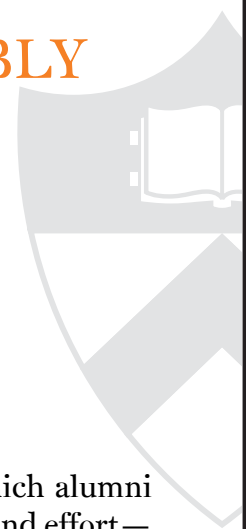


VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP ASSEMBLY

Princeton Volunteer Leadership Assembly

Friday, October 24, 2008

Keynote Address—Neil L. Rudenstine



Good evening.

I'm very happy to be with you to talk for a few minutes about the ways in which alumni involvement in the university—and your willingness to volunteer so much time and effort—are critical to everything that Princeton undertakes. And although the title of these remarks refers to the “modern university,” I also will also say something about the “historical” university—especially *this* university.

I want to begin by making one simple statement based on my own experience during the past four decades: regardless of how much you value—or try to assess—the importance of alumni dedication and continuous commitment to helping the university, I can promise you that even the highest of your estimates will be hopelessly inadequate. Even with razor-sharp intelligence, unrivalled perceptiveness, and an unsurpassable Princeton education, you cannot really understand or measure how essential you are to the continued vitality and pervasive spirit of unity that makes Princeton unique in higher education.

It is no exaggeration to say that, without you—and so many other alumni who are not with us this evening—the university would literally, and swiftly, begin to cease to function—or to function, if at all, as far less than a pale shadow of itself.

I have been wondering how I could dramatize this point persuasively and vividly so as not to be painfully obvious or relentlessly dull. So I have imagined what would happen if all of you and others did not participate very much, or even at all.

I could quickly mention two or three dozen critical university activities that would immediately be affected if you failed to show up for work on time tomorrow morning—or any number of other mornings and days in the future.

Without alumni volunteers and very strong participation, we would not have, for instance, a Board of Trustees. No Brent Henry, Bob Murley, Nancy Peretsmon, Rajiv and others. And no extraordinary leader of the Trustees, like Steve Oxman, who must devote at least half of his time to University affairs.

Now, the lack of a Board of Trustees might, perhaps, be viewed as an oversight or mere inadvertence. Or we could think of it as an imaginative if also unconventional experiment in the exercise of fiduciary responsibility. But I'm inclined to think that it would be seen and felt to be essentially catastrophic—and, preferably, something to be avoided if at all possible.

Academic administration and governance were once described as trying to run the circus from inside the monkey cage. Well, without a Board of Trustees consisting of alumni volunteers, the circus would soon become a mere menagerie, and there would obviously be very little acumen and no wisdom left inside the monkey cage. Even though President Tilghman and her administrative team are consummate wizards, I wonder whether even they could cope in the midst of the vast void that remained.

If we press further, what if you and the rest of our alumni really did decide to stay home in your spare time, in order to read War and Peace, or Vanity Fair, or Beowulf, then:

How would our admirable admission staff of only 25 or 30 members manage to visit the countless number of schools scattered throughout every state in the Union, as well as those in our far-flung empire abroad—identifying and encouraging the most talented students, everywhere, to attend Princeton? Without our alumni network of Schools and Scholarship volunteers, the Admissions Office would need, I would guess, at least 300 or 400 or even more staff—an army of innumerable Lilliputians, entangled in its own logistical complexities, and then depressed by its increasing incapacity to function.

Then, remember, there would be no Alumni Clubs with their officers and leaders of all club activities; no class secretaries to help keep Princeton friends and acquaintances in touch with one another; no departmental or other Advisory Councils; no one to organize and produce Reunions or harness the P-Rade; no more apoplectic letters dashed off to a non-existent Princeton Alumni Weekly; and of course no class agents and others to sustain the steady flow of gifts to Annual Giving or Fundraising Campaigns, year after year after year.

On the other hand, if we now step back and consider what we actually do possess in terms of alumni volunteers and their continuous participation, the sum total represents nothing less than a national and international phalanx of Princetonian conquistadors and ambassadors who help the University to pursue and realize its fundamental purposes, in countless visible and invisible ways.

How and why does this happen? It's certainly not common in the rest of the world, or automatic, or inevitable. Indeed, anything but so. Why it is that so many of our graduates have been prepared to give so much and so often, for apparently so little in return? Clearly, there are many different reasons, but one of them certainly had to do with the fact that, from our very early beginnings, there were important tasks to be done—land to be acquired, buildings to be built, and major problems that required serious attention and concrete solutions.

And interestingly, our founders and earliest alumni seem to have taken for granted the fact that all of this very practical work simply had to be done—and therefore would be done.

In addition, there were related, but less practical reasons for our founders, graduates and friends to become involved: reasons of the spirit that concerned our aspirations and ideals—our desire to create something significant that would embody a vision of education at the very highest level possible. This motivation—or rather, these motive powers have inspired

generations of Princetonians to build a college and university that would be unsurpassed in its academic excellence, its humane values, and in the very design and symbolic imagery and beauty of the campus.

If there were strong practical and idealistic reasons to stimulate alumni involvement in Princeton as early as even the 1760s, there were also elements of luck that played a role in what occurred. For example, our founders were familiar with the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, and those institutions were of course originally created by private endowment gifts, and were not—as happened later—supported by government funds. So it was that higher education in America began and remained a private enterprise at Princeton and a number of other institutions, and this concept of “self-help” had—and continues to have—profound implications beyond what anyone could possibly have imagined in the 17th and 18th centuries.

We were also lucky in other ways. Our first Board of Governors or Trustees consisted of—yes, it is true—nine graduates of Yale, four Harvard men, and three free-agent Presbyterian schoolmasters. Nonetheless, this idiosyncratic group somehow stumbled its way into composing a Charter that declared our own college to be a non-sectarian institution dedicated, not only to religious studies, but to the entire range of all the liberal arts and sciences. This was a more miraculous and revolutionary decision than it might seem, because our founders certainly expected us to be a training ground for Presbyterian ministers and even Bishops. But the Charter nonetheless gave the Trustees power to admit students who were then called—somewhat dubiously—“members of the laity”: that is, students who might prefer, after graduation, to study medicine or law, or to start businesses, or enter public life and service, and therefore to become leaders of society in any number of different professions.

Clearly, this and other decisions—had immediate powerful effects. They meant that—for all practical purposes—we were very much on our own, and would have to make our way as a small and fragile institution in a town that barely existed.

Inevitably, there were many dark and disconsolate days in the early years, when the college was nearly bankrupt and even very small amounts of money could hardly be raised. At times, only a handful of new students—just four or five—enrolled in the college; and there were so few faculty—only two or three—that we could hardly teach the number of courses that we actually required. Within the second grim decade of the college’s existence, four promising presidents died in succession, either from sudden illnesses, or the sheer burden of over work.

By the same token, however, if we were on our own, that also meant that we were independent, and free to chart our own course. We could decide what to teach and whom to hire, and—more generally—how to conduct our affairs. We could also, if required, withstand outside political, religious or other pressures. And, in spite of hard times, we discovered that we could actually attract an increasing number of gifts: some of them were in actual pounds sterling, often from totally unexpected sources; and other donations were charming if also perplexing, such as large number of acres of land nowhere near Princeton—and actually in a sufficiently unsurveyed part of the country that made it hard to know

precisely which acres were really intended. We also received a great deal of produce from a generous person in Georgia—but hiring a boat to sail down to retrieve the the gift, and then to bring it back (quite apart from selling it) must have resulted in final net loss, however well intentioned. As one grateful but weary President described this and other situations, he said—in effect—the more that the College appeared to prosper, the poorer it became.

Nevertheless, as increasing numbers of alumni volunteers and friends began to be involved, something unpredicted, somewhat surprising, but also perfectly natural happened: our forerunners—and later we—felt more and more that the college was, in one important way, ours: not ours in any sense to “own,” but ours to keep in trust: to nurture, to help shepherd, and to play a role in shaping it—in ways that would inevitably lead us to feel identified with it, to feel part of it, and to join the growing association of alumni companions who cared affectionately for what was at first a struggling vulnerable institution; then, an increasingly resilient and vital college; and then finally an extremely formidable university.

I want to mention just one more event from our history, and that concerns John Witherspoon, who served as Princeton’s President from 1767 to 1784, a tenure of 17 years. Not only did he bring with him from Scotland many of the philosophical and educational ideas of the Enlightenment—broadening the curriculum, fostering science as a serious subject, and establishing Princeton as a leading educational institution in the liberal arts—but he also embodied, by his own example, an ideal of extraordinary public service. He was asked to be a member of the first Continental Congress, and from 1776 to 1784 he traveled—regularly—back and forth between Princeton and Philadelphia in order to carry out his respective duties in each place. During the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, and then afterward, he ignited the already fever-pitch patriotic fire of his Princeton students, and when the senior class of 1783 graduated, there were—sitting on the Commencement platform—George Washington, seven signers of the Declaration of Independence (including Witherspoon), the French Ambassador, eleven future signers of the United States Constitution, and many members of the Continental Congress.

In other words, the idea and the literal embodiment of public service—of volunteering for the good of others—was strongly imprinted on the very nature of Princeton less than three decades after its founding. In fact, so powerful were the effects, that in several years following 1783, an average of just two graduates annually entered the ministry, while a total of 34 entered public life—including James Madison and Aaron Burr, both of whom were students of Witherspoon.

I wanted to mention this part of our history, especially to remind us of Witherspoon’s lasting impact, but also to recall that when Woodrow Wilson and his successors fostered the concept of education, not only for the sake of learning, but also for the purpose of service, they had something powerful—and still alive in memory—to look back upon. There was, in effect, an already established tradition, and it has become even stranger during the past century.

Equally important, Princeton has long stressed the fact that service can come in many forms—that it need not be something self-evidently remarkable, or widely recognized and

acclaimed. Indeed, it hardly ever is. It can mean the steady and strong focus of trained intelligence, constant care, and dedication to many aspects of our lives—whether large or small—in an effort to leave even a few things in our world somewhat better off than they otherwise would have been.

In other words, it can mean exactly what all of you are doing right now, at this conference and gathering: a purely voluntary offering of something exceptionally valuable—human talent and effort—to something that is also extraordinary and indeed irreplaceable in value—Princeton University. As I said earlier in this talk, without your presence and constant willingness to help—whether tonight or on innumerable other occasions—it is hard to imagine that there could really—literally—be a university such as Princeton.

I want to draw to a close by telling you about one single university gift that was more than large—it was, you might say, awesome. The donor, James—let’s simply call him that—was in his mid-eighties, and was deciding how to dispose of his considerable estate. I happened to be there, but the story has nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the donor and his perspective on life.

He was at his desk, and had a large sheet of paper with the names of what seemed to be 30 or more organizations on it. After a few minutes, he began to cross off one organization after another: not quickly, but steadily, and in no particular order, until there were only three or four left standing. “I want to give something to these few,” he said, “but almost everything will go to this one,” and he drew a line under the word “university.”

“James,” I said, “I can’t really see any pattern in your choices. There are completely different kinds of organizations on your list, and I simply don’t understand the rationale behind what you have done.” Perhaps you know the statement that was once made by someone concerning a very bright friend: “He has a brilliant mind—until he makes it up”? Well, I knew from experience that James had a brilliant mind even after he made it up, and he said in reply to me, in effect: “I have been trying to decide which of these organizations are not only very fine, and play an important role in our society, but are also likely to still be here, equally if not even more important, two or three hundred years from now. And I’m betting,” he said, “on the university.”

If we reflect for a moment, there are very few institutions in life—indeed, scarcely any—that have already lasted for centuries, and that are likely to last equally far into the future; that are still rooted in the very same place, with a great many of the same familiar buildings and pathways and vistas—with courtyards where we ourselves have lived during several intense, impressionable, sometimes difficult but also exhilarating years; where friendships have been formed that can last for decades, and where we are invited to have a life-long association with a singular place that will not move away, and will not stray or wander from its central purposes.

Given the rapid pace at which the landscapes and cityscapes of our lives are now transformed before our eyes, I think it is both a paradox and something of a marvel that Princeton can remain essentially unchanged, familiar, and familial—while it simultaneously presses forward at great speed in its research to the edge—and beyond—of what is known: to what is new

and pioneering in the quest for truths that are exciting and significant in themselves; that challenge our students to reach further and more deeply in their studies; and that are immensely useful—in a growing number of ways—to our society.

This union of what is deeply familiar, and what is instantaneously new—of constancy over time, and inventiveness in the here and now—is something that we re-discover whenever we come back to Princeton, and it is surely one of the most important reasons why we not only return, but are also ready and willing to be of service to it.

Given the outstanding leadership of our President, Shirley Tilghman—who is already widely regarded as a national leader in higher education—we can be certain that Princeton will be superbly guided by her and her colleagues in the years ahead. Then, as long as we ourselves continue to do our part on this journey, there is every reason to expect that Princeton will not only flourish in the years and decades immediately ahead, but also for at least another two or three centuries to come