

Centennial Founders' Day Luncheon

March 22, 1958

Virgil M. Hancher
*President,
State University of Iowa*

Higher Education in Iowa

ON THIS OCCASION I have the honor and the privilege of bringing felicitations and best wishes to the Iowa State College from the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, the Association of Iowa College Presidents, and my alma mater, the State University of Iowa.

It is no small thing for an institution of higher learning to be founded on the open prairies of Iowa and within the space of 100 years to reach a position of national and international distinction in the fields of science and technology. Such a record of accomplishment in one brief century of existence leads one to speculate what this institution will be, indeed what all of our institutions will be, when this newly-settled land shall be as old as Oxford or Paris or Bologna or Rome or Athens.

We feel instinctively that we live in a time of decision, in a time when new forces are impinging upon us whose

38 *Commemorative Papers*

effect cannot be clearly calculated — the impact of expanding populations, the acceleration of travel and communication, the astounding growth of new knowledge, the potential of atomic energy and space machines. We feel instinctively, and I believe rightly, that the decisions which we are now making, and which we must make in the decades immediately ahead, will have profound effect upon the future of our state and of our nation.

The decisions to be made in higher education are no less fateful than those in other fields. We have a dual system of publicly controlled and privately controlled higher education in the United States. In recent decades approximately one-half the students beyond the high school have been in privately controlled colleges and universities and one-half in publicly controlled colleges and universities. However, the percentages and relationships vary from section to section of our country. Along the eastern seaboard, private colleges and universities were first established, and they early achieved preeminence in scholarship, numbers, and reputation. On the Pacific Coast, publicly controlled higher education achieved predominance through a combination of overwhelming numbers and high scholarship.

As so often happens, we in Iowa occupy a middle ground. Our oldest public and private institutions were established about a century ago. Our youngest are very new. We have approximately 50 institutions for general collegiate and university purposes beyond the high school, having a combined enrollment of approximately 47,000 students. The three state-supported four-year institutions enroll slightly more than 23,000 students; the four-year private colleges enroll nearly 19,000; the eight private junior colleges enroll about 2,400; and the sixteen public junior colleges enroll

about 2,500 students. Not only are we fortunate in having a fair distribution of enrollments between the public and the private institutions; we are fortunate, also, in having both public and private institutions that rank high among the colleges and universities of the nation.

This happy state of affairs, however, is no cause for self-congratulation and complacency. There are clouds on the horizon — no larger than a man's hand — which may not portend a change of weather, but which we would be ill-advised to ignore. We live in a state which for more than 25 years has been more dependent than most states upon the national prosperity for its own well-being. It has not been master of its own economic fate. It has too frequently been dependent on policies determined in Washington with all the consequences to morale that such dependency implies. Iowa is a state which is in economic transition. The small unit farm has become an anachronism in an age of mechanical farming. Farming has become, if not Big Business, at least bigger business, and the modern, successful farmer is a capitalist on an equal and sometimes a larger scale than the town or city businessman. But the increase in farm size and the mechanization of processes means the displacement of human beings and the end of a way of life for those displaced. Such adjustments are painful whether they take place in India and Pakistan or whether they take place in Rolfe or Cherokee or Harlan or Marengo or West Liberty. And a society in flux, a society in process of rapid change, stands in danger of resort to unwise and desperate and impetuous choices and remedies. We need to keep these risks in mind as we consider the future of higher education in Iowa.

In common with most states we face the promise and

problems of increasing enrollment in colleges and universities. They are less acute with us than with California and other states with exploding population; but nonetheless, the colleges and universities of Iowa, as well as the people who are their constituencies, will be called upon to meet the challenge of increasing numbers, as well as the increasingly rigorous intellectual demands of a vastly complex and rapidly changing society. How are these demands and challenges to be met? What guiding principles should be followed in meeting our needs? It would seem to me to be of the first importance that we assure the intellectual strength and eminence of our existing colleges and universities, both public and private, before we establish new ones. Gresham's Law says that bad money tends to drive out good money. Unfortunately, that law has its educational corollaries. Poor high schools tend to reduce the standards of good high schools. Poor high schools tend to reduce the standards of colleges and universities. Poor colleges and universities tend to reduce the standards of high-ranking colleges and universities. In this time of crisis, our emphasis should be on high standards and quality performance. This means no diminution in the intellectual strength and eminence of our existing colleges and universities. We need to put first things first.

A second guiding principle is that no new institutions for higher education should be established until it is first demonstrated that there is need for them — that they have a natural constituency not now served by an existing college or university to assure an enrollment and a financial base adequate to guarantee high standards of scholarship and performance. We have institutions in Iowa which compare with the best in the land. Unhappily, others have been

established less on the basis of existing needs than upon hopes for future development. When these hopes were disappointed, the institutions were left without a natural constituency to provide either enrollment or support. The history of those institutions has been one of heart-breaking endeavor and unrealized hopes.

We need not and we must not repeat that experience in future decades. We must not leave our descendents the collegiate equivalent of the "one-room school." There are few communities in Iowa where a high school graduate is more than 25 miles from some college or university. There are few communities in Iowa (and even fewer without a college) which could meet the minimum standards imposed by the state of California for the establishment of a junior college. Those minimum standards are an anticipated average daily attendance of 400 students and a district with a tax base of \$100,000,000. The solutions applicable to states with rapidly expanding urban population have little relevance to an agricultural state lacking great urban centers. While it is true that expensive education is not invariably good education, it is true that good education is usually expensive, and it is never cheap. Cheapness and shoddiness are always dangerously close together. For this state, therefore, the guiding principle and first concern should be the strengthening of its existing institutions, both private and public.

In the context of higher education in Iowa, it is the function of the three publicly-supported institutions of higher learning to complement, rather than supplant, the other institutions in the state. Our three institutions attempt to provide a coordinated system of higher education — with teacher training predominant at the Iowa

42 *Commemorative Papers*

State Teachers College; with the liberal arts and sciences, graduate study, and certain professions at the State University; with science and technology, the allied applied arts and sciences, graduate study, and certain other professions at the Iowa State College.

All of us, I am certain, will join in acclaiming the eminence of the Iowa State College on the 100th anniversary of its founding. In 1953 I had the good fortune to attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the Long Ashton Research Station of the University of Bristol. Great figures in agriculture were there from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and more distant parts of the Commonwealth. All knew the Iowa State College and its work, and many had visited here. Their tributes — and those from many other parts of the world — can well be cause for satisfaction to all who have played a part in building the national and international reputation of this institution, but I venture to believe that these tributes will be no idle satisfaction to the Iowa State College, but rather a challenge for even greater accomplishment in the next 100 years.