

**Learning Communities
State of the University Address
1998**

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Standing here on this campus in the center of Indiana, a state our university has served for the last two centuries, I am inspired by the legacy of our history and excited about the potential of our future.

Today we come together to take account of our university. I am here to tell you that the state of our university is good. Indeed, it is very good.

Our Strategic Directions Charter has successfully stimulated a climate of innovation on all our campuses. It has enabled us to enlarge our traditions of academic excellence, and it has helped us become more effective, efficient, and accountable in all of our operations. We have balanced our research and teaching missions. And we are forging dynamic and productive partnerships with business, industry, and the K-12 schools across the state.

Yes, the state of our university is good. But the good is sometimes the rival of the best, and I believe we can be better. Good enough can never be good enough, if we are to remain true to our legacy.

Our community of learning draws its lifeblood from many sources—from the staunch commitment to public higher education the authors of Indiana's first constitution made in 1816 when they provided for a state university; from the determination of such early student pioneers as Sarah Parke Morrison and Marcellus Neal, who believed that a public university must be open to all qualified students, regardless of gender or race; and from the inspired leadership of Herman B Wells, whose vision raised a fledgling research institution to international prominence. These sources have sustained us over the past two centuries and will continue to do so.

But most of all, we draw our vitality from the vast experience of learning—that essential activity that has always been and will continue to be the reason for our existence. This is the tie that binds us—president, faculty, undergraduates, graduate and professional students, and staff. This is why we are here.

It is IU's commitment to learning, a commitment which has prevailed throughout our history, that will enable us to prosper and grow in the next century. We will do so in an environment that, as

much as in the university's early days, may be indifferent or, at times, hostile to the very principles that sustain us.

When Indiana was still a sparsely settled frontier, our founders recognized the value of higher education and carved the beginnings of our university out of the wilderness. Now, we face new frontiers, not bounded by wide rivers and old-growth forests, but by decreasing public support for our enterprise. We are all familiar with the changes in the environment of higher education that make our tasks difficult—public and legislative priorities that have put IU's state allocation at the bottom of the Big Ten; public concern over accountability, especially concerning faculty rights and responsibilities; and increased competition from other sources of higher education, including for-profit providers and universities online. As a result, higher education today is in transition. Imminent changes could alter the very framework within which our students learn and our faculty teach.

Today, as we consider the health of our learning communities, I want to talk with you about three issues that have significant influence on the state of our university. These issues are the new emphasis on student-centered learning, the need to review our general education curriculum, and recent calls for dismantling the tenure system. I ask you to join me in this assessment, to add your voice and your perspective. We are in this together, and we will succeed in elevating IU's standing only if we all find ways to share our insights, to capitalize on our mutual strengths, and to learn from one another's experiences.

There is a critical conceptual change underway in the academy concerning the educational process. At its simplest, the educational process involves two main participants, those who impart and those who acquire knowledge and skills. In the past, the primary focus of universities has been on the former, on teaching.

What makes good teaching? The best pedagogical approaches address students' current level of knowledge and skills, their interests and motivations, and their modes of learning, which may differ among individuals. And, as we all know, good teaching, if it is to take root and blossom as learning, must be nurtured by a whole range of support services—by sound academic advising and mentoring, by robust libraries, by state-of-the-art information technology resources, by conscientious academic support offices, and by a safe and appealing campus environment. In this regard, the state of the university is very, very good and getting better all the time.

But while teaching remains important—there cannot be good education without good teaching—the conceptual focus in higher education is shifting away from those who teach and toward those who learn. An erudite, witty lecture, though perhaps valuable in itself, is not to be prized unless students learn. Students' needs should be the central consideration in the design of new curricula, in the development of electronic educational delivery systems, and in the revision of general education and disciplinary majors.

On all its campuses, Indiana University is becoming more student centered. This focus on students and learning in the educational process has had beneficial results, both at IU and at its sister institutions. However, as with every major conceptual shift, this one is complex, and brings with it unwanted side effects. In this case, an undesirable effect is the growth of consumerism among

students. Students sometimes picture themselves as customers who are buying a service, rather than entering into collaboration.

But students are not customers in a critically important way. A customer is someone whose contribution to the transaction is payment for service, such as repairing a car, or payment for goods, such as groceries. In the case of a university education, the students'—the customers'—involvement extends well beyond payment. A student's tuition buys only the opportunity for learning; the end-result, the acquired knowledge and skills, is the students' responsibility.

In no other customer/provider relationship is all the “heavy-lifting” accomplished by “the customer.” A student must become a working partner in this community in order to share in the learning it creates.

Some futurists have claimed that information technology will evolve to the point that traditional campus learning communities will become obsolete. Even though I am a true believer in the value of information technology to actively engage students in the learning process, I am convinced that such predictions are dead wrong! In the right hands, information technology is a useful tool. But it is not a substitute for a well functioning learning community.

The thought that all post-secondary education eventually will consist of people working alone in their rooms with computers is nothing less than absurd. For most students, the intrinsically important social connections that occur on campuses when students interact, not only with faculty, but each other and with visiting speakers and lecturers, cannot adequately be duplicated.

Rather, the ideal is that of *distributed education*. The primary variable in the equation is not the distance between teacher and student—not geography—but rather the extent to which information technology mediates and enhances learning. Indiana University is well positioned to be a national leader in using information technology to supplement learning through distributed education. Indeed, *Yahoo!* magazine has voted IUBloomington the nation's second leading wired public university. The university information technology strategic plan presently under development includes recommendations that will enable all campuses to even more effectively serve our students by providing them the best liberal education possible.

One of the best arguments for a liberal education comes from Benjamin Franklin. He was dining in Paris one evening when one of his fellow guests posed this question:

“What condition of man deserves the most pity?”

Each guest gave an example of a pitiable condition. When Franklin's turn came, he described humankind at its saddest by painting a picture of a lonesome man on a rainy day who does not know how to read. In Franklin's day, an educated person was defined as someone who could read, as someone who had literate access to the best that has been thought and written in western culture.

If he were asked that question today, I expect that Franklin would define an educated person in quite different terms. He would say that in our contemporary, media-rich, information-saturated

environment, we are at our most pitiable if we do not have a deep enough understanding of art, literature, philosophy, and the sciences to separate the wheat from the chaff in a way that helps answer the most fundamental questions: What is our purpose? What is the right way to act? What is our common good? The general education curriculum introduces the literacies necessary to answer these questions.

Since the turn of the century, American higher education has included the requirement that a student develop in-depth disciplinary knowledge through an interrelated series of courses called majors. That approach has become near universal, and it remains sound.

But, in addition, a well-designed undergraduate curriculum offers a general level of basic skills and knowledge that we see as the defining characteristics of an educated person. This knowledge base can be acquired in multiple ways. In an ideal general education curriculum, students learn how to read a broad array of cultural and written texts. These texts are chosen to deepen students' understanding of the social and economic forces that shape our lives, to offer insight into the scientific laws of nature, to bring alive the history of our nation, and that of other cultures. A sound general education also instills an appreciation of the human spirit expressed through art and music.

IU is different from most research universities, in that it is focused on the arts and sciences. Professional education is, of course, integral to the university, from business to social work, from medicine and the health sciences to law. But at its core, Indiana University is an arts and sciences institution. It is who we are. This orientation gives IU a notable advantage. Unfortunately, I fear, we may not be maximizing this advantage under our current general education structures. While scholarship has grown more interdisciplinary in the last few decades, by and large, our curricular structure have not. Thus, students are not ordinarily encouraged to examine the convergences between their major and larger societal, historical, and ethical questions.

While I believe that IU does provide a good general education and that our students are now well served—mostly because of the expertise and conscientiousness of the faculty—there is room for improvement in the structures of our general education curricula.

In fact, that process has already begun.

Recently, several committees of faculty and students examined general education and the undergraduate curriculum. In redesigning the first year experience, IUPUI developed University College to ensure that the requirements and purpose of general education meet the needs of today's students.

Likewise, Chancellor Gros Louis will soon be bringing forward proposals concerning general education to the Bloomington campus community. The findings of such committees will form the basis for debate and action.

Indeed, it is time for all IU campuses to perform a similar review, and I ask that each campus develop concrete plans for general education revisions by the end of this academic year.

Implementation of these revisions should begin in earnest next year.

It is notoriously difficult to change the curriculum. There are always interests that prefer the status quo to the risks of something new. Over time, university curricula tend to drift, mostly in response to disciplinary demands. That is especially true of general education curricula. It is time now to review IU's general education requirements. We have a responsibility to provide our students the best preparation for the twenty-first century.

There is another feature of general education that reaches beyond the curriculum, namely, educating the whole person. The ancient Greeks had high regard both for mental and physical acumen. We emulate them today in continuing their tradition of staging Olympic games.

However, physical soundness should not be restricted to the few elite athletes. Exercise and active participation should be the norm for those so capable. General education, broadly understood, includes the opportunity to learn about the benefits of wellness and fitness. That means gaining an understanding of the harmful effects of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Just as attending IU broadens students' intellectual purview, so too should it broaden their perspective on how to best lead their lives. That is not to say, however, that universities are centers of indoctrination on the right way to think, feel, or behave.

A vital and healthy learning community is an open marketplace of ideas, where members of the community can argue for or against any position without fear or threat, and where rational considerations determine the outcome of debate.

Intellectual honesty is not only consistent with, but presupposes, basic and universal human values. A learning community can function only if each member is treated with respect, as a human being.

It is never permissible, and certainly not at IU, to treat someone unjustly because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or physical disability. This point has nothing to do with affirmative action, or any political position or ideological stance. It is simply a question of respect for others, which is the defining characteristic of a successful community of learning.

As we take a clear-eyed look at the campus climate of our university, I think we must conclude there is room for improvement in this regard. For instance, this past year there were several incidents on the Bloomington campus that were disrespectful of African American students. That is unacceptable and intolerable. The Bloomington campus recently undertook an external review of its minority affairs offices, and, I look forward to the campus discussion of the recommendations this team of consultants will make.

As a public university, we are morally obligated to educate the state's high school graduates independently of race or ethnicity, family wealth, or background. A diverse student body, one that is truly representative of the state's population, benefits all students, in that it mirrors the society in which they will work and live.

Sheltered, artificial campus environments are not good preparation for life.

But minority student recruitment is not by itself sufficient. Because a healthy learning community provides both access and opportunities for success for all students, we must find ways to ensure that our minority students persist to graduation at a rate equivalent to that of the majority population. This must be a goal for each of our campuses.

Let me add a word about another responsibility of members of a learning community, civility. There is no requirement that each person must like everyone else. Some people are more compatible than others. But each must be civil to everyone else, students and faculty alike.

Here, too, liberal education has an important role to play. It helps to build commonalities among an increasingly diverse student body. Identity politics and subjective notions of truth can make it difficult for students to imagine what they have in common or to even begin to talk about their differences. Sharing a common vocabulary and common intellectual perspectives can help our students to build bridges across the differences that divide them.

The conceptual shift to a student-oriented, learning-centered community, illustrated by the ongoing renewal of the general education curriculum, makes it clear that Indiana University is achieving the proper balance between teaching and research. But even understanding our dual missions as a single continuum of activity, and not two separate competing ones, there must be an appropriate division of human resources in terms of time and energy.

Discovery is a phenomenon common to both student learning and research. There is a moment, for example after considerable attention, to a text or a mathematical problem, in which the student “gets it,” the “Ah-Ha” moment. That same experience may occur when a faculty member glimpses a path leading beyond the frontier of knowledge. Student learning and faculty learning are only artificially separated.

Faculty discovery—research—is part of the core mission of Indiana University. It is not an adjacent activity, ancillary to our teaching mission. Rather, it is one of the responsibilities of the university to enhance the current state of knowledge. We do that in the belief that knowledge is good in itself, that it is better to know than be ignorant, but also in the belief that knowledge enhances our quality of life.

Since the origins of universities, when people first came together to study and learn, since Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum, discovery and research have been essential to the human enterprise. Certainly this was the case in the great medieval universities in Europe, and it remains the case today. Intellectual and academic freedom is essential to this enterprise.

The linchpin of academic freedom in contemporary American higher education is the tenure system. Essentially, the tenure system is a compact between universities and faculty members, made through their lay governing boards. In this compact, the university provides faculty members stable employment and the right to exercise professional judgement free of threat in return for a commitment to fulfill the responsibilities of sound instruction and progressive research.

It is a compact that has proved its worth; and universities and individual faculty members are both advantaged by it. In fact, tenure has been a major factor enabling the United States to develop the

most successful higher education system in the world. Nonetheless, the tenure system has come under attack in recent years. Critics find it objectionable, even offensive.

Their objections, in some ways, are not new. There has always been a current of anti-intellectualism in America. And it might be thought that the attacks on tenure are simply an instance of this historical trend, and thus can be ignored. That would be a mistake. Contemporary critics of tenure have specific concerns, and these concerns need to be addressed directly.

Some believe that the tenure system is a disincentive for productivity. After all, productivity among U.S. workers has increased markedly in recent years, in part because global competition has caused American industry to restructure, to downsize and ‘right-size’ periodically. This line of argument asserts that if no one is guaranteed a job, but must constantly prove himself or herself, people will work harder, and they will be more productive.

Another criticism centers on the claim that tenure is a faculty sinecure; continued employment is guaranteed even in the case of incompetence. The response that there are procedures under which faculty members can be terminated belies the truth, since these sanctions are rarely if ever brought to bear. Neither of these objections to tenure is telling. While they have an emotional appeal, especially to those nurtured on a diet of mistrust, they do not bear the weight of scrutiny.

The first objection, that tenure actually provides a disincentive for productivity, results from a misunderstanding of the motivation of those who devote their lives to learning. Although remuneration is not irrelevant, pay is not the prime mover. Faculty members are bright, hard working people; and if accumulation of wealth were their driving force, many would have chosen to spend their working lives differently. Rather, the most significant motivation for faculty members is to gain knowledge and communicate it to others. There is satisfaction—and strong intellectual rewards—in making discoveries and sharing them. It does not matter whether it is a scientific breakthrough, a new interpretation of a text, or a noteworthy performance of a classical score. It is the activity itself, and the acknowledgment of others, that is rewarding. Being a faculty member is not a job: it’s a life.

The critic would likely reply that this picture is idealistic—and it is! But it is also accurate. Faculty members do not need the threat of termination to perform well. They require, rather, an intellectually stimulating environment full of students who desire to study, colleagues who appreciate their good work, and the opportunity to learn continually. Productivity is tied to motivation, and not everyone’s motivation is the accumulation of wealth, as the critics would have us believe.

To obtain tenure, a faculty member must undergo an extended, serious review. Indeed, the evaluation process for tenure is far more rigorous than employee reviews normally undertaken in the business world. Cutting through the details of the tenure review process, there are basically three propositions about which colleagues and administrative committees must be convinced.

The first is excellence in teaching. Not everyone is, or can be, a charismatic teacher. But everyone can be a good teacher. Good teaching is a function of both mastery of the subject matter and technique, and technique is a learnable skill. I do not agree with claims that good teaching is overly

difficult to assess. While it is true that teaching is more complex to evaluate than research, the major difference is that in teaching, a wide range of measures is required.

Student evaluations provide some information, but these measures of effectiveness must be supplemented by other sources of information for example direct peer review, examination of classroom materials, publication of pedagogical work, exit interviews of seniors, thesis and dissertation advising, and so on.

Other sources include exit interviews of seniors, examination of classroom materials, publication of pedagogical work, curricular development and innovation, and team teaching, boundary breaking interdisciplinary teaching.

Secondly, the tenure candidate must be capable of contributing to the store of human achievement through research, scholarship or creative work. After a probationary period of usually six years, judgements about future achievement can be reasonably made. Published papers or books, plus expert advice from external referees, enables the faculty candidate to demonstrate he or she understands the nature of a research program that addresses a serious issue and that he or she can sustain such a program. In the end, the evidence must be sufficient to persuade colleagues that a candidate for tenure has excellence of mind.

Thirdly, there must be evidence that the tenure candidate understands the role of a faculty member in rendering professional service. Universities operate under the principle of shared governance, which requires that faculty members actively participate in joint decision making. While untenured faculty members do not ordinarily devote a great deal of time to these matters, they are expected to be at least engaged in departmental activity. Additionally, they are to demonstrate a willingness toward and some success in professional service beyond the campus. Overall, the point is that there must be reason to believe that the tenure candidate will be a good university citizen and will use his or her professional expertise in the service of others.

Now the critic of tenure appeals to the second argument.

Although those who prove themselves during the tenure review process have demonstrated a commitment to learning and service, there is no guarantee that, over time, this commitment will not be forsaken. Faculty members' level of professional commitment may change for a number of reasons, ranging from personal ones to burnout to changing life interests.

In those cases, the university should be excused from the tenure compact and the faculty member should be terminated. However, the tenure system does not, in reality, work this way. Thus, faculty members continue in place regardless of their level of performance.

Here the critic is partly correct, even though the extent of the problem is often times exaggerated. It is an uncommon occurrence when a faculty member irretrievably loses his or her commitment to learning. The best response to this is not to dismantle the tenure system—as the critic concludes—but rather to take the steps necessary to deal with the individual problem cases.

That is why progressive university faculties, IU among them, have been addressing the issue of

post-tenure review. The efforts of faculty governance at IUB and IUPUI, together with serious and sustained attention by some trustees, have yielded significant progress. During this academic year, the matter will come to the University Faculty Council, whose debate and conclusions will assist the regional campuses in also reaching resolution. Though their formulations differ, both IUB and IUPUI propose to follow several principles in post-tenure reviews.

These include the recognition that not every tenured faculty member should be reviewed—that would be inefficient in the extreme. Rather, post-tenure review would be undertaken only in particular cases where evidence exists to warrant it. The primary objective of that review is professional renewal. Since the initial tenure review process indicated a strong commitment to learning, every effort should be made to renew that commitment.

My sense is that in the vast majority of cases, this commitment will be re-invigorated, and the faculty member's productive career will continue. But in those few instances in which the commitment to learning cannot be regained, sanctions or even termination may be appropriate. However, the termination process is distinct from post-tenure review, and it must follow all the legal and moral strictures of due process. That process must be fair, but it also timely.

It might be argued, finally, that tenured faculty members constitute a small portion of the instructional workforce of the university. Critics might claim that, since tenure-track junior faculty, clinical and part-time instructors, graduate students and professional staff do not enjoy the protections of tenure, tenure's benefits in preserving academic freedom are overstated.

It is true that, strictly speaking, protections of tenure accrue only to the senior faculty. However, the critic fails to understand the culture of academic freedom that pervades the university community because of the practice of tenure. While not everyone enjoys these contractual protections, the commitment to intellectual and professional freedom extends to all who are part of the learning community.

In summary, these criticisms of the tenure system are not telling. Some adjustments with respect to post-tenure review are needed, but that can be accomplished well within the confines of the tenure system. But showing that the criticisms are untoward, however, is only part of the story. Tenure has a strong, positive justification, and one worth reiterating.

The system of tenure had its origins in the early part of this century.

The American Association of University Professors articulated it as one of their founding principles in 1915, because they recognized the self-evident fact that tenure is necessary to protect faculty members from capricious or politically motivated termination. By the nature of the enterprise, faculty members who explore bold and fresh ideas will offend some who have strongly held political, social, or religious ideologies.

That is as true today as it was when the tenure system was first evolving. Tenure does not give license to say or do whatever one chooses. Rather, faculty members, in their professional capacity, are protected in exercising professional judgement in the classroom, in public lectures and publications.

Some have argued that tenure is anachronistic, that it was needed a half century ago, but not now. The courts provide protection for free speech, including those of faculty members. However, I have serious reservations about this rejoinder. The courts generally have not intervened in termination cases of faculty members, provided that due process has been observed. Moreover, external constituencies can apply a great deal of pressure on universities. One can imagine, for instance, consternation generated by a professor debunking creationism; or a faculty member in a medical school instructing about abortions; or someone making controversial statements about race relations; or arguing against a capitalistic market system; or discussing homosexuality or transgender issues; or any other matters of sexuality outside the mainstream.

Pressure against a faculty member may involve direct political action, such as rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and stirring the media. It may include attacks by legislators, complete with threats to state or federal funding. In the extreme, it can involve members of the university's governing board, as we have recently seen at some universities in other states. These attacks can also come from within the academic community. Administrators may adversely react to a faculty member's exercise of his or her professional judgement; and so can colleagues. One or a group of faculty members may threaten the academic freedom of another, not only for political or ideological reasons, but because of academic disciplinary disputes or even personal factors.

Indiana University is not immune to such attacks. The most well known is the assault on Alfred Kinsey. Then President Herman Wells was steadfast in his defense of Kinsey, despite strong pressure from state elected officials, alumni of the university, and even IU faculty members. Even today the attacks on the Kinsey Institute, both by elected officials and national political interest groups, persist. Indiana University continues to defend the academic rights of all scholars and artists.

Today, safeguarding academic freedom is as much an obligation of the university as it has ever been. It is possible that some other means will emerge to ensure these protections, for instance a more aggressive stance by the courts. But no such substitute for the protection afforded by the tenure system currently exists.

The right of intellectual freedom gives license to faculty and others to voice their professional opinion. That can make for noisy public conversation, an atmosphere that is sometimes viewed negatively by external observers, who are unaccustomed to dissidence. But it is an atmosphere that those in the academic community respect and welcome. Participatory decision making and intellectual debate are noisy and often inefficient. But they most often produce good outcomes and, like democracy itself, are preferable to the alternatives.

Let me conclude by reiterating that a learning community is special and precious.

It is more than a place, the physical university campus; it is a state of mind.

A learning community provides the intellectual freedom for students to explore the incredible extent of human knowledge and creativity, to test and form their life values and goals, all without threat. A learning community enables faculty members, working with students and staff, to expand

horizons, to test and push forward the frontiers of knowledge and art.

I never cease to be amazed about the reach of human creativity, how much we have come to know and do through the cumulative efforts of generations of scholars, scientists and artists.. But that amazement pales in comparison to the excitement of thinking about how much more can be known and understood about the nature of the universe, about the causes of disease, by how much greater insight into the human condition can be gained through literature, art and music.

“What is there that confers the noblest delight?” asked Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad*. He answered his question, in part, this way: “To give birth to an idea, to discover a great thought—an intellectual nugget, right under the dust of a field that many a brain-plough had gone over before. To find a new planet, to invent a new hinge, to find a way to make the lightnings carry your messages. To be the first—that is the idea.”

The excitement of it all is thrilling, and made possible by the existence of great learning communities, such as that of our own Indiana University. Thank you.