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'The Coming Year': President Bill Perry Speaks to EIU's Faculty/Staff

Aug-31-2011

The American poet Mary Oliver once wrote(1):

" I like to say that I write poems for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now."

Today, we together, faculty and staff, are like the poet Mary Oliver -- we are creating something for the future. We are not writing poetry together, but we are building a university together: We are building a university for a student we do not know, who will be born this year, somewhere in the world. Unlike Mary Oliver, who will not be present for her reader hundreds of years from now, many of us will be here for our student 18 or so years from today. We must plan for that student. We must do so with the passion brought by poet to verse, but realize our poetry of university building is in continual revision around important academic constancies. Those constancies, upheld by the faculty, fuel my optimism for EIU's future.

In this year before us, we are engaged in a strategic planning process. We began in January and have seen emerge from dozens of focused discussions six themes of importance. After significant work to occur this fall, we will present a plan to the Board of Trustees in January of 2012. I will say more about the plan in a few moments. But first, I will comment on planning in general.

Robert Heilbroner's book, "The Future as History," speaks in many ways to one who wishes to plan. Heilbroner writes about the philosophy of optimism and says the following(2) :

"At bottom, a philosophy of optimism is an historic attitude toward the future -- an attitude based on the tacit premise that the future will accommodate the striving we bring to it."

That is the philosophy we bring to our planning process. Surely, we scan the current environment and trends, but we do not accept the premise that we are on a rudderless raft in, say, the Mississippi River. We do accept the premise that we sail in a vessel with tiller and means of propulsion in a body of water with natural limits. We can move across or even against the current if we plan to do so. In planning we may even suppose we will improve or add to our ship to enable even more possible destinations. Also, while we know that history influences our future, we do not accept the premise that history determines our future.

Imagine those faculty and staff who have gone before us in the history of Eastern Illinois University. Could Livingston Lord, president of a newborn normal school, and the faculty and staff at that time have anticipated the Great Depression, the ACT and SAT, online learning, cell phones, Facebook, texting, tweeting, the GI Bill, or Eastern growing to more than 10,000 students? They had to deal with the history they knew and had to plan to grow and change in the context of emerging historical currents. I would say they, and those who followed them, worked with a philosophy of optimism, and it has paid off.

Today when we plan, we have to ask ourselves what is possible and what is impossible given the current state of the university, society and historical forces. Heilbroner has something to say about this, as well(3).

*"But the fact that the **main direction** of historic movement is too deeply rooted to be turned aside does not mean that our future is therefore caught in a deterministic vise. It is not just necessity, but a mixture of necessity and freedom which, as always, confronts us as a condition of historic existence. If the idea of the future as history tells us what is not "possible" for our kind of society to do, it also makes clear what **is possible**."*

We are engaged in planning as optimists, carefully gauging the possibilities for EIU.

Our strategic planning has been led by a steering committee, co-chaired by Professor Assege Haile-Mariam of the Department of Psychology; Bill Weber, professor of economics and vice president for business affairs, and Ken Baker, director of Campus Recreation. The committee is large, and the majority of the membership are faculty members. You can access the current status of the planning process with one click on the "Collaborative Strategic Planning" button near the bottom of our main webpage. There you will see that this process has involved hundreds of individuals in dozens of meetings facilitated by the steering committee. The steering committee has found six areas of strategic importance to have emerged. They are, in alphabetical order:

- Academic Excellence
- Campus and Community Life
- Emerging Technologies
- Financial Sustainability
- Global Competition and Changing Demographics



EIU President William L. Perry

- Marketing and Communication

Concept papers for these areas have been developed by the committee and those papers will be posted on the strategic planning website next week. A vision conference will be held in late September. After subsequent work and communication with the campus, the plan will be shaped for presentation to the Board of Trustees. In the spring, we will make initial investments in selected objectives in the plan. I thank the steering committee for bringing the planning process to its current stage.

Strategic planning is only one of several developments for our campus this coming year. I also note the following:

We welcome a strong group of new faculty recruited to the university. We look forward to the energy, scholarly viewpoints and teaching perspectives the new faculty bring to EIU. I thank all the faculty search committees on this very successful recruiting effort. This year's class of new students has brought significant energy to Eastern Reads, Jumpstart to GIVE, and the first week of classes. I have heard from several faculty and staff strong positive comments about this class. In addition, I have received many positive community comments with respect to the service attitude and actions of our new students. Did you know that in the past four years, our students have virtually doubled their aggregate service to 7,500 students involved in 90,000 hours of service annually? Faculty and staff commitment and involvement have been key to this progress. I want to thank everyone who made the past two-and-one-half weeks very successful, from move-in, to Eastern Reads, to orientation, to the classroom. It requires a huge amount of work -- thanks to all who shared in the effort. With his convocation address, Professor of History and Faculty Laureate David Smith set the stage for a great academic year. This will be an invigorating year for all of us.

The Campaign for Eastern continues to do very well. In particular, the participation of our own faculty and staff in giving to EIU jumped 75 percent in one year. In addition, we had several departments with 100 percent participation. Participation is the name of the game. Thanks go to the co-chairs of the faculty staff campaign, Roger Beck, professor of history, Sandy Bingham-Porter, senior applications analyst in Information Technology Services, and Ken Baker, director of Campus Recreation, for their great work. Also, thanks to all the department-level volunteers who worked on the campaign. Remember, in the faculty staff campaign you can direct your giving to what you think is important -- some departments have established scholarships or funds to enhance operations. I'm looking forward to even more participation this year.

The Renewable Energy Center is in operation and a formal grand opening will be held on October 7, 2011. Our efforts in sustainability and faculty leadership in related academic disciplines are leading to a minor, a master's degree, and industry support for research and education. Our newly approved Center for Clean Energy Research and Education is attracting attention. EIU will be the "go-to location" to see the combination of bench scale and commercial scale gasification in support of research, education and regional economic development.

The Committee on Retention Efforts has rolled out the Early Alert System that makes it easy for faculty to alert support staff at the earliest possible time of retention issues with their students. Our students chose us and we chose them. Making every effort to support our students at the first sign of trouble is the right thing to do. Thanks to all the members of the Committee on Retention Efforts and the faculty who are piloting the Early Alert System for their work and attention to retention.

The Integrative Learning initiative continues to move forward. The Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Science webpage links to two videos that give several faculty and student perspectives on integrative learning in that college. I recommend those videos to you. Last fall, I developed my approach to integrative learning in my linear algebra class. It required time and effort but made a difference to the students, as I found in their reflective essays at the end of the semester.

I am looking forward to departmental visits this year. This will be the third round of such visits, in which I listen to your suggestions, observations and concerns about the university.

We have established the President's Research Fund. Competition for grants up to \$20,000 is open and the deadline for proposals is October 3. I encourage you to consider submitting a proposal. Details are available on the Research and Sponsored Programs website. I continue to be inspired by you. You continue to build scholarly expertise, you bring excellence and rigor to the classroom, and you build personal relationships with our students. Thank you for all you do for EIU's academic reputation.

I take every opportunity to tell our students that they have chosen a university that offers an educational experience second to none -- an educational experience designed and carried out by you, the faculty. I encourage your enthusiasm in your teaching and research. The manner of Chaucer's clerk, "*And he would gladly learn and gladly teach*(4)," provides great advice. Your enthusiasm, the "*gladly*," will capture the imagination of your students and change their lives. And changing lives is at the heart and soul of our calling to higher education. Let us resolve to change the lives of our students this year, with our expertise and enthusiasm. Thank you.

References

- (1) Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994. 110.
- (2) Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Future as History*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961. 17.
- (3) Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Future as History*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961. 186-187.
- (4) Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963. 25.