

## **Inaugural Speech – October 15, 2009**

Linda L. M. Bennett

Engaging the Future: Higher Education and the Common Good

The inauguration of a new president is, I hope, a rare event in the life of a university. It is a moment of great pomp and circumstance, but beyond the ritual, it is an opportunity for a community to gather, to speak clearly about purpose, and to commit itself to future endeavors.

To have Dr. David Rice, the founding president of USI, here today is a singular honor, and I thank him for his wisdom and his humanity in service to this University. And I am honored by the presence of Dr. H. Ray Hoops, whose dynamic leadership shepherded a phenomenal period of growth and development that changed USI's landscape. I am fortunate to take on the position of president of a university that has been so capably led by the first two presidents, and I hope my service will continue their good works.

I also want to express gratitude to Chair of the Board of Trustees, John Dunn, and to all members of the Board. The dedication of Trustees, past and current, to the University of Southern Indiana inspires me and I know that we have great opportunities ahead.

Not long ago, after I gave a presentation at an event, a friend came to me to talk about how my adjustment to my new post was going.

With no hesitation I told her that I worked with a great group of people and I considered myself fortunate. She smiled and said, “Linda, I know there are some audiences where you need to say ‘fortunate’ but there are times to say ‘blessed.’” She laughed and upon reflection I had to agree that I am indeed blessed.

I know that I am blessed to have dear members of my family who have traveled a distance to be here today, including my brother Jerry and his wife Randi from Methuen Massachusetts; my stepdaughter Sherri and her husband Jeff from Cincinnati; my stepson Bob and his partner Brett from Columbus Ohio; and my cousin Caroline and her husband Henry from Louisville. Friends have gathered from distant reaches, Mary and Don Durfee, with Mary serving as a delegate from Michigan Tech University; Stephen Wasby, from Cape Cod, Massachusetts and a delegate for the University of Oregon; Dick Flickinger, delegate for Wittenberg University, and his wife Marie from Springfield Ohio; and Diane Smith and her husband Doug from Cincinnati. Finally, I want to send a message of love to my mother in Cincinnati. She wanted to be here today but her health simply would not permit her to travel.

But there was no more fortunate or blessed day than 32 years ago when I married Stephen Bennett, who has been my most constant source of love, support, advice, and the occasionally necessary kick in the seat. I cannot imagine today happening without his loving wisdom. Stephen is serving as a delegate for the University of

Cincinnati, where he taught for more than 30 years and is professor emeritus of political science.

I stand here today as a beneficiary of the public education system. I started at the same place as many of our USI alumni and current students. My parents did not complete high school. In his junior year, my father left high school to join the Army during World War II; my mother was pulled home to be a young caretaker for her family before completing the eighth grade. My parents never owned a home and knew adversity most of their lives. They wanted much more for their children. Without the availability of a public education system and dedicated teachers at all levels, I would have traveled a different path in life. My appreciation for the University of Southern Indiana is deeply personal. I know the impact we are having, and will have in the future.

But let me turn my remarks to the inaugural theme and that is the connection between this University's role in regional engagement and its contributions to the common good. We in higher education don't speak nearly often enough about our role in contributing to a greater good. Many of our presentations about the benefits of college focus on the increase in personal income evident among those who attain a degree. Those figures are impressive:

- According to recent data, a full-time worker with a bachelor's degree earns 62 percent more than a co-worker with a high school diploma. [\$ 50,900 compared to \$ 31,500]<sup>i</sup>
- Those with master's degrees earned twice as much, and those with professional degrees three times as much as their high school graduate colleagues.
- College-educated workers are more likely to have access to employer-based pension and health insurance plans, though employer participation in health insurance plans has been decreasing in recent years.

Now, these are all noteworthy personal benefits of a college education and I celebrate every time I hear the reports of the high rate of employment of our graduates and how well regarded they are by employers all over the region.

But this is just the beginning of the story. Measuring the full benefits of higher education should include what some economists refer to as the “spillover” effects of higher education. Just to give you some examples:

- Increasing the proportion of a regional population holding a college degree results in increasing wages for all workers, including those without a high school degree.

- Unemployment and poverty rates are sharply lower among those with college degrees, resulting in far lower utilization of public assistance programs.
- Those with college degrees not only perceive themselves to be healthier, they usually are. They are more likely to seek preventive medical care that can prevent or forestall the onset of serious health conditions. They are less likely to smoke and more likely to exercise. College graduates are also more likely to donate blood.
- Volunteerism in the community increases with higher levels of education.
- The fundamental act of voting, essential to a democracy, is more prevalent among those with higher levels of education. And as for the political arena, those with higher levels of education are more likely to be tolerant of those with differing opinions, a characteristic much to be desired in today's political discourse.
- Higher education also feeds the cultural life of a region with higher levels of support for the arts. When we talk about the economic development needs of a region, we should remember that the cultural arts are critical to a vibrant community.

The founders of the University of Southern Indiana understood these benefits well. These visionary leaders formed Southern Indiana Higher Education, Inc. (or SIHE) to ensure the full development of a state-supported public university and knew the importance of access to higher education for a broad range of the public. That's why Robert Koch, Sr. announced in April of 1970, "We believe that in time, perhaps 25-50 years from now, the organization of SIHE and the land purchase will be regarded as one of the most significant and beneficial contributions ever made to the cultural and economic growth and stability of Southern Indiana."

Service to a greater good was a primary reason the University of Southern Indiana was created. It is our touchstone, and our mettle has been tested many times as the University has grown. But 44 years after our founding and a mere 24 years after our emergence as a separate public university, there is little doubt that USI is delivering on the promise of its founding.

- In a region where post-secondary educational attendance was a reality for only one in three high school graduates in the 1980s, now three out of four high school graduates continue their education, and many at USI.
- USI graduates are renowned surgeons, bank executives, artists, leaders in K-12 education, fashion designers, accounting executives, lawyers, nurses, elected officials,

hospital administrators --- and they are involved in their communities.

- The University is deeply involved in economic development in the region, serving as the higher education partner at Innovation Pointe in downtown Evansville, as well as serving a variety of businesses and not-for-profit organizations through its Center for Applied Research.
- USI's stewardship role for many of the historic sites in New Harmony, as well as its cultural offerings through the New Harmony Theatre, the Ropewalk Writers Retreat, and the New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art are significant contributions to cultural life in the region.
- And through its program, Connect with Southern Indiana, USI fosters the development of leadership in local communities throughout southwestern Indiana. This program received national recognition for innovation from the University Continuing Education Association in 2007.
- These activities are the main reason for recognition by the Carnegie Foundation, which in 2008 included USI among only 119 institutions nationwide to commend for the breadth of outreach and engagement efforts.

So what is next for USI? That's the question we are working on with the first institution-wide strategic planning process, launched this fall. The approach is a bit different than many planning processes because we began by asking all members of our campus community to share a story about an experience at USI that reflects the nature of campus life. We then asked participants to share their dreams for USI. These early conversations have already revealed some compelling core values:

- A sense of community, based on mutual respect, with the kind of strong relationships many of us would characterize as a family;
- Outstanding educational programs that are growing in recognition;
- Dedication to our students, to their learning both inside the classroom and as responsible citizens;
- Our strong ties to the surrounding region and integration of engagement into curricula across campus; and
- Maintenance of an environment that makes it possible for more students to afford a quality education.

In a reflection from one of our students [Raul Ramirez] participating the planning process:

*“When I came to visit campus, the professors were such an important part in making my decision. They know my name and are willing to*

*make time to help me with anything I need. They truly care about the students and that is not something you receive at every university. I want this relationship between professors and students to persevere no matter how much USI grows....I want USI to be recognized for the great educational programs it provides....I want this message of the greatness of USI to be spread nationwide.”*

A staff member offered that it was time for USI “to get a little swagger,” even to “shout from the rooftops” all that is accomplished on this campus. Well, we’ll soon have a tower on campus once the renovation of the old library and University Center is complete, but I don’t think I’ll wait until then to shout the good news about USI.

The University of Southern Indiana is well-positioned for leadership in public higher education. We all sense it. Now is the time for us to take the next steps in building the future for USI. We have great educational partners in this region and across the state of Indiana, and now is the time to strengthen those partnerships.

There are forces which encourage higher education institutions to collaborate on ways of building stronger networks to serve learners of all ages. We have taken a step in that direction as regional colleges and universities have gathered to cooperate on ways of helping Whirlpool employees through the closure of that plant. Our

recognition that the greater good is best served through collaborative efforts must shape other endeavors as well.

The future always holds challenges, but it also holds great opportunities. I look forward to my service as president of this great university, and I know we will work together to continue USI's commitment to serving the common good. That dedication, and the impact we have on our students and the quality of their lives, are what define us as an outstanding comprehensive public university.

Thank you all for being here today.

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<sup>i</sup> All data come from Sandy Baum and Jennifer Ma. [Education Pays, 2007](#). College Board. Washington, D.C.