

**Keynote Address by West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee, Ed.D.  
at Investiture Ceremony for Old Dominion University President Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D.  
October 21, 2022  
Chartway Arena  
10:00 AM**

I am honored to be here today for the inauguration of Dr. Brian Hemphill as the ninth president of Old Dominion University.

I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Hemphill for a long time and working with him on several partnerships during his presidencies at West Virginia State University and Radford University.

I have met his gracious wife, Marisela Rosas Hemphill, and I have seen what a proud and devoted father he is to his children, Jada, Jordan and those adorable twins, Catalina and Cruz.

I know that Old Dominion has made the best possible choice in a leader. He made a huge impact at his previous institutions in such key areas as fundraising, retention and graduation rates, and enrollment.

Less tangibly — but more importantly — his leadership has brought renewed energy and pride to every institution he served.

Although Dr. Hemphill has solid experience as a university president, he is obviously taking on a new challenge as president of a larger Research 1 university such as Old Dominion.

And since I am here as a sort of “dean of university presidents” — I hope Dr. Hemphill will not mind if I start by sharing some wisdom.

As I will explain in a few minutes, this is a challenging time to lead a large university.

Nationally, potent winds are buffeting higher education, in the form of state budget cuts, soaring tuition costs, aging faculties and public doubts about the value of college.

Despite all that, my advice is NOT: “Run!”

Because I know Dr. Hemphill has the knowledge and skill to navigate today’s challenges.

Because, despite all the challenges, I still believe higher education’s best days are ahead of us.

And because leading a large, public university is just plain fun.

If there is one thing I have learned over 40 years in higher education, it is that humor is a wonderful tool for connecting with people — as long as you leave sensitive topics such as football out of it.

In that spirit, I offer you the top ten reasons why leading a large public university is awesome.

Free parking.

You get to attend every single Faculty Senate meeting.

Do you know how much the average person would give for that opportunity?

You get to live in a house with a name. “Jacobson House” sounds so much classier than just an address, doesn’t it?

As Dr. Hemphill knows, a college president who wears bow ties appears intellectual and quirky — compared to an average guy wearing bow ties who looks like an aging hipster.

By the way, Brian, I can probably share some of my blue bow ties, since West Virginia University blue can pass for Monarch blue.

As president, you are the most popular guy on campus — at least I am on days when a blizzard rolls through and I get to declare a snow day.

Your weather may vary in Norfolk.

If you are nice to him, Big Blue might let you try on his crown.

Admittedly, though, the WVU Mountaineer will not let me touch the musket.

You get to reach out to people on social media — and Dr. Hemphill has access to a better marketing tool than he may know: Adorable young twins.

Nothing gets me a better reaction on Facebook than my twin granddaughters.

If my daughter had not graciously brought them into the world, I would have had to get a corgi.

At football and basketball games, people will praise your “ice cream and cake” dance — no matter how ridiculous it is.

Your autograph is in high demand — at least on diplomas at graduation.

And, finally, when you are president, the media hangs on every word you say. Trust me:

There is no possible downside to this whatsoever.

The truth is, as a university president, you do command attention.

You have the responsibility to set the tone from the top on campus, and to make sure that the university vision and values are not just words on a page but something every community lives every day.

As a young president, I had the naïve expectation that this would happen automatically.

But I learned that our role as leaders is to make things right before they go wrong, to eliminate the possibility of wrong occurring, to nurture and maintain a culture that promotes excellence, creative thinking and respect for others.

Leading means engaging your whole campus in asking the important questions.

For what purpose are we here?

For what purpose do we conduct research?

For what purpose do we teach?

For what purpose do we raise funds and construct shiny new buildings and work hard to attract students?

If it is to chase acclaim or a higher slot in some arbitrary ranking, we do it for the wrong reasons.

If we teach because it is what our contracts say we must do, we are here for the wrong reasons.

If we conduct research without thinking of how it can improve and make an impact on people's lives, we are here for the wrong reasons.

Because the real reason we are all here is to launch the ideas that will make our world a better place.

We live in an era where ideas are the catalysts of all progress.

And that means that education has never been more vital.

Education expands individual opportunity, stimulates the economy and creates jobs.

But it does more than that: It makes us free.

And it opens the American dream to every one of us, forever.

That is the message that a university president must share, tirelessly.

Because this is an age of doubt.

People have doubts about the economy.

They have doubts about the future. They have doubts about our political process — and, after what we have seen in recent years, who can blame them?

Some people even doubt higher education.

For years, few questioned the value of a degree in building a successful life.

As costs have soared nationwide, that value has come into question.

In a Pew Research Center survey, only about half of Americans think universities are having a positive effect on society.

Similarly, only half believe a college education's value outweighs its cost, according to a USA Today poll.

Pandemic-related challenges have spurred what some call "the Great Dropout," with more than four million students leaving higher education – over one million left last year alone.

If these trends continue, our country is in danger of losing its status as the worldwide innovation leader.

We have fallen to 16th place internationally in the percentage of young adults with college degrees.

Two decades ago, we ranked second.

A lot of that loss comes from the difficulty we have supporting students from college enrollment to college graduation.

The national six-year graduation rate is 59 percent.

If even half of those who drop out went on to graduate, our country would reign supreme once again in educational attainment.

Our country also ranks only 24th among developed nations for government funding of university research as a share of gross domestic product.

Meanwhile, the working world we are preparing students to enter has changing expectations.

And among faculty members, many campuses are plagued by what I call the tyranny of the gerontocracy — a strange concept, I know, coming from a person whose 75th birthday is in the rearview mirror.

But our faculties are aging more rapidly than other sectors.

More than a third are 55 or older, compared to 23 percent in the overall workforce.

It is great that we are able to contribute as long as possible. But this situation is making it hard for young faculty members to advance in academia — and the energy and new ideas young faculty bring to our profession is just as valuable as the experience and wisdom that older faculty provide.

And all this is taking place as states continue to cut budgets for colleges and universities — although I know Virginia has been more forward-thinking than some states about investing in higher education.

These are concerning statistics and perceptions, and university presidents grapple with them every day.

But my long experience allows me to see beyond the immediate challenges.

I see the possibilities for our public universities.

I see the enormous potential in our students and the commitment of our faculty and staff who teach and guide them.

I observe the extraordinary research we conduct and the health care we deliver.

I am fortunate to bear witness daily to the myriad way public universities lift our communities.

American higher education is a powerful collective transforming potential into real solutions.

Dr. Hemphill will not run away from today's challenges because he is a great leader.

And he believes, as I do, that moments of great challenge are moments of greatest opportunity.

What this moment demands is simply the best of us.

It demands that colleges and universities exercise their power as the central force in the creation of progress.

University presidents must think hard about the needs in their neighborhoods and in cities and villages around the world.

They must have the vision to re-imagine what education can and should look like in the 21st century.

And then have the will to make that historic change happen.

They must make real, strategic decisions about academic direction, about programs for investment and disinvestment.

They must learn to say the word "no," a word rarely used in higher education.

They must be problem-solvers, collaborators, innovators and risk-takers.

Above all, presidents must be advocates for the value of higher learning.

When critics question the value of a degree, we must make the reality clear.

It is more important than ever to possess the knowledge and skills acquired on a college campus.

Bachelor's degree holders are half as likely to be unemployed than those with a high school diploma and make \$1.2 million more, on average, throughout their lives.

Having an educated populace is also more important to our nation's future than ever before.

Improving science, technology, engineering and math education is especially critical to maintaining America's traditional world leadership in innovation.

But amid the push for STEM, we as presidents must also reinforce the value of the arts in this changing world.

The arts, quite simply, nourish the soul.

They make our lives richer, more compassionate, more fulfilled. They are, in fact, what make us human.

We must never forget that our schools – all types and all levels – are where the mind and the imagination flourish.

We are repositories of human achievement, sanctuaries for the human spirit, and incubators of human aspiration.

As I tell my community at West Virginia University, we must be more than an institution of higher learning — we are an institution of higher purpose.

Last year, I introduced purpose as one of our work's pillars, standing alongside education, health care and prosperity.

In this important moment, in these challenging times, public universities must go beyond the answers we have always given and embrace the unique purpose we fill.

We must see our fellow institutions as allies, not opponents.

There is infinite room in American higher education for improvement, expansion and collaboration.

We must reach out, as never before, to others of good will and common intent.

We must initiate wholly new kinds of collaborations that extend our missions more completely and effectively to every corner of our nation and beyond.

We must liberate energies imprisoned by long-held habits, and habits of mind.

I strongly believe that freedom begets human creativity and goodwill.

Making our own choices empowers us to take risks, to innovate, to fail — and to get up and try again.

My experience working with Dr. Hemphill has shown me that he has the vision to navigate all of today's challenges, and a passion for higher education that will help Old Dominion thrive as never before.

He has the empathy to connect with students and understand their needs.

At his previous institutions, he did not camp out in his office.

He was out and about constantly talking to students, faculty, staff and alumni.

The student body president at West Virginia State, who joined him for lunch once a month, said: "I know how lucky I am.

Whenever I talk to other student government people at conferences, they're always like: 'He did what?'"

"Our president would never do that."

Dr. Hemphill also has the fundraising acumen to generate new investments on campus; investments in scholarships to help students fulfill their dreams; investments in professorships and chairs and research funds to recruit and retain the best possible faculty; and investments in facilities to meet today's learning needs.

He also has a proven track record for creating partnerships that strengthen the University.

In West Virginia, he forged several between West Virginia State and larger public universities, including my own.

And Dr. Hemphill also has the wisdom to promote the free and open discussion that is the cornerstone of a university.

I know Dr. Hemphill believes in today's students.

And he knows that a university's role is not to make people comfortable; it is to make them think.

Because, despite all the challenges we face and the doubts Americans harbor, our nation still looks to higher education for solutions.

They look to us because of the uniquely powerful role that education has played in America to fulfill our country's founding ideal of a meritocracy based on ability and action, to sustain our democracy through an informed citizenry, and to right the wrongs of bigotry and oppression.

Dr. Hemphill knows the true purpose of public higher education is to help people live the American dream and to help our world advance beyond our wildest dreams.

And I know he will live that truth every day.

Congratulations, Dr. Hemphill, on becoming Old Dominion University's ninth president.