new and engaging curriculum that combines experiential learning with rigorous scholarship, let us do so in ways that connect us with other great institutions through the kinds of partnerships very few other leading universities could even dream about developing.

What I have presented here today is a set of value propositions designed to take a great university to a new level. When I greeted the freshman class this year, I told them that my greatest hope was that they would spend their four years here talking about values, engaging in constant moral discourse. Indeed, educated learners love learning, but they love wisdom even more. In addition to their intellectual qualities, educated learners also practice humility, tolerance, generosity, and self-criticism, since they understand that knowledge is worthless, even dangerous, if not placed in the service of some larger ethical vision that renders it humane.

One of my favorite quotations comes from Mark Twain, who once said: “To be good is noble. To teach others to be good is nobler – and less trouble!” Our faculty, students, staff, alumni, trustees and others have generated an inspirational statement of institutional values, and I could speak for hours about what I heard during all those discussions: recurring themes of openness, and respect, and academic freedom – and other kinds of values as well, such as the value of entrepreneurship and responsible risk-taking, and the importance of accountability, which will become a major university theme over the coming year.

But I have to highlight one value in particular that I heard loud and clear. At this critical time in the history of our country, we must make a renewed commitment to the value of diversity in all its forms. We start, of course, with diversity among people,
respecting all human differences, whether gender, ethnicity, or our clear need to become even more international as a university. Then, we must support this increasingly diverse group of faculty, students, and staff by providing a corresponding diversity of programs and opportunities, respectful of different learning styles and diverse interests. But most of all, we must face down the unsupported assertion that diversity is at odds with excellence. In the increasingly competitive world of higher education, I believe that diversity is a fundamental requirement for excellence.

Before ending, I want to give a message to all our alumni who are here today and who are watching this on the webcast around the country and the world. All of you are key members of our University family – a fact reflected by the inclusion of a new Alumni House in our initiative for the heart of the campus. I am confident that we will succeed in achieving our ambitious dreams only with your support, and that is not just a plea for money. Yes, we need you as donors, but we also need you as ambassadors to potential students, as spokespersons to our external constituencies, and as advisors and planners – as the pride of this University, showing the nation and the world through your work and service every day the extraordinary value of a Case Western Reserve education. My goal is for this University to be an ever-increasing source of pride for you, and during my presidency I want your alma mater to be accessible to you and for your connections here to be meaningful and important.

The artist and philosopher Francoise Gilot once said, “There are two kinds of doors: there are doors in space and there are doors in time. Doors in space you have to look for. Doors in time you have to wait for.” I believe a door in time is opening today for Case Western Reserve University. When we say we want to educate our students to be forever awake to new possibilities, we mean they – like us – should be awake to these doors in time and be prepared to step through them with courage and confidence, since they don’t stay open long.

We know that progress always comes with two steps forward followed by one step back, and that, with the inherent cynicism that exists in all organizations, whenever you have a one step back, people will say, “You see, they weren’t serious. You see, it’s never going to happen.” But I know our vision for Case Western Reserve can and will happen, and today I’m inviting you to join with me as we take all these steps, in partnership, together.

Have I laid out some ambitious goals here? Yes. Do I believe we can achieve them? Absolutely. And why do I believe such a thing? Because I am continually inspired by the words of Margaret Mead, who once said, “Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” It’s the only thing that ever has!

Faculty, students, staff, alumni, trustees, leaders of our University and community: we are that group of thoughtful, committed people who have the privilege and the duty to transform our University, to transform our community, and to
transform all of higher education by transforming ourselves here at Case Western Reserve University.

I said this was an invitation, not an investiture, and so I invite each and every one of you to become my partner – to become the University’s partner – in making the vision a reality.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.