

**Keynote Remarks to the
Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education
Legislative Forum
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As a member of the Board of Regents for the Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical Colleges, let me first thank you, Chancellor Johnson, for your leadership of our Oklahoma system of higher education. Under your stewardship, higher education in Oklahoma has fared exceptionally well. Recently, I read about a well known public institution of higher education in another state, whose state funding in the last five years has dropped from an annual appropriation of \$31 million in 2008 to \$13 million in 2013. To be sure, higher education in Oklahoma has experienced difficult cuts in state appropriations. But nothing like that happened here, thanks to your leadership and the leadership of Governor Fallin, former Governor Henry, Speaker Shannon, President Bingman, and so many other

legislative and state leaders.

The A&M Regents govern five institutions – Oklahoma State University, Langston University, Oklahoma Panhandle State University, Connors State College and Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. Our institutions are blessed with excellent leadership. President Burns Hargis, President Kent Smith, President David Bryant, President Tim Faltyn and President Jeff Hale all do great work. They and their staffs make our jobs as regents much easier.

As someone who majored in history and is a lifelong student of history, I am mindful that just 106 years ago this week, Oklahoma became the 46th state to enter the Union. Oklahoma is a relatively young state. But from the outset, Oklahomans made a strong commitment to higher education. It's interesting to note that the Enabling Act of 1906, under which the Oklahoma Constitution was adopted and approved for

statehood, specifically discussed education, doing so in 5 of its 22 sections.

This is significant because those of us who love Oklahoma know that the future of our state is inextricably intertwined with higher education. Higher education is transformational. A higher education changes lives. It's hard for me to imagine anything we do as a society that is more important than higher education.

As I suspect is true of most of you, I grew up in an age when the importance of obtaining a higher education was a given. Virtually everyone knew that getting a college degree was important. No one had to talk about the value of attending college; we simply assumed that obtaining a college education was critical to a successful career.

To be sure, a higher education was out of reach for many. Over the years, our society has tried to change that, and Oklahoma's Promise, which Chancellor Johnson mentioned, has

done a great job of making higher education widely accessible in our state.

A simple review of the numbers shows the value of higher education. Chancellor Johnson showed us statistics that demonstrate that obtaining a college degree virtually doubles a person's annual and lifetime incomes and halves the person's likelihood of being unemployed.

We know intuitively that higher education makes a huge difference. And the numbers bear that out.

Yet, in some quarters today, one hears grumblings about public support for higher education. Some today doubt the value of a higher education. To put it bluntly, in the public arena, higher education is under attack. Some even want to drastically cut our support of higher education.

Thank goodness our Governor and legislative leaders are committed to making Oklahoma's system of higher education

the best it can be. They understand the value of higher education, and they have been willing to fight the necessary battles to keep higher education strong in Oklahoma.

As a member of the governing board of Oklahoma's two land grant institutions, let me point to the example of our greatest president, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln is best known for his role in preserving the Union and freeing the slaves. But let's not forget what Lincoln meant to public higher education.

A major plank in Lincoln's platform was to dramatically expand access to higher education. And in 1862, as the battles of the Peninsular Campaign raged on, the Morrill Act, which enabled the creation of land grant institutions, became law. Because of this law, higher education, previously restricted almost exclusively to the wealthy, became much more broadly available.

Many think of land grant schools as focusing only on

agricultural and mechanical arts. To be sure, Oklahoma State University and Langston University, Oklahoma's two land grant schools, have excellent programs in those fields. And maintaining and expanding excellence in agriculture, engineering and the various STEM programs must remain a priority.

But the Morrill Act doesn't stop there. It also demands that we "promote the liberal and practical education" of our citizens. What was true in 1862 is perhaps even more important today. We need to provide educational opportunities for our citizens to succeed in a rapidly changing world. And that includes an education in the arts and humanities.

Well, nothing succeeds like success; and the land grant mission has certainly succeeded. Now I realize that most of Oklahoma's public colleges and universities are not, technically speaking, land grant institutions. But from what I have observed,

they tend to embrace a similar mission.

We've all heard statistics showing that, by the time this semester's freshmen class graduates, employers' needs will have changed. But many things never change. The need for critical thinking does not change. The need to speak and to write English well does not change. The need to understand numbers and math does not change. The need to know and appreciate our culture and our heritage does not change.

Let's continue to provide a broad, high quality higher education that meets the demands of an ever changing business world and provides a well-rounded background for success. Business will appreciate it. Students will appreciate it. And the citizens of Oklahoma will appreciate it.

Chancellor Johnson, I thank you and I thank everyone else who is present today for what all of you do to enhance higher education in Oklahoma.