

# Outhier Lecture, Lipscomb University

## April 3, 2002

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Good afternoon, and thank you very much for the opportunity to talk with you today. As you have heard, I was an undergraduate student here a few years ago, and I jumped at the opportunity to return. My days here were good ones; they were days during which I matured, I changed, I grew and I improved.

I have devoted most of my adult life to the cause of education, because I know the power of education. As a young boy growing up in south Georgia, I had very good teachers in the public schools of Albany and Macon, teachers who held me and my classmates to high standards, teachers who would not accept less than our best efforts, teachers who reinforced and supported the values of the community we all lived in.

As an undergraduate student here at Lipscomb, I was privileged to share the classroom with some excellent teachers, some very intelligent classmates and a staff and administration which genuinely cared about each of us as individuals. I could feel their compassion for us and their passion for teaching and learning as I walked the campus.

As an administrator at three very different institutions, I have tried to carry those values with me. I hope that the impact that was made on me can be passed on to the next generation.

When I was named president of the University of Georgia a little more than four years ago, I was serving as president of Centre College in Kentucky, one of America's truly great liberal arts colleges.

We had about 1,000 students, and immediately people began asking whether I could be effective as president of a place as large and complex as the University of Georgia. Surely, they said, he won't be able to handle it.

It didn't seem to matter that I had also served as a vice president of a much larger institution, Pepperdine, that I had managed the budget process for the governor of the state of Tennessee, and that I had served as chief of staff for a United States Senator. None of that seemed to matter as much as

the perceived contrast between Centre and UGA.

In a world focused on size and bigness student enrollment numbers, \$250 million contracts for baseball players, 100 million votes for president of the United States I am increasingly convinced that in good management at any level and for any type of organization public or private, profit or non-profit -- while it is necessary to be strategic and to lay out a vision, what really matters is attention to the small things. Details matter.

I'd like to share with you now some principles that I try to apply as president of the University of Georgia. They are the same principles I applied as president of Centre College and as chief of staff, and, as long as I keep them in mind and apply them to my daily life, they work.

I also believe that despite the obvious and apparent differences between higher education and the business world, there are common principles that bridge our two worlds. In fact, as higher education becomes more and more dependent upon the public-private partnership model, I believe that we will have to accept some business management principles.

Likewise, I believe that business can learn from the academic world and indeed, there is much that business has already learned.

Most companies today are nowhere near as hierarchical and top-down in management as they were 20 years ago. One of the models for that management style is the academic world, where some would say we don't have enough central control. But the academic world is a world which values collegiality, which is inclusive in its decision-making process and which respects the rights of any stakeholder to have and express an opinion. It is a hub that depends on the spokes for its existence.

Universities, however, must also become more decisive. We suffer from paralysis by analysis; in our zeal to hear every opinion, we listen too long and don't make timely decisions. The result is sometimes less important than the process and that stalls progress. As president, I sit at that point where all the voices have been heard and all the input has been received, and it's time to make a decision. My guiding light is the interest of the institution as

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a whole. As a matter of definition, when one hears from every point of view, one is not going to please everyone with a decision. But decisions must be made.

I remember as a teenager that my friends and I laughed about K-mart's blue light special. But the reality is that people gathered around the blue light, they identified it with K-mart and they shopped at those stores. When K-mart gave up that identity and tried to make itself into something it wasn't, it lost its way, and we all have read the news in the past few weeks about bankruptcy and store closings.

The lesson? Find an identity and stick with it. Be flexible enough to change as needed, but stick to your core values.

I can also remember when flying was a pleasure, an enjoyable adventure, something to look forward to but it has been a long time since I felt that way.

We have come to this point: If the service is too difficult, people won't use it. The airlines have adopted a bus mentality and have lost the sense of creativity in customer service. If you have any doubt about that, consider this: When an industry, and industry, says that the government is the answer to its capitalist woes, that industry is in very serious trouble.

The lesson? Don't forget what made you successful.

I don't know the details of the Enron downfall, but there were clearly ethical questions about the operation of that company. The lesson? When the ethical underpinning of any enterprise is lost, the enterprise itself is lost.

These are the principles that I try to follow.

First, treat every employee exactly as you would want to be treated. The only way to manage effectively an organization of any complexity is to multiply your efforts through good people. If you replace everybody who leaves with somebody better, you can revolutionize an organization in three to five years.

We have done that at the University of Georgia. Virtually every vice president now serving has taken his or her position since I came here the one holdover has recently accepted a new vice presidency for us, so in essence, we have a new team, a new vision and a new energy.

Second, pay attention to appearance. If I'm walking across campus and see a scrap of paper on the sidewalk, I pick it up and toss it in the next trashcan I see. I take pride in how our campus looks, and I think that pride is evident to visitors and those who are on campus daily.

We recently completed our decennial review for accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. As is always the case, the report of the visiting committee included both praise and recommendations. Among the praises was something I don't think I've seen in any other SACS review a commendation for the groundskeepers on the appearance of our campus, especially North Campus, which is the oldest section of the UGA campus. They were right; our groundskeepers and landscape people do a terrific job.

Their work makes UGA a pleasant place to work, and that pays off in morale and efficiency and pride.

Let people know that you care about how things look your office, your lobby, the entrance, the hallways. It inspires confidence and makes a subtle but lasting impression.

Third, create a climate of doing the right things, not just doing things right. Life is full of small ethical decisions, and people pay attention to how you handle them. Their observations about how you handle small decisions will impact their confidence in your ability to make the larger decisions and whether they want to follow you.

I want to be clear about this: There is nothing wrong with doing things right. But there is a higher standard, and that standard is to do the right thing. In the aftermath of last September's horrendous tragedies in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, I saw many examples of people doing the right thing.

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ABC News interviewed an orthopedic surgeon who, as a member of a local hospital trauma team, rushed to the scene of the attack on the World Trade Center to render assistance. During the interview, he pointed out that while there were hundreds of people like himself who were there in some official or professional capacity, he was struck by the number of ordinary people who were there offering assistance.

One of those was the doctor's auto mechanic, who was there with his tow truck, helping to haul vehicles out of the way of the rescue crews. He had not been called in by the fire department, he was not part of a civil defense team, he wasn't a volunteer rescue worker. He just saw a need, possessed an asset, and went to work.

Another reporter interviewed a number of firefighters who had come from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Missouri and other states. When she asked them if they had been called in by the New York City Fire Department, they all said, "No, we just came."

The auto mechanic and the firefighters could have done things right. They could have waited until they got an official call from some authority to come to the city and lend assistance. And that would have been fine and it would have been proper.

But they decided to do the right thing, to offer aid without being asked, to apply their talents and skills and equipment to the monumental task at hand.

They have set a high standard for us, but it's a standard we should all try to meet.

Fourth, and finally, more is not always better. If you like bananas, two or three a week is OK. If you had to eat bananas every day at every meal, you would quickly grow to dislike them.

Too many organizations think that their mission is to change the world, when a better mission is to change a part of the world. If all of us change a part of the world for the better, together we will have changed the world.

It's better to find a little bit of good in each person than to dwell on the negative. Jefferson Davis was obviously on the wrong side of the slavery issue. But he was also the swing vote in the Senate that created the Smithsonian Institute, and in many other ways was a progressive member of the Senate.

Treat people as you would be treated.

Pay attention to appearances.

Do the right things.

More is not always better.

If you and I will follow those guidelines, our organizations will be a positive force in this world.

Thank you.