

Robert J. Zimmer

Address delivered at the University of Chicago's 500th Convocation

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This is the 500th time the University of Chicago has gathered in a formal convocation, a ritual that our first president William Rainey Harper declared was meant “to bind together into a unity the many complex and diverging forms of activity which constitute our university life and work.” Convocations afford a moment for reflection—on lessons of the past, aspirations for the future, and the University’s position in the world.

At its inception, the University of Chicago was a bold and imaginative experiment, rooted in the tradition of the European university but at the same time a great innovation in the younger and expanding United States. The first university in Europe was established in Bologna around the end of the 11th century, followed soon after by those in Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge. The origin of these universities was complex, each in their own way derived from specialized training schools. While powerful in influence over the centuries, some of the colleges attached to these universities had a relatively modest start. Even King’s College in Cambridge describes its own beginning as one with a provost and 70 poor scholars.

In contrast, William Rainey Harper and the other founders of the University of Chicago wanted this research university to appear whole, all at once, and remarkably they largely succeeded. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the University’s fifth president, said later of the founders that they were young and in a hurry. Harper’s goal was not only to create a great research university modeled on those of Europe and in particular Germany, but also to revolutionize the idea of higher education in the United States. The establishment of the University of Chicago was in fact a transformative moment for higher education in this country. The approach and attitude of the University at its founding have not only resonated through our own history, but had a powerful influence on the evolution of research universities throughout the nation.

Five of the first eleven convocation addresses at the University examined, in one manner or another, the nature of universities and their role in society. These topics reflected the intent of the University of Chicago to create a new model in the United States. The very first

convocation address was given by our first head of history, Hermann Eduard von Holst, and was entitled “The Need of Universities in the United States.” We may think we are familiar with the content of an address with this title as it is a common obligation of university administrators today to give such addresses. But most likely, we would be only partially correct and we might be surprised by Holst’s key point.

To contextualize Holst’s address, we must go back to a major turn taken by the European university in the 19th century in Germany. In 1810, 600 years after the establishment of the universities in Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, and 83 years before Holst’s convocation address, the University of Berlin was founded under the leadership of Wilhelm von Humboldt. He was deeply influenced by some of the ferment in thinking about universities in Germany at the time, in particular by the thinking of the philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. In Humboldt’s university, the spirit of the modern university was born, in what came to be known as the German model. This entailed three major ideas: first, that the goal of education was to teach students to think, not simply to master a craft; second, that research would play a role of central importance and teaching students how to think would be accomplished through the integration of research and teaching; and third, that the university should be independent, and not be in direct service to the state.

Schleiermacher, writing in 1808, describes the goal of university education as enabling students “to become aware of the principles of scholarship, so that they themselves gradually acquire the ability to investigate, invent, and to give account. This is the business of the university.”

As we can imagine, the effort to create and instill a new system met with considerable opposition from faculty invested in other approaches, particularly those with no emphasis on research and independent thought. But the model was powerful in its results and became not only the dominant model in Germany, but slowly spread its influence through Europe over the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. Germany developed into the world leader for science from the mid 19th century until the destruction that engulfed both Germany and the University of Berlin, beginning in the 1930’s. Some attribute this remarkable pre-1930’s success at least in part to the environment fostered by the German model, embracing intellectual freedom and rigorous thought.

It was with the background of this still growing influence of the German model in Europe that Holst stood to speak in Chicago on January 2, 1893. Holst's key point was there was in fact no real university in the United States at all—in the European, specifically German, sense—and one was badly needed. And speaking that day, Holst articulated the goal of university education, echoing Schleiermacher, as rendering students “independent, not only in technicalities, but in the first place, and above all, in thinking.”

Of course Harper and his colleagues, while deeply influenced by the German model, were not content with simple import. In his Liberal Baptist tradition, Harper sought to deploy this model in the service of American society on the basis of merit and open competition. The founders created a university that was likewise imbued with the energy, ambition, openness, and optimism of an expanding Chicago looking toward both the nation's origins in the east and its vast open areas to the west. The combined result was a new and instantly powerful force in higher education in the United States, one driven by ideas not by deference, and open to all from its inception. And just as the German model slowly but powerfully influenced universities in Europe, so the founding of the University of Chicago had a profound effect on American higher education. In many ways, Harper's University became a model that ultimately exerted a major influence on other—and older—higher education institutions in this country.

In the almost 117 years since the first convocation, the world has seen tumultuous transformations, some for better and others for worse, as well as extreme challenges, many of them ongoing. Through all this, the University has remained true to its lasting values that Holst called for and Harper instilled in the early days—that research and education environments go hand in hand, that they both need to be driven by an intense and singular focus on rigorous and intense inquiry in an environment of intellectual freedom, and that we are open to all people and all perspectives that can stand the scrutiny of argument.

Harper was forceful in articulating his belief in the power of his university to have a profound impact on society and to improve the quality of human life. He has of course been proven correct. The power of the ideas that have emanated from the University of Chicago and the achievements of our alumni who have been empowered by an education devoted to independent and critical thought have created a startling legacy of impact across the breadth of human activity. The extraordinary impact that the University has had can, I believe, be directly connected to the constancy of purpose we have maintained.

Our convocations embody two very distinctive aspects which reflect the seriousness of purpose and the focus of the University. We offer honorary degrees only for scholarship, not for other forms of accomplishment or celebrity, as we do again here today. It is a powerful statement of values and we stand virtually alone with this commitment. Second, an examination of the convocation addresses since 1893 shows a persistent focus on issues of substance rather than benign, and perhaps occasionally welcomed, advice for graduating students. Since 1970 all convocation addresses have been given by faculty of the University, and the eloquent words of Martin Marty have carried forth this tradition today. Neil Harris, a professor emeritus of history at the University, writes in the introduction to the volume celebrating this convocation, that the University's "convocation address, at this last moment of tutelary authority, is meant to reaffirm its own values." At convocations that call for reflection on the past and future, faculty bring to the convocation address the collective responsibility of stewardship of the University across the generations.

Unlike the years immediately following the University's founding and Holst's exhortation, we are no longer alone as a major research university in this country. Others have evolved toward our model, each in their own way. But, both in reality and in perception by colleagues across the world, we carry the flag of the highest scholarly and educational ideals of the research university. This is a set of values that must remain our guiding principles in all that we do.

There is another interesting lesson of the European university experience which relates to the dangers of success. Universities are not immune from a common reaction to success - the fog of complacency, comfort, and even ossification. Over time, a good deal of higher education in Europe succumbed to this, even with the powerful German model. In fact, considerable effort has taken place in recent years to rejuvenate the higher educational system in Europe.

An antidote to this complacency is that we must bring to our time the same energy, ambition, openness, and optimism that Harper and the founders brought to theirs. What does this entail? It entails a constant attention to renewal of the faculty and with it the ferment of new ideas. It is for this reason that I recently announced we will be expanding the faculty even in this time of economic uncertainty. It entails bringing the full diversity of perspectives to bear on the problems of our times. It is for this reason we remain fully

committed to the financial support of our students at all levels and to the expansion of this support we have undertaken in recent years. It entails continuing to support the evolution and vitality of our scholarly and education programs, and hence building the foundations for the impact they will have in the future. It is for this reason that we continue to invest, even in these times, in new libraries, laboratories, facilities, and opportunities for our faculty and students abroad.

And perhaps most importantly, it entails every one of us renewing, each day, our culture of openness, intensity, and rigor through our own actions. It is the fabric of this culture—of constant questioning and challenge, of evaluating our own assumptions, of energy in pursuit of clarity, of ideas and not deference, of belief in the impact of ideas on the quality of human life, with faculty, students, and staff engaged in a common enterprise—that has defined the University since the winter of 1893 when Holst spoke at the first convocation.

We are all stewards of the remarkable legacy we inherit. And we gather here as one community of common purpose, just as Harper envisioned we would—to celebrate our University's achievements, reaffirm our connection to its past, and to renew our highest aspirations for its future.