

Turning Challenges Into Opportunities President's Address to the University Community

Richard L. McCormick, President

September 19, 2003



Good afternoon and welcome. I want to thank the Senate for inviting me to speak at its first meeting of the new academic year and to congratulate the Senate on 50 years of shared governance at Rutgers.

Thanks also to all of *you* for joining me this afternoon for my first Annual Address to the University Community. Together let us begin *each* academic year by collectively and openly reflecting on the challenges and opportunities before us.

Rutgers is fortunate. We have a brilliant faculty, inquisitive students, hard-working staff and loyal friends. Together, they bring abundant intelligence, a passion for learning and the vital energy needed to move us to the top tier of public research universities.

We come from many different places. But we are all here to discover and share the knowledge that creates a full and rich life, not only for ourselves but also for the people we serve, here in New Jersey and beyond. We know that a great public university is the engine driving our society's highest ambitions — individual advancement, economic development and social progress.

This lofty enterprise is sustained by three essential components: outstanding people, a depth of resources and a culture that encourages a diversity of ideas. Weaken one leg of this tripod and the enterprise is in danger of collapse. That is why the university's vigorous defense of free speech this past summer was so vital.

Last spring a small student group called New Jersey Solidarity–Rutgers Chapter applied to host the “Third National Student Conference on the Palestine Solidarity Movement” here at Rutgers in mid-October. The group's mission statement immediately stirred concerns. It questions the right of Israel to exist and sanctions violence as a legitimate weapon in the struggle for Palestine. The organization's charged rhetoric was offensive to many, both within and beyond the Rutgers community.

This proposed event raised tremendously difficult questions about the borders between free expression and hate speech. I heard from many of you as you struggled intellectually and emotionally with these issues. But, in the end, our role was clear. A university committed to academic excellence must encourage rational debate, honest scrutiny and the unfettered expression of all viewpoints, however difficult or even abhorrent they may seem to us. This is the essence of free speech.

But that did not mean we became passive observers. The troubling questions raised by the student group also provided educational opportunities — and Rutgers faculty, staff and students took full advantage. We answered thousands of e-mails, letters and phone calls, explaining our position to alumni, donors, elected officials and a concerned public. Faculty at FAS began putting together a teach-in on free speech. Hillel, the Jewish student organization, organized a yearlong initiative called “Israel Inspires.” Our deans, safety officials and facilities coordinators worked unceasingly to ensure that all these events would be conducted in a safe, civil and respectful manner.

Recently, the national Solidarity Movement decided to move its conference to Ohio State University, while the Rutgers chapter continued to want its own conference on the New Brunswick/Piscataway campus. But a week ago it became apparent that the student group was unable to meet our university's requirements for holding large-scale events. A little more than a month before the conference, the students still did not have a speakers list, cost estimates, a parking plan, an adequate registration process or a coherent description of the event.

Rutgers was left with no option. We had to cancel the reservation for conference space. But let me be clear: the cancellation was not related to the students' views on Palestine. The only reason for the cancellation was their inability to host a viable event. If they can do so at a later time and fulfill the requirements placed upon any student organization, they will be welcome to hold the conference.

In retrospect, our community gained much from this experience. Rutgers' response to this challenge was positive, intellectually vigorous and resourceful. We did the right thing, and we withstood unwanted political pressure with dignity.

Such debates are vital signs of life. New Jersey's population boasts a potent mix of peoples from all parts of the globe and all ethnic and religious groups. At its best, it is a hotbed of conflicting views and clashing opinions. Our students reflect those multicultural origins. Their healthy diversity of perspectives is one of the university's greatest strengths.

Our commitment to diversity won an important ally this summer. In June, the United States Supreme Court upheld the principles of affirmative action, and we at Rutgers applauded the decision. The court's majority said clearly that a diverse student body brings educational benefits and better prepares everyone for life and work. Our wonderfully mixed student body has already provided strong confirmation of the court's opinion. We must now work harder to bring that same diversity to the ranks of our faculty.

So looking back on these past few months, we have many reasons to be proud. The faculty, staff and students of Rutgers took a divisive issue and created an opportunity to reaffirm our most enduring values. Together, we stood strongly for freedom of expression and a diversity of ideas. We demonstrated one of our greatest strengths: an ability to look at obstacles and see possibilities.

Now we will need to draw on those same skills in the year ahead as we tackle a series of significant issues — including the proposed restructuring of New Jersey higher education, the need for stable state funding, a deepening of our ties to the people of New Jersey and our continued quest for academic excellence.

All these issues present opportunities to reaffirm our values and promote our goals. They can bring the brightest students and most accomplished professors to Rutgers, open new revenue streams and invigorate the research and learning environments. They can maximize Rutgers' ability to train tomorrow's leaders and discover creative solutions to human problems.

First the restructuring. I do not know when, or even if, we will go ahead with the ambitious plan to restructure the system of public research universities in New Jersey. But either way, the process of thinking about the university's mission, organization and relation to sister institutions already has opened exciting opportunities. It has encouraged creative thinking about where we are and where we want to be. It has asked us to work collectively to foster excellence and integrity in all our pursuits. We have begun an important conversation about Rutgers' future, a conversation in which all of us — faculty, staff, students, board members, alumni and the people of New Jersey — should participate.

The restructuring will eliminate barriers to education, research and service. Currently our university does not include the health science disciplines of medicine, dentistry and public health. For sound reasons, almost every major public research university in the United States includes these fields, along with the arts and sciences, law, business, social work, education, engineering, nursing and pharmacy — all under one roof. That synergy, as well

as unity, is now lacking in New Jersey.

The proposal calls for creating three universities, each with its own medical school, in the northern, central and southern regions of the state. This will involve a significant reconfiguration of the campuses of Rutgers, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Reconfiguring yes, but renaming no. The name has got to be Rutgers!

Combining these institutions is enormously complex. It will be difficult and time-consuming. And it will be expensive. Within Rutgers, many are wary and confused and understandably so. But there are sound reasons to proceed.

Some of you were here in 1980 when Rutgers went through a similar process in New Brunswick. Back then, each of the undergraduate colleges — Rutgers, Douglass, Livingston and University College — had its own faculty. There were four history departments, four English departments, and so on. Today we look back and wonder why it took Rutgers so long to realize that change was needed.

The decision to create one Faculty of Arts and Sciences came with great trepidation and anguish. But the results were outstanding. Every discipline gained strength and breadth and became greater than the sum of its parts. Some attained national stature almost overnight. Only nine years later, in 1989, Rutgers was asked to join the nation's most prestigious institutions in the Association of American Universities.

That reorganization led Rutgers toward the goal of becoming one of the top-rated universities in the country. Now is the time to take the next step into national prominence. But we need to get it right. It would be a mistake to underplay the opportunities before us. But it would also be an error to underestimate the risks we face and the resources that will be required.

What are those opportunities? Open collaboration is surely the most important. Today, it can take months of negotiation before Rutgers can hire a faculty member or build a laboratory jointly with UMDNJ. It can take pages of dense type to explain to a funding agency how our convoluted cross-institutional proposals will work in practice. Despite having superb scientists at both Rutgers and UMDNJ, and being located in a state with some of the largest life-science companies in the world, New Jersey ranks somewhere in the middle among the 50 states in the amount of funding we receive from the National Institutes of Health. This is simply not acceptable. New Jersey should be an international powerhouse in biomedical research. Just as important, our students, both graduates and undergraduates, should have increased opportunities to study with faculty across every discipline.

While the life sciences will obviously benefit from the proposed restructuring, faculty and students in other areas will also find new inspiration. History Professor Keith Wailoo, for example, is analyzing medical data to offer new insights into health care as it reflects society's values. Educators studying learning disorders, psychologists investigating addiction, ethicists examining bioengineering and sociologists looking at women's health issues can all benefit from having the health sciences as part of our university.

But restructuring will not be easy. There are an uncountable number of moving parts that need to mesh if the new organization is to operate smoothly. There are a thousand questions that need to be answered. Programmatic offerings, reporting relationships and infrastructure issues have all to be sorted out. Not for a minute do I minimize the difficulties we face. But nor do I doubt that our faculty, staff and students can overcome these obstacles creatively and conscientiously.

The changes offer the potential to broaden our intellectual horizons, deepen our students' world view and heighten our ability to tackle difficult human problems. They can attract intellectually gifted students and stellar faculty — *and* be good for Rutgers and good for New Jersey.

But the restructuring should be done only if we can ensure that the resulting universities are the very best they

can be. Before we go ahead, there are important questions that must be addressed — above all, about governance and funding.

There is no one model of university governance. Within the 50 states there are approximately 19 different administrative structures. So whatever system we adopt should recognize Rutgers' unique history and current needs. It should build upon the highly successful Act of 1956 that established Rutgers as The State University of New Jersey and confirmed our historic freedom from political control.

There is certainly a role for a Chancellor and Board of Regents in Trenton. Higher education should have advocates in our state capital to remind the governor and legislators what strong public research universities can be and do. Besides advocacy, there are other roles a chancellor and regents could play — in the allocation of state appropriations, in planning and mission differentiation, in coordination with other educational sectors in the state, and in accountability and regulation. But the operational decisions that affect the academic missions of the university must be made at the local level by faculty, staff, students, presidents and board members. Local decision-making is essential for creating truly superior universities, without politicizing their work.

The second issue is funding. The state will need to make a major investment in higher education, both to cover the costs of combining the currently separate institutions *and* to maintain three excellent research universities.

Indeed, whether we proceed with restructuring or not, predictable and sufficient funding is essential to a great state university. There are several steps New Jersey can take without waiting — a firm policy commitment to fund higher education in line with the best systems in the country, significantly improved annual appropriations starting next year, and predictable core funding from a revenue stream that is dedicated to higher education. If the restructuring occurs, we will also need a separate infusion of one-time funds to finance the transition. And, lastly, there is the possibility of a bond issue to create new research initiatives and to build much-needed facilities for our growing student population. Without these steps, the prospects for success will not be bright.

Fortunately, Gov. James McGreevey has articulated a persuasive and comprehensive vision of public universities that afford excellent educational opportunities to the people of New Jersey and whose research brings economic growth and new jobs. The restructuring proposal is a key element of the governor's vision. So is the Commission on Jobs, Growth and Economic Development, which he appointed in April and charged with developing plans to enhance existing businesses, create and attract new industries and train the skilled workforce demanded by the knowledge-based economy. In June, the commission trained its sights on our state's research universities and began soliciting interdisciplinary research proposals in five key areas essential to 21st-century economic growth: biomedical science, information technology, advanced materials, telecommunications and devices and instruments.

The excitement and enthusiasm generated by this call for proposals galvanized the scientific community at Rutgers. Teams of faculty members worked feverishly to prepare compelling and innovative proposals and submit them by the September 15 deadline. The speed and energy with which they worked was both inspiring and exhausting. If accepted, these proposals could lead to a Genetics Institute in New Brunswick, a Center for Cellular Dynamics in Newark, and a Center for Computational and Integrative Biology in Camden. Disease detection and treatment, homeland security and nanotechnology could all be advanced.

We hope that these research proposals will be supported by a bond referendum in November 2004. The bond could also provide monies to increase the enrollment capacity of our state's colleges and universities. Demand for higher education in New Jersey far outstrips the supply. We cannot afford to turn away anyone who can benefit from a college education simply because we lacked the foresight and the will to build sufficient classrooms.

Public support is essential to obtaining the resources we need. But there is good evidence that we can succeed. According to a May 2003 *Star-Ledger/Eagleton* poll, a majority of New Jerseyans see public higher education as a clear priority, and one that should be supported even during hard economic times. As *The New York Times* warned in a late August editorial, "Unless the country renews its commitment to public higher education, the

universities will find their faculties decimated and their degrees devalued. . . . The states will then learn that important institutions are easy to destroy and devilishly difficult to rebuild.”

To achieve the funding we require, Rutgers will have to use every ounce of political energy we possess. Our record in the recent budget cycle suggests we can do it. I want to thank all of you, once again, for your help. Your letters, postcards, phone calls, e-mails, testimonies and rallies made a difference. Over and over, legislators have told me they had never seen such a forceful and persuasive budget campaign from the Rutgers community. Because of your hard work, we avoided some truly devastating cuts.

But this year’s budget is still not good. We begin this academic year with a \$20 million reduction, one of the worst in our history. There is no money for salary increases to recognize the good work of faculty and staff. Every department and every office is making painful decisions. Already, there have been layoffs. Faculty and staff lines are going unfilled, needed equipment is not being purchased and maintenance on our old buildings has once again been deferred. Students may find it more difficult to get the courses they need. These cuts significantly hurt our ability to function effectively, and they hurt our students, faculty and staff. For this I am truly sorry.

Even as we strain our political muscles to persuade the people of New Jersey, we must rely on non-state revenue streams. Did you know that the total amount Rutgers receives from federal funding sources — mostly for research support and student aid — now equals our base operating appropriation from the state? There is little doubt that tuition will continue to rise, that we will need to be more aggressive in pursuing grants and contracts and that private gifts will become increasingly important. We just reached the \$500-million goal of our capital campaign, nearly a year before the campaign ends. That just means it is time to set the bar even higher.

Even in difficult budget times, Rutgers *must* invest in new academic opportunities. To encourage this, I have proposed setting aside \$3 million from our current resources to be used as seed money for forward-thinking, interdisciplinary proposals that enhance our primary missions of teaching, research and service. Used wisely, the Academic Excellence Fund can strengthen our dedication to the creation and transmission of knowledge and deepen our commitment to bringing that knowledge to bear on problems that matter to everyone.

Last year we started our state budget campaign in the winter, after the governor had already crafted and delivered his budget message. This is too late in the process. We must begin our next round of efforts now.

Over the summer Rutgers initiated a new Budget Advocacy Program, and we will soon be hiring a director charged with coordinating our efforts in Trenton and around the state. The offices of State Government Relations, Alumni Relations, University Relations, Budget and the Foundation are already involved in this effort. I will do my best to develop close working relations with our elected officials in Trenton, but I need your continuing help.

Advocacy is not just about Trenton. It is about every contact you have with the citizens of our state. It is about telling the Rutgers story with passion and conviction, about listening to people, understanding their needs and working alongside them to solve their problems.

Right now, too few of New Jersey’s citizens are active Rutgers advocates. Most do not fully understand why a strong state university is important to them. If we do not do a better job of forging connections to citizens across the state, they will see little reason to support an increased university budget or a much-needed bond issue.

During the last budget cycle, I received many letters, e-mails and phone calls about the proposed reductions. I want to tell you about three of those letters. They were written by girls active in 4-H. They wrote to tell me how much the programs meant to them. There was the fun of putting on a play and riding horseback, of course. But they also wrote of finding a supportive community to help them through adolescence and of learning to give back to their neighbors. These girls and their parents knew that these valuable activities, although far from Newark, Camden or New Brunswick, happened because of their state university. They wrote to me, and they wrote to the governor, because they knew that a cut to Rutgers was a cut to them.

Rutgers needs to reach more citizens that directly. As state universities go, we are still a young institution, so perhaps our commitment to New Jersey, and New Jersey's commitment to us, is still not fully grown. Yet there are signs that this is changing. And nowhere is that more evident than in our hometowns.

If you had visited New Brunswick 30 years ago, you would have seen a very different city. The commercial center sported empty storefronts, the dilapidated State Theater showed mostly pornography and the only hotel in town housed primarily indigent residents. It was a depressing place and a dangerous one.

Today, with help from Rutgers, Johnson & Johnson and the New Brunswick Development Corporation, the city has been transformed. There are interesting places to shop, excellent restaurants, a vibrant theater district and a thriving nightlife. Instead of fleeing the city at the end of the workday, people flock to its streets. On Friday and Saturday nights, New Brunswick is alive with activity.

But there is still work to be done. The upper reaches of George Street, between the Rutgers and Douglass/Cook campuses, are about to undergo a major rejuvenation. Earlier this week we broke ground for a new building for the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at the intersection of George Street and Livingston Avenue. A new Public Safety Building is going up on George Street, and there are exciting plans for a dormitory that will introduce 722 Rutgers students into the heart of downtown.

College Avenue also needs redevelopment. Instead of a street clogged with traffic and bordered by parking lots, imagine a beautifully landscaped pedestrian mall lined with our historic academic buildings and architecturally distinctive new structures. Easton Avenue could also become an attractive shopping area catering to student needs. Rutgers students, faculty and staff are already serving on a committee to find ways to revitalize the 5th and 6th Wards adjacent to the College Avenue campus through improved housing, new recreational venues, better transportation and improved public safety.

We can see that same kind of renaissance in Newark, which now has an extraordinary performing arts center and a downtown minor-league stadium. One of the cornerstones of the city's progress is the ambitious University Heights Science Park, sponsored jointly by the city's institutions of higher education. Just this week, Science High School broke ground at University Heights.

Camden, too, is showing the fruits of renovation. The state recently committed \$174 million to revitalize that city. The grant includes \$11 million for Rutgers to increase enrollment and build new residences and law facilities. These will be important components in bringing Camden back to life.

A beautiful state university campus is not just important for faculty, staff and students. It stands as a mark of the state's respect for and commitment to higher education. It instills pride in New Jersey's citizens who begin to view the campus as a desirable destination. It connects the university more closely to the people we serve.

That connection is never more vital than when Rutgers people are out in the community, solving problems and offering expertise. But too often, state agencies, elected officials and ordinary citizens do not think of Rutgers when they need help. To build relations and win the hearts and minds of New Jerseyans, we need a firmer grasp of what state residents want and expect from their state university. This fall, we will launch a project to learn just that. The Constituency Research Project is the university's first, comprehensive attempt to get a sharply focused snapshot of how Rutgers is perceived by various stakeholders. A market research firm, guided by a university advisory committee, is already at work to identify constituencies and develop a questionnaire. The goal is to find out what citizens know about their state university, what they expect from Rutgers and how we can strengthen our ties around the state.

At the same time, the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy will be conducting a survey of faculty to find out how we are already serving the people of our state and what more we can do. The survey will

ask you to describe your experiences working in neighborhoods and communities. It will also ask for ways the university can improve its outreach activities. I ask all of you who receive this survey to participate.

We are also planning an exciting project to bring together new faculty with the people of New Jersey. Next spring, we will launch the New Faculty Traveling Seminar. Each year, 35 new faculty from across the university will be invited to join me on a five-day bus trip around New Jersey to get to know their new state, meet its people and understand its needs. The bus tour will provide an unparalleled opportunity to speak directly with the people in New Jersey's communities, to build personal relationships and to add a human dimension to the work we do. A faculty committee is about to begin planning the details of where to go, whom to meet and what to see. I hope some of you will join me on the first Rutgers road trip.

I have spoken this afternoon about many of the challenges and opportunities facing Rutgers as we strive to become one of the best public universities in the nation. It will take hard work, dedication, long hours, some sleepless nights and extraordinary brainpower to get from where we are to where we want to be.

So why do I feel so optimistic?

There is the hard evidence that we are making progress. Our philosophy program was rated number one this year, and many other disciplines are not far behind. Our researchers have secured millions of dollars in grant money to combat world hunger, conquer AIDS, improve K-12 education and keep our environment clean. Our concert halls, theaters and museums present rich and varied cultural offerings. Our students continue to amaze us.

We have also put in place a new administrative structure, committed to transparency and openness, service, teamwork and the delegation of authority to local units where it can best be exercised. I am very pleased that Philip Furmanski, executive vice president for academic affairs, and Karen Kavanagh, executive vice president for administrative affairs, are leading these efforts.

More important than all these accomplishments is the persistence of Rutgers' indomitable spirit combined with our brash belief in ourselves. Everywhere on campus, I see an amazing spirit that lifts morale and fills us with pride. Even in the face of frustrations and setbacks, our determination, our ambition, our entrepreneurship, and sheer will power carry us over obstacles and around barriers. After all, this is New Jersey, a state whose frenetic pace is tempered by an equally extravagant gusto for life's possibilities. It is a joy and a privilege to be back in this state and to serve as your president.

I began my talk today with a discussion of a student event that tested the basic beliefs of our learning community. I would like to end with another student story about what can happen when our learning environment encourages students to speak up and be heard.

Last spring, Lauren LaRusso came to me with a bold idea: a plan to turn passive students into active voters. A student at the Graduate School of Education working toward her master's in social studies teaching, Lauren is a Douglass graduate and past president of the Douglass College Governing Association. We like to say that among public education's major goals is creating citizens who understand themselves and their role in society. Lauren is one of those people. She knew that too many students fail to vote and that, as a result, our legislators do not take student concerns as seriously as they should. She reasoned that if students were to become effective advocates for Rutgers and valued American citizens, they would need to register and vote.

By August, Lauren had assembled a coalition of student leaders and developed a creative Get Out the Vote campaign. She knew she faced steep challenges breaking through student apathy, meeting early October registration deadlines, helping students understand the issues and transporting them to local polling places. But she saw the possibilities as well: the chance to take complacent teenagers and turn them into civic-minded citizens. She never looked back.

It's too early to know if the voter drive will succeed and certainly this is not a one-shot project. Yet we can all learn something from Lauren: that problems also bring possibilities, that determination and enthusiasm can overcome obstacles, and that a commitment to fundamental ideals tempered by knowledge and understanding can lead to real-world change.

Lauren is studying to become a teacher. Her students will indeed be fortunate because they will learn the secret of success: if we aim high, hold fast to our values and use our energy and intelligence both exuberantly and wisely, we can turn daunting challenges into boundless opportunities.

It's a lesson we can all profit from. Rutgers deserves to become a top-tier university. With determination and a clear vision for the future, we will.

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