

## **THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY'S IDENTITY CRISIS: MISSION OR MIRROR?**

Inauguration Address  
Oklahoma Baptist University  
Dr. David Whitlock, President  
by  
Bob R. Agee  
President Emeritus  
Oklahoma Baptist University  
May 1, 2009

Dr. Whitlock, trustees, faculty, staff, students and friends of Oklahoma Baptist University, it is a genuine pleasure to be a part of this historic occasion. Trustees, you have done extremely well in bringing a man of David Whitlock's experience, preparation, commitments and ability to fill the presidency at this great institution. I have worked with this man and can testify to the fact that he is one of the most outstanding people I have known. Faculty, he has stood where you stand and walked where you are walking and has been effective in every institution he has served. He will love this institution and you and will bring a wisdom and grace to the office that will help you dream noble and challenging dreams. He will respect you and walk alongside you with a wisdom that flows both from his personal spiritual pilgrimage and the depth of his professional preparation. You are most blessed and fortunate to have him as your president.

On this special day, I'd like to offer a word of counsel to you, Dr. Whitlock, as an older brother in the high calling to work in Christian higher education. I'd then like to offer a word of challenge to the trustees, faculty, staff and students of OBU.

Over the past decade and a half, it's been my privilege to speak at a number of presidential inaugurations. I've been a student of higher education leadership and administration for almost forty years and have worked with some of the finest presidents and executive staff

members to be found anywhere. From my observations, Dr. Whitlock and Dana, I would be remiss if I didn't sound some words of warning to you. Actually, I shared some of these same words of warning at the inauguration of Dr. Pat Taylor almost 13 years ago. He took me seriously and I hope you will too.

(1). Take your work seriously but don't take yourselves so seriously that you try to become something you're not. Many an executive has become so enamored with his or her position that they try to create an aura of superiority around themselves and demand that all of life treat them with a certain amount of deference. The most effective leaders are those who tend to consider themselves servants to a larger mission and purpose, who live and work at being first in rank among equals, and who concentrate on people-building while they build organizations. As I've watched you two, you give the impressions that you are genuine, real and approachable. Don't let the new position you hold take that away from you. Remember that, in the final analysis, a college president is simply someone who lives in someone else's house, drives a borrowed car, and begs for a living.

(2). Remember that Oklahoma Baptist University's legacy of greatness and effectiveness does not begin with you. This great institution has been led by quality presidents, each of whom has made significant contributions to bring the university to where it is today. Many highly qualified faculty and staff have devoted themselves to educating the students whom God sent here and they have done so at great financial and personal sacrifice. I deeply regret that you will not have the privilege of working alongside faculty members like Drs. Shirley Jones, Laura Crouch, Jim Hurley, Jimmy Russell, Bill

Mitchell, Max Brattin, and a host of other greats who have led the classrooms of this great place. At the end of the day, the greatness of the institution is shaped by those who teach just as much if not more so than by those who lead the administration of the place. Numbered among OBU's alumni and former students are outstanding leaders and excellent citizens who have caused the larger world to respect and appreciate the fine work of those who have gone before. God has led you here to contribute to that great legacy - to take this fine university through the next decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with renewed energy and enthusiasm for our task and with a new vision of significance.

(3). Remember that the work we do and the mission we embrace is far larger and more significant than that reflected by the rank and file institutions of higher education. OBU does not exist to be just like other colleges or universities in America. If you are content to be a small imitation of a state university with a few assorted religious activities, you have missed the point of why Oklahoma Baptists operate this great institution. What we attempt to do is more important for the present and the future of this noble experiment called democracy than we have ever been. We are a part of the larger work of the Kingdom of God in the world and our work and future hinges on the integrity with which we go about our task. Don't ever forget that and you will be amazed at the additional energy and motivation that will generate.

**Now a word of challenge to trustees, faculty, staff and students of OBU today.**

For several decades now colleges and universities in the United States have been

struggling with an identity crisis. Administrations, faculties, and student bodies have had to determine whether the university will be an institution on mission or will be simply a mirror of contemporary society. Unfortunately, even tragically, most institutions have made the wrong decision.

Virtually every report published in the last twenty-five years that attempted to analyze the quality of work being done by the American educational system has been less than kind. Lawmakers and educational analysts have been persistently critical of the fact that our schools are frequently turning out graduates who cannot compete with students and graduates from other countries. One study revealed that when comparing the math and science skills of American students in the ninth grade with students from fifteen other industrialized nations of the world, American students finished dead last. Criticism of the quality of academics in the nation's elementary, secondary, and collegiate institutions has been complicated even more by news reports of the rising crime rate on campuses; the increasing use of drugs and alcohol among student populations; increasing incidence of immorality and disorder among campus constituencies; and reports of improper behavior by college administrators, faculty members, and students. Can it be that colleges and universities and possibly even the elementary and secondary schools of our land would have to admit to being mere mirrors of the basest levels of contemporary society rather than being institutions committed to a clear and compelling mission?

**What does a mirror institution look like?** A college or university that simply mirrors the lowest common denominator in contemporary society is one where a value-free or value-neutral mentality prevails within the academic program and throughout campus life. A mirror university is one where institutional and constituent priorities accentuate and glorify everything

BUT an emphasis on academic excellence, the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of the intellect and the development of character. Society in general has sought to make the abnormal, the deviate, the perverse, and the immoral, acceptable normative behavior. A mirror college or university simply participates in and at times even provides the articulate rationales for making immoral unethical, indecent behavior the accepted norm.

The mirror institution sets its standards low; keeps its expectations of students, faculty and staff at a minimum level; and tolerates behavior and performance that is much less than the noblest and best of society's heritage. There are forces afoot which have attempted to insist that there are no moral absolutes, no universal standards of right or wrong, and a frightening tolerance of shoddy inferior products and performance. Educated and uneducated alike want to operate from the mindset that the individual is not accountable to anyone for anything that he or she wants to do. John Gardner so aptly points out that a society that tolerates shoddiness and inferior quality in any area of life is in trouble. He contends that it is just as wrong to tolerate shoddy plumbing as it is to tolerate shoddy philosophy. The society that does will likely find itself, he points out, at a juncture where neither its pipes nor its ideas will hold water.

**But what is a mission institution like?** A college or university on mission is one whose statement of mission and purpose sets forth the aspiration to educate and nurture the best that can be found within the human mind and the human spirit. A mission university is one whose curriculum is carefully thought through and designed to plot a course in intellectual and spiritual development with a stated desire to inspire an interest in and desire for a higher level of thinking and living. That institution operating out of a strong clear sense of mission is one whose faculty and administration are committed to a set of goals which make terms like "excellence" and "quality" more than mere rhetoric. The mission university is one where

students choose to go because of the quality of education offered, because of the kind of atmosphere provided, and because of what the institution stands for. There are rules and regulations at a mission university that focus on emphasizing standards of morality and ethics which are based on more than merely the opinions of contemporary society. The mission institution tends to operate with a keen sense of heritage and takes seriously its place in preparing men and women who will care about their world and who will be captured by talk of excellence and quality. At a mission university there are academic standards and instruction is offered in a setting that demands time and discipline and study and preparation in order to get a degree. The kind of people hired to the faculty and the way they go about doing their jobs reflect whether an institution operates out of a sense of mission or simply as a mirror of society. A mission university has convictions about what constitutes a truly educated person and is committed to working with men and women on the pilgrimage of becoming informed, thinking, caring, responsible leaders and participants in society.

**Which will Oklahoma Baptist University be?** Like every other institution of higher learning in this country you constantly work with the tension of having to decide whether you will be an institution with a strong clear sense of mission or become merely a mirror of contemporary society whose purpose is to simply reflect whatever educational or societal fads are in vogue at the time. This student body needs to know that this Board of Trustees, this president, this administrative leadership team and this faculty have committed themselves to the notion that Oklahoma Baptist University is a university on mission. There will be expectations of you in and out of the classroom. Policies and programs will seek to provide an atmosphere where the best of the best can blossom and flourish into leaders and thinkers who will challenge society to nobler aspirations.

That sense of mission will compel and guide your curriculum, affect what takes place in the classroom and will shape the atmosphere. That sense of mission will shape and direct both the way you go about your task and the outcome that will be evident in the students whom you attract.

**Students, what will be your sense of mission?**

In a world where mediocrity is the accepted norm for behavior, performance, and product Oklahoma Baptist University's mission is to promote excellence and quality in every area of life. There will be a lot of places where you can get a college degree easier and cheaper than you can get it here but there will not be any place where you can get a better education. The faculty and administration are not going to allow you to be content with mediocrity in the classroom, in personal habit or the pattern of thought. Students, we believe that God has poured into every person the capacity and the potential to be far more than you ever dreamed possible for yourself. You are capable of greater understanding of information and the accumulated insights of the ages than you have yet considered. There is more to you as a person and there are possibilities in you that must be cultivated and nurtured. You need an ever expanding knowledge base from which to operate. None of us knows enough or has read enough or has thought enough to be where we ought to be yet. This faculty and this administration will try to push the horizons of your thoughts and your imagination to help you develop the kind of content for your life that will compel you to work and live with substance and depth.

But if OBU is true to its heritage, its mission will reach beyond the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of the intellect and the vision for excellence. In a world that believes that "anything goes" a Christian university's mission is to teach and promote the notion that there is such a thing as right and wrong - to impart and to affirm a biblically based sense of values,

morality and ethics. The Christian college or university which takes its role and purpose seriously will become "torch-bearers of morality in the world of learning" according to Julius Scott, president of Paine College. Let this be the kind of place which has the right and the responsibility to call the academy to a moral conversation - to be that place that emphasizes education as a "civilizing blend of biblical morality and humanizing learning." (Julius Scott)

We must be willing to be a prophetic voice, ever calling society to a new level of thought about what is the right thing to do. In the policies and regulations governing campus life there must be a willingness to provide that prophetic tension that causes students, faculty and staff to raise the ethical questions and to search for that path of good that is consistent with our best understanding of the plan and purpose of God for human conduct. Our task is to prepare students for a life of integrity committed to eternal truth and to daring to be a different kind of people who will try to make a difference in their world. Education which does less for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is failing the destiny of our civilization.

Oklahoma Baptist University operates out of a sense of divine call, born out of the prayers and careful thought of early Baptist pioneers in Oklahoma. Its mission and purpose is higher than, nobler than, and more sacred than any moment in any denomination's issues, conflict or agenda. There is a Kingdom dimension to what OBU is about that transcends the moment and calls out the best in all of us. The faculty and staff, students, the college's family of supporters, and the Baptist family in Oklahoma must determine to work together to see that the university's best days are yet to be. Today, let me urge each of you to seize this moment to renew your commitment to being a mission-conscious and mission-driven institution.

Dr. Whitlock and the OBU family, being content to be a mirror of whatever age or era we find ourselves doesn't call for much from within. The determination to be known as a person or

institution on mission will call for something deep within each of us. It will call for commitment, for discipline, for determination to reach beyond where you are now. The challenges you face for survival and prosperity are not unique to this college. This is the day to join hands and hearts with a commitment that YOU will be a people on mission. You will determine to be people who can and will make a difference in our world – representing the best the academy has to offer in a way that is unapologetically Christian. May God grant you the strength and resolve to make it so. God bless OBU!