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Our University - First in Family

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First in Family

Universities exist to change people's lives. There are many directions that a university can take in defining its fundamental purpose. As we work to define ours at Southern it may be worthwhile to take a brief look back. The university was originally shaped as a normal school, and later recast as a research university during the Morris years. My sense of a research university is influenced heavily by the land grant tradition. As I understand our history at Southern, this influence was also strong in Morris' view of the university.

The need to respond to changes in industry and production in the United States, the change from draught animal agriculture and the industrialization of handicraft manufacturing, were the genesis of the Morrill Act that created the land grant universities. Coupled with the need for educated people, to move agriculture and industry into a new form of service to human kind was the recognition that learning was for the many -- rather than the few. This notion survives in all of the best universities, regardless of categorization.

Sec. 4. respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.

The understanding that Southern embraces regarding how higher education can transform society will have a powerful impact on our mission, and on each of us in our daily work. The way Southern attends to the needs of those who are the first in their families to attend university will determine to large extent the success of our institution over the next generation. Educational institutions exist as part of the larger social fabric. Our needs and actions cannot be divorced from the needs and actions of the larger social order. The well being of the free enterprise system is, to a great extent, strengthened or weakened by the way that a society creates and maximizes human potential. Lost opportunity in the development of people to their fullest potential creates a cost that undermines the success of our form of government.

The Morrill Act was configured to provide opportunity to the "industrial classes". Large numbers of people were methodically blocked from access to higher education, not by ethnicity, race or creed, but class. Since that time access is still limited by race and

ethnicity, even after class borders are eased. In order to break boundaries of race and ethnicity effectively, we must covet those who are the first in their family to attend college. The social order will change in a painstakingly slow manner. A diverse university creates a powerful and essential lesson in humanity, a lesson that is especially important in a global setting. Contemporary applications of this principle suggest that we need to find ways to address the needs of first generation college goers.

Attracting a diverse population will also ensure intellectual vitality. Affording opportunity to all racial and ethnic groups is critical to the future and is a goal to be embraced. However, a vision of diversity as a wellspring of academic energy goes beyond race and ethnicity to all kinds of diversity of thought and action, with many sources of origin. An educated person must be able to appreciate people who are different from themselves as well as ideas that challenge their views.

Two decidedly different, but equally important forces are at work in the environment that require diversity or assure brittleness.

On the one hand are the pragmatic forces of the market economy. We have become a knowledge-intensive society with an economy dominated by service industries, industries that require educated workers. It is imperative to educate citizens of all backgrounds to be the workforces of the future. On the other hand is the need for the intellectual vitality that diversity of all kinds produces. The vitality produced by different views of the world will in turn produce new knowledge.

A friend of mine, a college president at a Historically Black University, showed me statistics regarding the average incomes of the families of his entering freshmen class during a presentation. A few minutes later he revealed data on the average starting salaries of graduating seniors from his institution. I asked him to put the two slides together and we studied them. The starting salaries of the majority of the graduates, as individuals, exceeded the majority of the family incomes of the entering freshman. This presents a fundamental change in the lives of people, one at a time, and in turn, the social order.

We must aspire to a similar commitment at Southern. One of our targets for the next twenty years should be to focus on those students who break the barrier and attend college as the first in their family.