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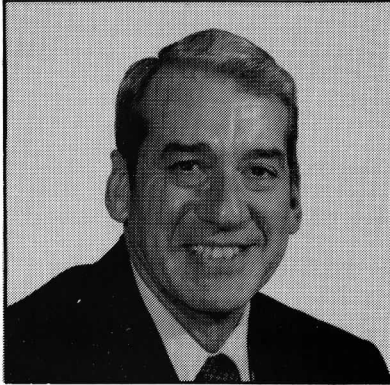
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**FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE:
An Address to the Faculty
of Governors State University**

LEO GOODMAN-MALAMUTH II
President,
Governors State University

Delivered Monday, November 22, 1976 in the
William E. Engbretson Conference Center
Governors State University
Park Forest South, Illinois





Leo Goodman-Malamuth II assumed the presidency of Governors State University September 1, 1976.

Dr. Goodman-Malamuth is former Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Chairman of the Academic Senate at California State University (Long Beach), where he served on the national committee on professional development of the American Association of University Administrators, the advisory board on Continuing Education, and the advisory board to the CSU and Colleges Consortium.

He is a member of the American Speech and Hearing Association, American Association for Higher Education, and American Association for Mental Deficiency, and associate editor of *Etc., A Review of General Semantics*.

A native of California, GSU's new president received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Speech Pathology and Communication from the University of Southern California.

**Focus on Excellence:
An Address
To the Faculty of Governors State University**

I have served as your President for almost three months—a very short time indeed when compared to the future life of this University. During these three months, however, I have had an opportunity to learn much about Governors State University, its students, faculty, staff, programs, goals, its successes, and, yes—its failures.

I am impressed. You have accomplished much. Each of you can identify the numerous successes in which you have played a part. Most of those successes are students, students who have come to Governors State seeking opportunity, an opportunity to learn from you. Your most significant reward lies in the knowledge that hundreds of students have left this University better prepared to assume the challenges of work, family and citizenship.

I would like to examine with you for the remainder of my address the nature and quality of the education our students should receive. What should this University be doing for its students? And why? What should be the purpose of this new University, which was born with a sense of mission and aspiration seemingly different from those that many other universities claim? How really different are we or should we be?

I intend to address these questions by examining Governors State University within the larger context of American higher education. I want to take both a historical and philosophical viewpoint. The major assumption is that Governors State University is and will continue to be devoted to the pursuit of excellence.

There are a number of approaches I could take in discussing the quality of this University with you, and there are some very important aspects I will not have time to discuss. It is my intention, however, to discuss Governors State University's place within the long tradition of American higher education, the importance of the faculty, the nature of the curriculum, the legitimate expectations of the students, and finally, what you can and should expect from me.

Historical Antecedents

Let us look in retrospect for a moment. Governors State University did not spring forth without philosophical and historical antecedents.

This University is grounded in a tradition of academic quality that traces its roots back to ancient Greece. Yet, we are as new as the technology of the 1970's. We must not disregard our roots, for they provide our solid foundation. At the same time I recognize that challenges unique to the 20th Century demand new and creative responses. We have reacted to these new challenges in ways that are different. As a matter of fact, we have initiated and integrated a number of different educational practices, the sum of which makes us, I feel, genuinely unique. None of the differences, however, considered in isolation, is really new. Some may be new to this region, this state, or even this decade. But the educational questions with which we grapple today, and even some of the solutions we suggest, have been pondered through the three hundred years of higher education in this country.

Organized higher education began in America with Harvard College in 1636. If Henry Dunster, the founder of Harvard, were to read a GSU catalogue, he would not find it at all unusual that we are concerned with competencies and not grades, that we have no departments, that we are preparing students for careers, and that we are dedicated to the integration of knowledge. What students should know and how well they should know it was an issue even during the Colonial Period. During that period students arrived at college from varying backgrounds and at different levels of preparation. Critics of the time raised serious questions about who was qualified to enter higher education and how one could tell whether the student was properly prepared. We grapple with these same questions every day. At GSU today we debate the relative merits of a strictly defined curriculum as compared to greater student freedom in choosing electives. It is interesting to note that one of the great educational controversies of the 19th Century was this same debate over electives. Other questions familiar to us were raised during that time. For example: What are the relative merits of self-motivation versus external compulsion? Should higher education be "practical" or "liberal"? Should the university be aristocratic and train the academically elite, or should it seek to attain a democratic all-inclusiveness?

At GSU we have attempted through co-operative education, field experiences, and credit for experiential learning to combine the knowledge imparted in the classroom with the real problems which students will encounter in the work place. We have attempted to combine theory with practice. And while this is an altogether ap-

propriate endeavor, it was also the very rationale for the Land Grant Act of 1862.

We must bear in mind that grades were not given until recently in American colleges and universities; that departments, faculty rank, and electives were introduced only in the late 19th Century; and that tenure was introduced only after 1920. Finally, of special interest to those of us at GSU are the comments of historians about the University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1825. "The whole philosophy of the University of Virginia was based on a confidence in the maturity of the student. He was supposed to have arrived at an age when he knew what to study. There was no annual promotion from class to class. A student completed the course as fast, or as slowly, as he was able."¹ How familiar it all seems.

The point I am trying to drive home is that our roots run deep. The concerns at GSU in 1976 are not totally dissimilar from those expressed over the past decades. We do need to seek 1976 answers for our questions, but we also need to be aware that our answers are in many ways as traditional as they are innovative. Governors State University, for all its differences, for all its unique jargon, for all its "action objectives," is a university which, in the final analysis, is committed to the same purposes as every other American college or university with which I am familiar—teaching, research and service.

My overriding concern at GSU is that we reassure ourselves that these functions are performed according to prescribed standards of excellence. Excellence, however, obtains meaning only within a context. One must ask what kind of excellence and for what purpose? A simple answer will not suffice. Academic excellence is achieved only when all the discrete parts which constitute a university are themselves excellent and are functioning cooperatively toward achieving the highest quality.

¹Brubacher, John S. and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: An American History, 1636-1956*, p. 98.

The Faculty

Faculty have the most important role to play in the achievement of excellence at this or any other university. Robert Hutchins made the observation that at any time, under any conditions, there is only one way to get a distinguished university. That is to get a distinguished faculty.

I believe you are a distinguished faculty. You come to this University with superior preparation and broad experience from a large number of excellent universities. There are weaknesses, even pockets of weakness, to be sure. But by and large you are an excellent, dedicated and concerned faculty. And you must be no less than an excellent, dedicated, and concerned faculty, for it is you who will have the greatest and most significant impact upon our students and our community. It is you who provide the most important role models, who design the curriculum, who set the standards, and who make the critical evaluations. You have an important role to play in governance, in participating in the setting of our priorities; in short, in influencing what we are and what we will be.

It is my firm belief that you have the major responsibility for maintaining the quality and excellence of this University. To do so requires that from time to time you must make some difficult, tough, and unpopular decisions. These decisions come in the realm of the budget, the curriculum, and in personnel matters. If we are to maintain excellence among our faculty, then it is incumbent upon you collectively and as individuals to exercise professional judgment and integrity in the selection of new colleagues, in recommendations for merit increases, for tenure, and even, when necessary, in the recommendation that some must be separated from this University. The pursuit of excellence excludes faculty tolerance of mediocrity and poor performance by colleagues. If the role of the faculty is as critical as I believe it to be, then it is essential that the actors in the role be outstanding persons. And it is you, who through your peer evaluations and peer judgments, have the most responsibility in assuring the maintenance of excellence among your faculty colleagues.

The Curriculum

Second only to the quality of the faculty is the quality of the curriculum. We must continually strive to improve that quality. But what should be the nature and purpose of the curriculum? Ten years ago many were saying that it was not the role of higher education to be concerned with career preparation. Colleges and universities should not, they said, educate the future captains of industry. Instead, the call was for relevance. Each individual was to be the best judge of what was relevant for him or her. Course requirements were dropped in colleges and universities across the nation. Gone were the requirements of western civilization, of foreign languages, of science, of mathematics, composition, philosophy and ethics. For some students, this milieu provided an opportunity to study fields of interest in depth and to investigate areas about which they knew little. For others, it provided an easy way to avoid the challenging and difficult and to select a potpourri of courses from the academic cafeteria.

Today, as I read through professional and semi-professional journals, I am struck by the appearance of two seemingly competing themes. One is that higher education should be practical and should be preparing students for careers. The second theme is that higher education should strive to educate the whole person; it should attempt to unify knowledge; it should provide an integrating perspective on social change. In sum, it should attempt to grapple with the reality of "how everything affects everything else."

At Governors State University we must deal directly with the duality of careerism and the liberal arts. Don't misunderstand me. I believe that the liberal arts, when properly understood, are integral to educationally respectable "careerism." Education *can* focus too narrowly on the vocational. When it does, education loses much of its essential richness. Conversely, if the abstract is emphasized to the detriment of career preparation, the student is also poorly served. Alfred North Whitehead, perhaps, summed it up best when he noted that there is no adequate technical education which is not liberal, and no liberal education which is not technical. We must consider the proper roles which both technique and intellectual vision must play for our students.

Our students should expect that they can leave Governors State University with the competence, based upon knowledge and ability, to succeed in the careers they have chosen. After all, we know that most of our students are here to prepare for careers they would not be eligible for, were it not for a college education. I recognize that, and I am comfortable with it.

In this highly technological society, however, when change is occurring at a greatly accelerated pace, our

students must be able to accommodate to change. They must learn to learn. A student competent in the technology of environmental science today will not be so within five years if he does not keep abreast of his field. We must instill in our students the *sure* knowledge that things will change, that the students themselves must change, and that they must acquire the most important "skill" of all—the ability to recognize and master the daily challenges to learn anew. In short, our students must have a general education in addition to career preparation. We could spend the next fifty years splitting hairs over the question of what a general education should mean for our students. And yet we all have a sense of what we mean. The Governors State University Liberal Education Project has identified a number of liberal education competencies our student should acquire. As a start, let us examine those competencies, modify them, if we wish, so that most of us are satisfied that the competencies can serve our students. Then let us devise a curriculum to achieve them. We must make every effort to insure that each graduate of this University has received an overview, and a sense of interrelatedness and wholism. It is an immense task. I do not underestimate the complexity. Neither do I underestimate the importance.

The Students

To discuss our students and what they should expect of an excellent university education is to discuss matters that transcend the students themselves. Who are our students? You know this far better than I. Let me review the now familiar picture. They are older than students at other universities—their average age is about 31. They are working. They have already graduated from a junior college. They are practical and career minded. An education is serious business to them. For some, it is fair to say that a diploma is more important than an education—but so it has always been in higher education.

Students come to us with varying academic abilities. While some are the equal of students at the most selective universities, others have difficulty with computational skills, cannot write a cogent paragraph, and perhaps read at an eighth grade level of comprehension. We are an open door university. We have not set our admissions standards—these are the result of public policy beyond our control. But I am comfortable with our admissions policies and with our students, for I firmly believe that each and every person deserves the opportunity of access in order to seek as much education as he or she wishes and is able to achieve. It is the habit of the elementary school teachers and principals to blame the home for the low abilities of their students. The junior high schools blame the elementary schools and the high schools hold the junior high school responsible. We are not responsible for the academic ability of our students when they walk in our doors. But the buck must stop here.

While we cannot control what our students know, and while we recognize their varying abilities when they arrive, we must establish and maintain a standard of excellence they must obtain before they graduate. Our students should demand this of us and it is altogether reasonable that graduate schools, professional schools, potential employers, and the taxpayers of Illinois should expect no less. The diploma, be it from high school or university, should mean more than "time served." There is and should be a minimal expectation by both our students and by society as to what a Governors State graduate can do. And again, while this question is of intrinsic interest to students, it is you the faculty who determine what a diploma from Governors State University shall mean.

This University must devise ways to assist students in obtaining the education they seek. We must recognize forthrightly, as I mentioned earlier, that some students arrive with the need for additional study skills and basic foundations. We must bend every effort to work with these students, for many do have the ability if only they were given the opportunity and the excellent teaching

they need. To this end, I have placed high priority on a Learning Assistance Center to help our students obtain the skills necessary to succeed at Governors State University. I believe this facility will aid our students immensely.

But even with a Learning Assistance Center, some students who enter our doors will not leave with a degree in hand. This is an unfortunate fact of educational life. But if a student lacks perseverance, or interest, or if he or she simply does not do what is required, then that student will not graduate. On the other hand, we must make every honest effort to help and motivate our students. It is our responsibility to help them learn what we have to teach.

Let us never, though, declare the incompetent as competent. Let us be constantly mindful that we are a university, and that we are devoted to the pursuit of excellence both for ourselves and our students. The declaration that a student has achieved the competencies of your module and of your program, must be a dispassionate educational judgment. We must not do as others before us and pass students for reasons that are not related to academic quality and competence. One further word on this point. Were we ever to grow careless in our determination of students' competence, we would most assuredly fail ourselves, the academy, the citizens of Illinois, and most poignantly, our students themselves.

The Role of the President

Throughout this address I have shared with you my perceptions of the importance of the faculty and the curriculum. I also have spoken about what our students should expect of us. As I close let me attempt to answer a question which you might justly address to me: What kind of leadership might we expect from the President?

First, I assure you that I shall do all I can to see that your teaching and research activities are facilitated by efficient and sensitive administrative and support services. I have heard that the history of support services at Governors State University has not been an altogether happy one. Support services are, however, improving and they will continue to improve. Further, I have, as you know, placed a high priority on reassessing the University's administrative structure. This reassessment is, naturally, a sensitive matter, but we are proceeding in resolute good faith. The University Assembly has appointed, at my request, a University-wide committee to examine the current administrative structure and to make recommendations for its improvement.

A more essential condition for excellence, more essential even than efficient administrative and support services, is University morale. I intend to work toward the goal of a University grounded in trust between and among persons. For community itself can flourish only where there is trust. And morale is high only where there is community, where many individuals, sharing mutual respect and trust, work energetically toward common goals.

It is not as easy today as it once was to describe a university as a "community." A divided and confused society has left its mark on the academy. Nevertheless I maintain that a university is but a poor imitation of what it might and should be unless an atmosphere of trust and shared goals prevails. For only in such a milieu are *all* the creative differences and tensions, so crucial to the life and health of a university, free to find expression. Where trust is lacking, and distrust predominates, leadership falls to the demagogue. Where trust is the rule, a community of academically free individuals can, through vigorous research, debate and reasoned compromise, pursue common goals.

Why do I place such emphasis on community, trust and morale? Because, I feel, the atmosphere engendered by these qualities is a *sine qua non* for any genuine pursuit of excellence worthy of the name "academic." Only in the fertile university soil of mutually earned trust and respect will the delicate seed we call "academic excellence" continue to grow. We are educators. Ours is a solemn responsibility.

I am optimistic. We have done much that is truly ex-

cellent, and there is much more we can do. We must remember that we are a University quite literally still in our infancy. Of course, there have been mistakes, and many of them are yet to be remedied. We are all aware of problem areas which demand our attention. But we shall improve. We will become better educated about what we must do and how we must do it in order to make this University function effectively and in the best interests of our students, faculty, staff and community.

I do not want to deal in platitudes but there is no problem facing this University that we cannot solve. Some will take longer than others and there will be many frustrations. But we have the human talent to accomplish the task.

Ours is not the task of building anew. Rather, it is more like a continuous process of evolution, because this University, like all other universities, will never be complete. As we evolve, we will find the impulse toward change to be in conflict with the impulse to conserve.

We should recognize this tension at the outset and resolve to make it a creative one which will make this a better University tomorrow than it is today.