

A Love of Place
Installation Speech of James B. Milliken
Sixth President, University of Nebraska
January 27, 2005

Thank you, Regent Hawks. And thank you to the Board of Regents, for the honor of being asked to serve as president of the University of Nebraska. For someone who grew up in a small town hoping to *attend* the university, this is a humbling experience.

I also want to thank the board for hosting a wonderful series of events in celebration of this installation, starting yesterday in Scottsbluff and Kearney and continuing today in Omaha and later in Lincoln. These events recognize the important role of the University of Nebraska, not just on our four campuses but throughout the state.

I am pleased to add my welcome to our new Governor and fellow Fremonter, Dave Heineman. Governor, we appreciate your support for higher education and look forward to an excellent working relationship. To other state officials, distinguished faculty, guests from other colleges and universities, students, staff and friends ... welcome, and thank you for attending.

I am happy so many of the most important people in my life could be here today. My wife, Nana Smith, and our children Bennett, Caleb and Anna. And one of the two people most responsible for anything of value I might accomplish – my father, Tom Milliken.

Four special guests are with us today – my predecessors, the former presidents of the University of Nebraska. I will ask them to stand and remain standing until all four are introduced and we can recognize them as a group. Dr. Clifford Hardin, who more than anyone is responsible for the evolution of the modern University of Nebraska; Dr. Ronald Roskens, who, after serving as chancellor of UNO, enjoyed a long and successful tenure as president. Dr. Martin Massengale, who capped an impressive administrative career as chancellor of UNL and then president of the university; and Dr. L. Dennis Smith, who served from 1994 until last summer, a distinguished scientist who led significant efforts to build the quality and national reputation of the university. You honor me with your presence.

Thank you too, President Broad, not only for your kind and thoughtful words, but for giving me the opportunity to work with you, to learn from you, and, I hope, to emulate your leadership.

It is the rare installation that is graced by the U.S. Poet Laureate, and Ted Kooser's poem has special significance to me. A monograph of "So This is Nebraska" was given to me by a good friend when we were seniors at the University of Nebraska, more than 25 years ago. In both his poetry and prose, Ted eloquently captures much of what is unique about Nebraska. Ted, thank you for being here.

Last May, my friend Bob Kerrey said that fundamental among my qualifications for the presidency is a "Love of Place." I believe that same love of place guided the growth of the university even from our earliest beginnings.

The university was chartered in 1869, less than two years after Nebraska became a state, and the first students arrived on campus shortly after. Willa Cather—a student at the university in the 1890s—wrote about these early students:

"In those days there were many serious young men among the students who had come up to the University from the farms and the little towns scattered over the thinly settled state. Some of these boys came straight from the cornfields with only a summer's wages in their pockets, hung on through the four years, shabby and underfed, and completed the course by really heroic self-sacrifice ... There was an atmosphere of endeavor, of expectancy and bright hopefulness about the young college that had lifted its head from the prairie only a few years before."

It was that atmosphere that led the state to invest in a university in the first place. One observer commented that it would have been more cost-effective for the state to simply pay to send students to established colleges. But Nebraska's early settlers recognized the importance and value of higher education.

And so, in an economic climate that was certainly worse than today's, they took bold steps and built a university based on hope and optimism. They were truly pioneering new frontiers.

Within a few years, people like Cather, Roscoe Pound, Charles Bessey and James Canfield brought the University of Nebraska to national prominence. By 1895 it was considered

one of the four great public universities in the country, along with Michigan, Wisconsin and Berkeley.

Today, education is even more important than it was 100 years ago. We know, for example, that the average lifetime earnings of a Nebraskan with a bachelor's degree are a million dollars more than those of a person with only a high school diploma. But a university education provides for more than the means for an individual to earn a living—important as that is. As we look around the world, we are reminded that an enlightened democracy depends on an educated citizenry. Our ability to understand, enjoy, and have an impact on the world in which we live depends, in great measure, on education.

The real promise of education is often seen most dramatically in the individual case.

When Andrea Walton Miller was a high school student in Gordon, Nebraska, near the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, her counselor told her she wouldn't make it in a four-year college and suggested she stay close to home. Instead, with the help of a Davis Scholarship, she became the first member of her family to go to college. She attended the University of Nebraska at Kearney where she was a finalist for a Truman Scholarship, and graduated with highest distinction. She is now a second year law student at UNL, studying for a career in public service.

Erica Rogers is another first-generation college student who exemplifies the transformation that education makes possible. In 1988 she was a teenage single mother living on welfare. Today, she's an award-winning columnist and opinion editor of the *Daily Nebraskan*. Erica is putting herself through college and is a McNair Scholar who is consistently on the Chancellor's list.

Day in and day out, students experience similar, if less dramatic, transformations on our campuses. This is where faculty help our sons and daughters become Nebraska's future leaders.

Education also has the power to transform a state.

Historically, transforming Nebraska from an unforgiving prairie to one of the agricultural leaders of the world depended on the development of new kinds of crops, new methods of irrigation and new ways to market products. The catalyst for change was the university and its agricultural extension service.

Today, Nebraska still faces challenges – some old, some new. The demographic profile of our state is shifting. We have serious economic challenges, particularly in rural Nebraska.

State government has a structural fiscal dilemma. And the university is faced with tight resources at a time when we are being called upon to do more to educate Nebraskans, conduct competitive research, and reach out to our citizens and communities.

The solution to Nebraska's challenges is not simple, but it is clear: we must invest in the people of Nebraska in order to build our economic competitiveness. We are not a large state, and certainly not a wealthy one. But we have the power to determine our own destiny by educating people who have the vision and the talent to compete in a knowledge-based global economy. I believe that education—and specifically the University of Nebraska—is the key to Nebraska's future.

Leading economic research points to universities as important hubs of creative activity that spur technology and innovation-based development. This is the case in California, Massachusetts and North Carolina. For Nebraska to be competitive, it must also be true here.

We've created some excellent models with our own Peter Kiewit Institute, J.D. Edwards program and Durham Research Center, and we can build on those successes. We must maintain our cherished agricultural heritage and at the same time develop new industries, new technologies ... new opportunities that will expand Nebraska's economy and allow us to be competitive.

We need to set our sights high, take advantage of our strengths, and vigorously pursue a better quality of life for Nebraskans.

A brighter future depends on growing our pool of talent, and the best way to accomplish that is to increase the number of Nebraskans attending college.

We have one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country, but our college-going rate is only average. The number of adults in Nebraska with a college degree is below the national average. We cannot hope to lead if we don't boost our level of educational attainment.

One of the barriers to college attendance has been a lack of affordable access. That must change. Economic circumstance should not prevent any Nebraskan from attaining a college education.

Providing an adequate level of need-based aid and keeping tuition at reasonable, competitive levels will help ensure that smart, capable students can attend the university. Tuition dollars and state appropriations are the primary sources of funds for the core functions of the university.

When state support stagnates or declines, significant tuition increases are the result. Affordable public education requires adequate state investment.

At the same time, we have a responsibility to help Nebraska families prepare financially to undertake the cost of a college education by providing information, early and often, about the true costs of college and the options available.

The increasing diversity of Nebraska's population draws these and other challenges into sharp focus. Increasing the college-going rate of underrepresented minorities will not only benefit these students and strengthen the university, it is one of the keys to a prosperous Nebraska.

We must be cautious, however, not to provide access at the expense of quality. The principal difference between mediocrity and excellence in higher education is the faculty.

I've been impressed upon my return to find a faculty who are passionate about their work, and who are making a tremendous contribution to our state. They are conducting research that will change people's lives, and that is bringing international recognition, as well as important financial benefits to Nebraska. They are providing classroom and laboratory experiences that attract some of the best students in the state and in the country.

Competition for outstanding faculty is fierce, and public universities are at an economic disadvantage compared to their private peers. To offer Nebraska the best in teaching and research, we need to invest both in people and in facilities. We will ask the Governor and legislature to help us provide the resources we need to recruit and retain the best people and to ensure the quality of our classrooms and laboratories.

If the success of our state depends on knowledge and innovation to be competitive—and I am convinced it does— a robust research agenda is essential. The creation, transmission and application of new knowledge will help shape our future. We must continue to invest in our areas of strength – areas where we are or can be national leaders.

Public universities have historically led the way in transmitting and applying new knowledge, and we will continue to do so. However, today's innovation-based economy demands new models of engagement between the university and the state, and new ways to share intellectual resources and research with Nebraska citizens and businesses. I will ask Nebraskans to help us determine how and when and where the university can be most helpful and engage most effectively.

Most states are struggling with severe fiscal challenges, and Nebraska is no exception. Nebraska's non-discretionary spending obligations are increasing dramatically, while our ability to address what we refer to as "discretionary" obligations – including higher education – continues to suffer.

If we continue on this path, it wouldn't take very long before everything else—including the University of Nebraska — is reduced to zero in the state budget. This is an unacceptable future. State investment in the university is essential, not just for the survival and growth of the University, but for the survival and growth of Nebraska.

The fundamental idea of public universities is that they were created *by* states to *serve* states. States provide core funding, and the university serves the state through teaching, research and outreach. But lately there has been talk about "privatizing" public universities to relieve states of some of their funding obligations. I think this is a bad idea.

Don't misunderstand – I am a strong proponent of diversifying our resources and increasing our federal funding. And no one values more than I do the private contributions that have been so important to this university. But when the basic compact breaks down, as it has started to in some states, I think it is the state that suffers. We must keep our great public universities public.

Over the past six months, I have had the privilege of traveling the state, talking with Nebraskans, visiting our campuses and other university facilities, and meeting with faculty, staff and students. I've tried to spend more time listening than speaking, to try to understand how other Nebraskans feel about their university.

The message I heard repeatedly is that the people of Nebraska love this university. To many, it is the most significant institution in the state. They recognize that it is not only the key to upward mobility for themselves and their children, but that the university is the key to a Nebraska that is prosperous and offers a good quality of life to its citizens. They believe—as do I—that the University of Nebraska is creating a place of promise for the next generation.

It is an honor and privilege to serve as president of this great institution. The University of Nebraska has a rich history and a bright future. I am delighted to have the opportunity to be part of it.