

**“Transformations”  
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**George Washington Carver Lecture  
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities  
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**Good afternoon. Buenas tardes and thank you for the invitation to share my thoughts with you today. I am deeply honored to be associated through this lecture with George Washington Carver, whose story of abundant talent, extraordinary determination, and remarkable accomplishment should serve as a validation of and inspiration to all of us whose lives are devoted to creating educational opportunities for talented people from a broad range of backgrounds and cultures—people who entrust us with their dreams and aspirations.**

**Several months ago I joined many of you, my fellow public university presidents, at the Lincoln Memorial for a very special commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862. Although some of us may have been wondering about our sanity as we sat in our academic regalia, baking in the stifling heat of a late June afternoon in Washington, we could not help being moved by the symbolism of the event and its relevance to the important work that we do.**

**The 150-year legacy of the Morrill Act has opened the doors of U.S. higher education to growing numbers of talented people in our society, whatever their socioeconomic circumstances. Its spirit has been re-affirmed many times with the establishment of such financial aid programs as the G.I. Bill and, of course, Pell Grants.**

**In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the spirit of democratization of higher education is alive and well on public university campuses across the country, especially those in large urban areas where institutions like The University of Texas at El Paso are taking the Morrill Act legacy to the next level. We are educating large numbers of low-income and minority students, segments of the population that continue to be most seriously underrepresented in higher education.**

**Sadly, however, this investment in building the human resource foundation upon which this country's greatness has solidly rested has begun to erode, as public—and especially state—support for higher education has declined, and cost burdens have been shifted to students.**

**The consequences are sobering. In 2012, only 11% of students in the bottom quartile of the U.S. family income scale earned bachelor's degrees, compared to 79% in the top quartile. Believing as we all do that talent crosses racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries, and that your ZIP code should not be your destiny, we know that we are falling far short of the ideals that inspired Senator Morrill and President Lincoln. Although public higher education has clearly been**

**the most powerful driver of our success as a nation, and a model for massification efforts across the world, we now appear to be wavering in our willingness to invest in it and we're even questioning its value.**

**At UTEP, we are doing all that we can to counter these trends, and I'm pleased to have this opportunity to share our story with you. We take very seriously our responsibility to ensure that we are good stewards of the Morrill Act legacy, offering all residents of the historically under-educated U.S.-Mexico border region we serve access to excellent and affordable higher education. Grounded in our strong conviction that talent is found in all ZIP codes, validated by our students' stellar achievements, and driven by our commitment to provide the educational excellence that all students have every right to expect, UTEP's success in fulfilling our access and excellence mission has enabled us to develop a new public research university model.**

**But I'm getting ahead of myself. I should first share with you the origins of my personal passion for public higher education and why, sometimes to the puzzlement of friends and colleagues, I have remained at The University of Texas at El Paso since 1971 when I joined the UTEP faculty as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Linguistics, and why I have continued to serve as UTEP's president for the past 25 years. It's all about passion, determination, and seeking to make a difference in the lives of others. So, let's back up just a few years.**

Like many of you, I was the first member of my family to attend college. I grew up in St. Louis, attended a mediocre high school that expected its male graduates to join the industrial workforce as apprentice electricians, carpenters, and plumbers, and the female graduates to work briefly, if at all, prior to marrying and becoming “homemakers.” I learned typing and shorthand in high school, which I’ve always found useful, and home economics, which also may have come in handy a time or two.

My first job, just out of high school, was as a receptionist and switchboard operator at a large industrial firm in St. Louis. You might say that I was the Lilly Tomlin of Nordberg Manufacturing! (I should add here that it would be comforting to me if, unlike most students today, at least some of you know what a switchboard is and have heard of Lilly Tomlin!) After less than a week or two, I had mastered all aspects of my switchboard—I could connect and disconnect calls, and successfully execute transfers and conference calls—and I quickly concluded that I was in a dead-end job. I wish I could say that I had been sufficiently prescient to know that switchboards were definitely not a technology to invest my future in but, honestly, I was just bored.

While in high school, I had actually thought about going to college and becoming a teacher, but that idea never got much reinforcement from my teachers or my friends, nearly none of whom ultimately went to college. Added to the discouraging climate in high school was the fact that there were no public universities in St. Louis at that time.

**The two privates—St. Louis U. and Washington U.—seemed distant, in terms of both their physical locations and their cultures.**

**Nonetheless, remaining in my switchboard job was clearly not going to be an option, so I enrolled at St. Louis U, which was closer to where I lived, and based on that single criterion, I made what may have been the very best decision of my life.**

**Still, my first year at SLU was a real struggle. My low-achieving high school simply did not prepare me for the demanding expectations of the faculty, and my fellow students, most of whom had attended private, college-preparatory high schools, greatly intimidated me. They'd been through Dante's Inferno and Purgatory, and I'd never heard of him. Fearing failure, I never worked harder in my life, attending classes in the morning, working as a secretary in the afternoon, and replacing my carefree high school social whirl with non-stop studying every evening and weekend. Despite all this pressure, I was nonetheless exhilarated with the opportunity to learn. I loved SLU and the Jesuit faculty who generously shared with me their disciplinary expertise and their devotion to teaching and learning. When I received my bachelor's degree with highest honors from SLU and a month later took my first airplane flight ever to spend the following year in Brazil as a Fulbright student, I knew that my life had truly been transformed forever.**

**That educational journey—the amazing transformation of my own life and prospects—has fueled my passion not just for higher education in general, but for access to excellence for ALL of our students and**

**potential students, a passion to invest in all who are ready to invest in their own brighter futures.**

**Of course, reaching ultimate success in this enterprise also requires that we understand the obstacles, challenges, concerns, and fears that our students feel most acutely.**

**When I became a UTEP faculty member 40 years ago, I was powerfully reminded of my own apprehensions as a first-generation college student. I saw in many of my students' faces the same self-doubt that I had felt at SLU, wondering "Am I really college material?" Within weeks of joining UTEP, I was sure that I had found a place where I could do for many other young people what the Jesuits had done for me, a place where I could pay back by creating opportunities for those following in my footsteps. Through my many years at UTEP, I've been privileged to participate in the transformation of many thousands of lives, and my life's work has become entirely focused on increasing access for all young people—particularly the nearly 40% of UTEP students who report a family income of \$20,000 a year or less—and ensuring their engagement in the same kinds of enhanced educational experiences offered to their peers in more affluent settings. They have every right to expect nothing less from us.**

**If students suffer some crises of identity on their way to finding themselves and their success, the same can be said of the educational institutions they attend. In fact, by the time I became president in 1988, I had come to believe that UTEP suffered from a**

**profound identity crisis. Although we had always had a regional focus, starting with our establishment in 1914 as the Texas State School of Mines and Metallurgy to support the industries of the surrounding U.S.-Mexico border region, by the 1960s and like many other regional institutions, we had concluded that the single path toward greater glory in higher education would require emulating prestigious institutions, however different their settings, constituencies, and missions. We perceived our low-income Hispanic population and our U.S.-Mexico border location as liabilities to be ignored or, if necessary, denied. As a reminder of this misguided goal of trying to become something we weren't and shouldn't have wanted to be, some faculty found humor in placing "Harvard on the Border" bumper stickers on their cars. Recognizing the prevailing self-doubt on campus, I welcomed the opportunity to try to shift our collective focus toward a greater understanding of who we really were and whom we served, to convert such perceived liabilities as the U.S.-Mexico border into assets, and to achieve far greater authenticity in our institutional aspirations and our efforts to achieve them.**

**We took stock of our setting, and our responsibility for its human and economic development, we studied data on the young people UTEP served—and those we didn't—and we began to identify and celebrate our distinctive features, all toward a goal of transforming UTEP into an institution well aligned with and responsive to the needs of the surrounding region and its residents. What we saw in our self-examination wasn't always pleasing. Particularly troubling to many of us was that although nearly all of UTEP's students were from El Paso**

County, a disproportionate share were graduates of a relatively small number of more affluent and Anglo high schools. We didn't look like El Paso. Large numbers of young Hispanics in our community were being denied access to social mobility through education, talent was being squandered, and our community's future was in jeopardy. We began to re-focus our attention on UTEP's public university mission and our responsibility for both the dreams and aspirations of area residents, whatever their backgrounds, and the future prosperity and quality of life of our underdeveloped border setting. Oh, and we happily witnessed the gradual disappearance of those bumper stickers!

We also recognized that educational institutions in the region, from PreK to post-secondary, formed a closed loop: more than 80% of UTEP's students are graduates of El Paso County high schools, and 70% or more of teachers in area schools are graduates of UTEP. But we had engaged in endless reciprocal blaming for our shortcomings—UTEP blamed the schools for not sending us better prepared students, and the schools blamed UTEP for not sending them better prepared teachers, both failing to recognize that the finger of blame came right back to themselves. Instead, we realized that the conversation had to shift toward our shared responsibility to work together to increase educational opportunities for all young people in our community and leverage each other's progress toward enhancing excellence.



**To that end, in 1991, we formed the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, a partnership that includes all nine school districts in El Paso County, the El Paso Community College, UTEP, and business and civic leaders, working together toward a goal of raising educational aspirations and attainment among all young people in the region. Our focus was to be on data: sharing them, analyzing them, and ensuring that they, not assumptions and opinions, would drive our efforts to align expectations, curricula, and standards within the entire PreK-16 educational pathway. This vertically integrated commitment to systemic change and its reliance on data have served us extraordinarily well for the past 20 years, creating robust longitudinal data sets, bringing together K-16 faculty in math, reading, and other disciplines to eliminate disconnects for students as they progress along the pathway, and perhaps most importantly, building trust among all the key stakeholders across the region.**

**The outcomes tell the story best. In 1991, El Paso's high school graduation rates were among the lowest of all major metropolitan school districts in Texas, and there was an unacceptable disparity between the graduation rates of Hispanic and Anglo students. Today, El Paso area high schools have the highest overall graduation rate of all Texas major metro areas, and the gap between Hispanic and Anglo rates has narrowed to 6 percent. El Paso County districts also rank first in the percentage of high school graduates who complete the State's recommended or advanced curriculum, and first in the number of low-income high school graduates who enroll in post-secondary**

**education. As a result, both UTEP's and the El Paso Community College's enrollments have grown significantly over the past decade, in UTEP's case by 48%, which means that more El Pasoans are aspiring to and being successfully prepared for post-secondary attainment. Especially encouraging is the decline in the percentage of UTEP's entering students from El Paso County who require developmental education: in math, for example, college readiness has improved from 29% of entering students in 2003, to 83% in 2010. We are also especially proud that, with 77% Hispanic enrollment today, UTEP's student demographics now mirror those of El Paso County, and that UTEP is also recruiting the region's most accomplished high school graduates. More than 60% of the Top Ten Percent graduates of area high schools who attend public universities in Texas enroll at UTEP.**

**While successfully building a smooth pathway to UTEP from area schools, we've also been devoting substantial talent and time to understand better how we can promote greater student access and success on our own campus and remove unintentional barriers to students' progress. We've examined access in terms of four separate dimensions—aspirational, academic, financial, and participatory—and reviewed through systematic data analysis how best to address each of them. To improve financial access, for example, we have worked to address our students' often severe financial constraints through greater efficiencies in all our operations, and more extensive and creative financial support via externally funded scholarships, grants, and on-campus employment opportunities. We are proud that in the**

**U.S. Department of Education’s most recent survey, at \$2,543 per year, UTEP’s net price is the lowest of all U.S. research universities.**

**We have also learned a great deal about our student population—what works and what doesn’t—through a constant cycle of development, monitoring and evaluation of interventions and their outcomes. We have come to know that a tool kit filled with ideas that work in other settings is unlikely to be effective in ours without well-informed re-calibration. We’ve learned to be wary of one-size-fits-all solutions, and impatient with metrics like graduation rates, about which I’ll have more to say in a moment. In short, our data have liberated us from distracting and usually irrelevant debates, made us far stronger advocates for the students we serve, and far more successful in creating conditions for these students to achieve their goals. Again, the outcomes tell the story best. Degree completions have grown dramatically at UTEP, with an 85% increase in undergraduate degrees awarded over the past decade, more than 80% of them to Latinos, and UTEP consistently ranks among the top three universities nationally in the number of Hispanic graduates per year in nearly every disciplinary area.**

**But our work didn’t stop with successfully promoting access and degree completion. We’ve also made a firm commitment to excellence, knowing that however successful we may be in fostering it, access without excellence is a promise broken. To that end, and with UTEP’s historic STEM strengths, our students’ financial constraints, and state funding trends clearly in mind, we concluded**

**that building competitive research capacity through strategic growth in externally funded research was the most promising pathway to creating the enhanced climate of excellence that we sought to couple with our deep commitment to student access and social mobility. We are pursuing excellence for and with our students, not in spite of them, as is evident in the commitment of UTEP researchers who enthusiastically support undergraduate students as members of their research teams, and in the major investments we've made to create a large number of on-campus jobs and robust undergraduate research opportunities well aligned with students' academic goals.**

**Once again, the outcomes tell the story. UTEP's annual research expenditures have increased steadily from \$5 million in 1988, to \$76 million last year, and UTEP now ranks fourth—after Texas A&M, UT Austin and the U. of Houston—among all Texas public universities in federal grant funding. UTEP's annual budget has grown from less than \$100 million 20 years ago to more than \$400 million today. We've expanded the single doctoral program in Geology we offered in 1988, to today's 19 doctoral programs enrolling more than 700 students. And, as we expected, this enhanced research and doctoral program climate has had a profound impact on UTEP's undergraduate students as well. A growing number of the 55% of our 23,000 students who are first in their families to attend college now confidently express aspirations not only to complete a bachelor's degree, but also to continue on to graduate or professional schools. And they are successful: UTEP ranks 7<sup>th</sup> among all U.S. universities in**

**the number of Hispanic bachelor's degree recipients who successfully complete doctoral degrees.**

**We—the UTEP students, faculty, staff, administration, and community partners—have worked hard to achieve these results, and we have worked with an unwavering belief in the quality and excellence of our community and in every student who comes to our campus. Steering UTEP's transformation over the past 25 years has drawn on every ounce of talent and energy that my colleagues and I have been able to muster. Creating a bold vision and building the confidence to aggressively pursue it have required creativity, relentless determination, resilience, and a very thick skin. Still, I can't think of a more fulfilling and satisfying way to spend 25 years! Of course, UTEP's transformation continues to be a work in progress, and I'll close by focusing quickly on two issues that affect UTEP and all public universities, with a request that you join actively in helping us address them.**

**First, there is that pesky graduation rate metric which grossly understates the performance of access-driven public universities like UTEP, by including in its calculation only those students who enter a given institution as first-time, full-time freshmen in the fall semester of a given year, and who graduate from that same institution four to six years later. At UTEP 70% of students who earn degrees are not counted in our graduation rate because they didn't begin with us as first-time, full-time freshmen. But we are not alone. All public universities are disadvantaged by the graduation rate metric, which**

**strongly favors private institutions whose students tend to form more stable class cohorts. As a result, this widely cited metric misleads the general public, media, policymakers, and governing boards about the success of public universities, grossly understating our and our students' success. Even worse, public institutions are often compelled to pursue policies and investments designed to increase graduation rates, and the most frequent casualty of such quests is an institution's commitment to access. This is surely a trade-off unworthy of the Morrill Act legacy.**

**There's some very good news on this front, as APLU leads a national project to develop an alternative to traditional graduation rates, focusing on each student's individual progress toward completing a degree at one or multiple colleges and universities, and crediting all institutions in which a student enrolls for their contributions to that single degree attainment. It is absolutely critical that all of us fully support this initiative to replace once and forever a graduation rate metric that has done enormous damage to public higher education for far too long.**

**Closely tied to misleading metrics are misaligned college rankings, dominated by *US News & World Report*, which has, for decades, doggedly persisted in applying such criteria as size of endowment and alumni giving to a rapidly changing higher education landscape and student demographic. This focus on wealth and prestige not only sends misleading messages about what matters in selecting a university, but serves to devalue the broad range of post-secondary**

options that are available to 21<sup>st</sup> century students especially at public institutions. I'm pleased to say that there's very good news on this front as well. *Washington Monthly* magazine has for the past several years begun offering an alternative to the *US News & World Report* rankings, with a focus on the overall impact of an institution, on the students it serves, on the region in which it is located, and on this nation as a whole. The focus is on three broad categories of public good: how well the school serves as an engine of social mobility; how successful it is in producing cutting-edge research and Ph.D. degrees; and how effectively students are encouraged to give something back to their region and to the nation. To these three they added this year a student cost metric. The really exciting news for UTEP is that we were ranked #12 among all U.S. research universities and #1 in the social mobility category. But the news is equally good for all public universities that, by *Washington Monthly's* criteria, dominate the top-ranked spots. Like all such efforts, these rankings can surely be improved, and I hope that all of us who proudly lead public universities will help support this serious effort to offer an alternative to the increasingly dysfunctional rankings in *US News & World Report*.

George Washington Carver's extraordinary accomplishments were shaped by his remarkable journey from Diamond, Missouri, via Iowa State Agricultural College, to his life work with Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. That journey has been characterized as, "symbolizing the transformative potential of education, even for those born into the most unfortunate and difficult

of circumstances.” All of us in U.S. public higher education today are privileged to be entrusted with that transformative potential to serve talented young people like Carver, whose life circumstances present daunting challenges. We are responsible for ensuring that their talent is recognized and nurtured, knowing that all of us will benefit too from the achievement of their full potential. At UTEP, we’ve worked hard to serve as an effective transformative resource for those who come to us with their dreams and aspirations, and in the process, we’ve undergone a transformation too. In doing our best to educate our students and region, they have helped us to discover our true identity. We’re now comfortably authentic—and excellent—in our own UTEP skin, and joyful in knowing that we’ve made huge progress in becoming the best UTEP we can be. Carver’s epitaph perhaps says it best: “He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.”

Exactly!