

Henrietta Rotary Club Presentation

December 11, 2007

Bill Destler, President

Rochester Institute of Technology

It is with the greatest pleasure that I speak to all of you today. The contributions that Rotarians like you make to our community are real and significant, and I am so grateful for your continuing efforts to improve the lives of others. As you all know, I have been “on the job” for six months now, and Rebecca and I are truly grateful for the warm welcome that has been provided to us by the entire Rochester community. Let me state at the outset that I am committed to continuing the warm and supportive relationship between RIT and Henrietta and its citizens. If, as time goes by, issues develop in this relationship that need attention, you have my firm commitment to address them in a positive and constructive manner.

When I was first contacted more than a year ago concerning the opportunity to lead RIT, I must confess that, while I knew of the institution by reputation, I knew little in detail about RIT or its programs. What I have found over the course of the past year, and especially since joining the RIT family in July, has been a revelation. RIT is truly a national treasure waiting to be discovered. So, from the standpoint of one who started looking at RIT as an outsider looking in, and who now has had the chance to learn even more about this remarkable institution as an insider, here’s some of what I’ve learned:

First, RIT has roots dating back to 1829 with the formation of the Rochester Athenaeum, a kind of self-edification gathering of Rochester businessmen. The Athenaeum was merged in 1891 with the Mechanics Institute, an educational institution established in 1885 to train workers for Rochester’s growing industries. The newly merged institution became the Rochester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute. The RAMI was later renamed in the Rochester Institute of Technology in the 1940’s. What many people do not realize, however, is that RIT did not offer bachelor’s degrees until 1956, so in the sense that we usually understand a college or university to be an institution that offers bachelor’s degrees and higher, RIT is a very young university, indeed. Today, amazingly, RIT offers more than 200 degree programs including many masters’ and Ph.D. programs.

RIT, of course, initially had a downtown Rochester campus, but when State and City officials announced plans in the 1960’s to build an “inner loop” right through the RIT campus, the Board of Trustees made the courageous decision to

move the entire institution to Henrietta. In an act of prescience rarely seen in higher education, the trustees purchased about 1400 acres of farmland on which to build the new campus. At the time, RIT was a small technical college and many probably wondered why so much land had to be purchased, but since 1968 over 200 buildings have been built on the Henrietta campus and RIT has grown to be one of the nation's 15 largest private colleges and universities in terms of undergraduate enrollment. I wonder how many Rochesterians realize that the growth of RIT in terms of academic programs, student enrollment, and physical facilities has been as rapid as that of any institution of higher education in the U.S. over the past fifty years.

And it isn't just in terms of size that RIT has grown over the past few decades. RIT's programs in photography, art, printing, manufacturing, imaging, crafts, science and engineering, and NTID's programs for the deaf and hard-of-hearing have been regarded among the nation's very best for many years. Recently, moreover, RIT's has developed an emerging reputation for its work in astrophysics, sustainability, color science, film and animation, and microsystems among others.

But the thing that initially caught my attention was the unusual range of academic programs offered at RIT. RIT's unique program mix of the traditional "institute of technology" programs in science, technology, engineering, and business combined with its strong programs in the liberal, design, and creative arts and the unique diversity provided by the National Institute for the Deaf, gives the Institute the potential to become a national center of creativity and innovation unlike any other. Where else do photographers and engineers study side-by-side? What other higher education institution has both a Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences *and* a School of American Crafts? Where else do hearing and deaf students work together on student projects?

It is this combination of "right brain" and "left brain" talents at RIT that seems to me to be the most significant distinguishing feature of the institution, and one that can lead RIT to even greater national and international prominence. So, with your indulgence, let's imagine together how RIT might develop into a real "category of one" university to the benefit of Rochester, New York State, and the nation:

Imagine, if you will, a university that not only educates its students for productive careers, but reinforces America's greatest competitive advantages by expecting creativity, invention, and innovation of every student before graduation.

Imagine a university that teaches scientists and engineers how artists envision and create new works. Imagine a university that uses diversity as a creative engine in this process and where the barriers between the hearing and the deaf dissolve in the face of this innovative energy. Imagine the first student innovation center on the RIT campus and an innovation festival each year at RIT at which these efforts, hundreds of them, would be showcased. Imagine RIT, not as a “research university” or a “teaching university”, but as the first “innovation university.” We are already at work to make this a reality at RIT. In fact, the first “RIT Innovation and Creativity Festival” will be held on May 3, so mark your calendars!

Imagine, if you will, a university in which complex social problems, sometimes called “wicked problems”, are not attacked by individuals working in disciplinary silos, but rather by teams of students and faculty from all disciplines who, from the outset, benefit from the ideas and contributions of those from very different perspectives. Imagine RIT being the home of the first “Team PhD” program.

Finally, imagine, if you will, a university with close ties to the corporate sector (sound familiar) that decides to make its faculty and staff, graduate and undergraduate students, and facilities available to companies to carry out short and medium term corporate research and development projects at low cost and without the usual intellectual property fights that usually derail such efforts. Imagine a “Corporate R&D at RIT” program in which hundreds of companies discover that they can once again afford to do new product research and development, while identifying future employees at the same time.

And there is another asset that RIT can draw upon in pursuit of these goals. Rochester, it turns out, may well be an ideal place for RIT to be located in to make its mark in these areas. The remarkable recovery of the Rochester economy after the significant downsizing of its largest corporate enterprises has been, in large measure, because of the many new companies that have been launched by talented community leaders such as all of you. In fact, I recently heard at a meeting hosted by the Rochester Business Alliance that the Rochester region has more companies in the process of formation than any other place in New York State. What fertile ground for RIT to be planted in! In addition, Rochester has a proud historic tradition of valuing technology, business, and the arts. RIT and Rochester are therefore well-situated to be the place where the “right brain” meets the “left brain” collide in an explosion of innovative energy.

During the coming year, I will be challenging the RIT community and our Rochester community friends to consider ways in which we could, working together, capture this new “high ground” in higher education. As an example, perhaps we could use our newly established Golisano Institute for Sustainability as the platform for bringing these disparate talents together to work on turning sustainability into a regional economic engine. Imagine how exciting it would be to shake up the interface between the corporate sector and higher education with these ideas and others.

In conclusion, I have been asked to say a few words about Park Point, the new “college town” development being constructed at the corner of Jefferson and John Street. This impressive project, which will include housing for over 900, our Barnes & Noble campus bookstore, and numerous other shops and restaurants, is intended to provide an “edge of campus” gathering place for RIT students, faculty, and staff and other community members. It is being built in response to numerous requests from our students for such a venue close to campus, and is a cooperative venture with Wilmorite that is scheduled to open in the Summer of 2008. It will be operated by Wilmorite as a private venture on land purchased from RIT, but in the future RIT will have the option to reclaim the entire development as part of our Henrietta campus.

Thanks again for the invitation to join you here today. And thanks again for all you do to support our community.