

**Keynote Address by West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee, Ed.D.**

**The Inauguration of Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D. as the Seventh President of  
Radford University**

**October 13, 2016 Investiture Ceremony**

Thank you, Dr. Scartelli.

I am honored to be here today for the investiture of Dr. Brian Hemphill as the seventh president of Radford University.

I have had the privilege of knowing Dr. Hemphill for a long time and working with him on several partnerships during his presidency of West Virginia State University.

I have met his gracious wife, Marisela Rosas Hemphill, and I have seen what a proud and devoted father he is to his children, Jada, Jordan, and those adorable twins, Catalina and Cruz.

I know that Radford has made the best possible choice in a leader.

He made a huge impact at West Virginia State, where fundraising, retention and graduation rates, and out-of-state enrollment all surged during his tenure.

Less tangibly — but more importantly — his presidency brought renewed energy and pride to that institution.

I am sorry that my state has lost Dr. Hemphill to our Eastern neighbor.

But perhaps we can still claim him, since many people around the country still think “West Virginia” is just the region surrounding Roanoke.

Although Dr. Hemphill has solid experience as a university president, he is obviously taking on a new challenge as president of a much larger university such as Radford.

And since I am here as acting as a sort of “dean of university presidents”— which translates into the oldest and most experienced president the event organizers could find who could still hobble to a podium—I hope Dr. Hemphill will not mind if I start by sharing some wisdom.

As I will explain in a few minutes, this is a challenging time to lead a large university.

Nationally, winds more potent than Hurricane Matthew are buffeting higher education, in the form of state budget cuts, the student debt crisis, aging faculties, and public doubts about the value of college.

Despite all that, however, my advice is not: “Run! Run like the Liberty Flames are chasing you down the soccer field!”

Because I know Dr. Hemphill has the knowledge and skill to navigate today's challenges.

Because, despite all the challenges, I still believe higher education's best days are ahead of us.

And because leading a large public university is just plain fun.

To prove it, I have prepared something I have become known for at West Virginia University — a top 10 list.

These lists are a popular feature of monthly "Gee Mail" videos I send out to the campus community.

If there is one thing I have learned in 36 years as a president, it is that humor is a wonderful tool for connecting with people—as long as you leave the Little Sisters of the Poor and your head football coach out of it.

So, without further ado, I present:

The top ten reasons why leading a large public university is awesome.

1. Free parking.
2. You get to attend every single Faculty Senate meeting. Do you know how much the average person would give for that opportunity?
3. You get to live in a house with a name. "Tyler House" sounds so much classier than just an address, doesn't it?
4. As Dr. Hemphill knows, a college president who wears bow-ties appears intellectual and quirky— compared to an average guy wearing bow-ties who looks like an aging hipster. By the way, Brian, I brought you a crate-load of bow-ties that I cannot use anymore because they are red — or scarlet, actually, but close enough.
5. As president, you are the most popular guy on campus — at least when a blizzard rolls through and you get to declare a snow day.
6. If you are nice to him, the Highlander might let you try on his kilt. Admittedly, though, the West Virginia University Mountaineer will not let me touch his musket.
7. You get to reach out to people on social media — and Dr. Hemphill has access to a better marketing tool than he may know: Adorable young twins.  
Nothing gets me more likes on Facebook than my three-year-old twin granddaughters. If my daughter had not graciously brought them into the world, I would have had to get a puggle.
8. At the Highlanders Festival games, people will praise your hammer throw — no matter how pathetic it is.
9. Your autograph is in high demand — at least on diplomas at graduation time.
10. And, finally, as a president, you will soon learn that the media hangs on every word you say. Trust me: There is no possible down side to this whatsoever.

The truth is, as a university president, you do command attention.

You have the responsibility to set the tone from the top on campus, and to make sure that the university vision and values are not just words on a page but something every community lives every day.

As a young president, I had the naïve expectation that this would happen automatically.

But I learned that our role as leaders is to make things right before they go wrong, to eliminate the possibility of wrong occurring, to nurture and maintain a culture that promotes excellence, creative thinking and respect for others.

Leading means engaging your whole campus in asking the important questions.

For what purpose are we here?

For what purpose do we conduct research?

For what purpose do we teach?

For what purpose do we raise funds and construct shiny new buildings and work hard to attract students?

If it is to chase acclaim or a higher slot in some arbitrary ranking, we do it for the wrong reasons.

If we teach because it is what our contracts say we must do, we are here for the wrong reasons.

If we conduct research without thinking of how it can improve and impact people's lives, we are here for the wrong reasons.

If we learn because we must check off certain boxes on our path to a job, we are here for the wrong reasons.

Because the real reason we are all here is to launch the ideas that will make our world a better place.

We live in an era when ideas will be the catalysts of virtually all progress.

The great fortunes of the world were once forged by muscle and sweat in the mills.

Increasingly today the great fortunes of the world are amassed from products of the mind.

Smokestacks were once the metric of prosperity.

Today, it is the college bell tower.

Imagination today is what steel was 120 years ago — the very building block of our future.

And that means that education has never been more vital.

Education expands individual opportunity, stimulates the economy, and creates jobs.

But it does more than that: It makes us free. And it opens the American dream to every one of us, forever.

That is the message that a university president must share, tirelessly.

Because this is an age of doubt.

People have doubts about the economy.

They have doubts about the future.

They have doubts about our political process—and, after what we have seen this election season, who can blame them?

Some people even doubt higher education.

For years, few questioned the value of a degree in building a successful life.

As costs have soared nationwide, that value has come into question.

The trend is understandable.

Tuition prices have outpaced inflation for decades, and that has forced students and parents into borrowing.

Wages for new college graduates have barely ticked up, while the average graduate's debt has more than doubled.

It adds up to more than \$1 trillion that about that Americans owe on student loans.

It adds up to a crisis.

And it is not the only one we are facing.

Our country is in danger of losing its status as the worldwide innovation leader.

Compared to other nations, fewer of our young adults are earning college degrees.

Four in ten students who start college fail to finish.

And government investment in research is growing at a slower rate in America than in countries such as China.

Meanwhile, many campuses are plagued by what I call the tyranny of the geritocracy—a strange concept, I know, coming from a person whose 70th birthday is in the rear view mirror.

But today faculty members are delaying retirement past age 65 at twice the rate of other workers.

It is great that we are able to contribute as long as possible.

But this situation is making it hard for young faculty members to advance in academia — and the energy and new ideas they bring to our profession is just as important as the experience and wisdom that older faculty provide.

And all this is taking place as states continue to cut budgets for colleges and universities—although I know Virginia has been more forward-thinking than many states about restoring funds and investing in higher education.

These are challenging times—so challenging that a lesser leader than Dr. Hemphill might have slipped off the stage and tossed his regalia in the nearest recycling bin on the way out of town.

He has not and will not do that because he is a great leader.

And he believes, as I do, that moments of great challenge are moments of greatest opportunity.

What this challenging moment demands is simply the best of us.

It demands that colleges and universities exercise their power as the central force in the creation of progress.

University presidents must think hard about the needs in their neighborhoods and in cities and villages around the world.

They must have the vision to re-imagine what education can and should look like in the 21st century.

And then they must have the will to make that historic change happen.

They must make real, strategic decisions about academic direction, about programs for investment and disinvestment.

They must learn to say the word "no," a word rarely used in higher education.

They must be problem-solvers, collaborators, innovators and risk-takers.

Above all, presidents must be advocates for the value of higher learning.

The earnings gap between college graduates and those with a high school diploma has never been higher.

Having an educated populace is also critical to our nation's future in the knowledge-powered global economy.

To maintain our innovation edge, we must educate more science, technology, engineering and math leaders.

But amid the push for STEM, we as presidents must also reinforce the value of the arts in this changing world.

The arts, quite simply, nourish the soul.

They make our lives richer, more compassionate, more fulfilled.

They are, in fact, what make us human.

We must never forget that our schools – all types and all levels – are where the mind and the imagination flourish.

We are repositories of human achievement, sanctuaries for the human spirit, and incubators of human aspiration.

In this important moment, in these challenging times, we must go beyond the answers we have always given and the boundaries we have always maintained.

We must see our fellow institutions as allies, not opponents.

There is infinite room in American higher education for improvement, expansion, and collaboration.

We must reach out, as never before, to others of good will and common intent.

We must initiate wholly new kinds of collaborations that extend our missions more completely and effectively to every corner of our nation and beyond.

We must liberate energies imprisoned by long-held habits, and habits of mind.

“But we have always done things this way!” is not an acceptable rationale for anything in higher education today.

I strongly believe that freedom begets human creativity and goodwill.

Making our own choices empowers us to take risks, to innovate, to fail — and to get up and try again.

My experience working with Dr. Hemphill has shown me that he has the vision to navigate all today’s challenges, and a passion for higher education that will help Radford thrive as never before.

He has the empathy to connect with students and understand their needs.

At West Virginia State, he did not stay in his office.

He was out and about constantly, talking to students, faculty and alumni.

The student body president, who joined him for lunch once a month, said: “I know how lucky I am. Whenever I talk to other student government people at conferences, they’re always like ‘He did what? Our president would never do that.’”

Dr. Hemphill also has the fundraising acumen to generate new investments on campus.

He also has a proven track record for creating strategic partnerships.

And Dr. Hemphill also has the wisdom to promote the free and open discussion that is the cornerstone of a university.

On a campus, people come together to argue and rebut, to debate and debunk. That is how we learn.

That is how we challenge our own ideas and open our minds.

Unfortunately, these days, we see minds closing and civil discourse withering all around us.

We see it in presidential primary debates that resemble episodes of Jerry Springer.

We see it across the Internet, which has become a platform for rude and sometimes vicious commentary.

We even see it on our nation’s campuses, where some students demand “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” to protect them from opposing viewpoints.

I know Dr. Hemphill believes in our students.

And he knows that a university’s role is not to make people comfortable; it is to make them think.

Because, despite all the challenges we face, our nation still looks to higher education for solutions.

They look to us because of the uniquely powerful role that education fills in America – to fulfill our country’s founding ideal of a meritocracy based on ability and action, to sustain our democracy through an informed citizenry, and to right the wrongs of bigotry and oppression.

Dr. Hemphill knows the reason colleges and universities are here—to help people live the American dream, and to help our world advance beyond our wildest dreams.

I know he will live that truth every day.

And he will shout it from these Blue Ridge mountaintops.

Congratulations, Dr. Hemphill, on becoming Radford University’s seventh president.