

Inaugural Address
Bill Destler, President
Rochester Institute of Technology
November 9, 2007

It is with the greatest pleasure and pride that I speak to you today as RIT's ninth president, and it is also with a deep sense of humility and the knowledge that I could not have reached this point in my life without the assistance of so many others, including many of you here today. Thanks especially to President Skorton, who has honored both RIT and me by his presence here today. He represents, in a very real sense, all those who have supported my own educational and personal development as I have moved to this point in my life. It is also my good fortune to follow Al Simone in this role, and those are big shoes to fill (thanks, Al!). Standing here on the shoulders of so many others, I am more than a bit uncomfortable in having such a fuss made about me. In fact, when Board of Trustees Chair Mike Morley told me he was initiating planning for this inaugural, I asked him if such a celebration was really necessary, and he said, "Bill, it isn't really about you. It's about RIT at an important point in its history." And therein, of course, lies the real reason for today's ceremony.

As we just saw in the video, RIT's history is as interesting and surprising as are the Institute's current faculty, staff, students, and programs.

While our roots date back to 1829, we did not offer bachelor's degrees until the mid-1950s. Today, amazingly, RIT offers more than 250 degree programs including many master's and Ph.D. programs. Back in the 1960s, many people probably wondered why a small technical college would relocate to 1,300 acres of farmland. It was a courageous move by the Board of Trustees. 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 people inside and outside of the Rochester region 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 has developed an emerging reputation for its work in

astrophysics, microsystems, color science, film and animation, and sustainability 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 University 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 for 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. I have been talking to the entire community here about having RIT known not just as a "teaching university" or a "research university", but as a real "innovation university". Whether we aspire to call RIT an "innovation university, an "imagineneering university", or for the right brainers, perhaps, an "imageineering university", its potential to be a source of new ideas is even greater than we currently realize. Let me give you a recent example of the opportunity, and challenge, that we have before us. At our recent Fall "Brick City Homecoming" celebration, we once again celebrated the arrival of Fall with the traditional RIT "pumpkin launching" competition. In this event, teams of Freshman students from our College of Applied Science and Technology are challenged to design and build devices to launch pumpkins in a (hopefully) predetermined direction and they are judged both for accuracy and distance. Now these Freshman teams have been on campus for only 6 weeks at the time of the competition, so most of the devices resemble medieval catapults of various kinds, though even in that general classification the various different designs are remarkable in their diversity of thought and execution. One team, however, took a different approach. First, they went out and got a corporate sponsor. Wow! Then they designed a system in which a bicycle was used to drive an air pump which pressurized a compressed air storage tank which was then used to power an air cannon. This pumpkin air cannon, if pressurized to its maximum capacity, could launch a pumpkin from the Eastman Building to well over Jefferson road somewhere.

Now permit me to ask all members of the RIT community here the following questions: How do we best serve such young, creative, and talented students? Do we just sign them up for introductory courses and hope for the best? How do we keep their creative juices flowing while they are gaining a broad foundation in math, science, and the liberal arts? How do we help them to appreciate that such a broad foundation will provide a better tool set with which they can create and innovate. How do we avoid “numbing” them down as a result of the endless string of assignments, papers, projects, and examinations that they will inevitably confront? And finally, how do we encourage the development of their minds, their hearts, and their souls in such a way that we ensure that the next generation of humans, and pumpkins, can grow and flourish on this planet. As we work to make RIT a real “innovation university”, we will have to come up with good answers to these questions.

At RIT, our students are taught not only how to learn, but also the knowledge and skills they will need to jumpstart their careers in areas as different as digital cinema and packaging science. Our graduates are legendary for their ability to “hit the ground running” in their first jobs, and employers line up for a chance to recruit them. These specialized degree programs are a unique feature of an RIT education and they reflect the career-orientation that has traditionally defined the Institute. But what if, in addition to these career-specific course offerings, RIT students had the experience of working on complex societal problems with students from different majors on teams in which each student brings his or her own discipline-specific knowledge to a cross-disciplinary effort to find real solutions. Isn't that the situation they will likely find themselves in upon graduation? Don't we need to get the “right brainers” and “left brainers” together to find acceptable solutions to our most vexing problems? Isn't that the kind of “capstone” experience that colleges and universities ought to be providing to students? And isn't that the ideal way to get students thinking more generally about how they can make a contribution to humanity after they graduate? If we want to make RIT a real “innovation university”, we will have to answer these questions as well.

Today we are on a campus with some of the most remarkable laboratory and design facilities anywhere in the world. Many universities have research facilities for micro and nanoelectronics, but RIT has a full CMOS chip fabrication facility right here on campus. Many universities have machine shop capabilities to support student and faculty research and development projects, but RIT has production line, computer controlled prototyping facilities that rival the best in industry. Many universities have design programs, but RIT supports its design programs

with tools such as a \$7M web production line color printer and full 3-dimensional printing capabilities that can create a prototype of a new product design right before your eyes. Many universities have environmental science and engineering programs, but RIT has the world's best facilities and programs in sustainable product design and manufacturing. The presence of these extraordinary facilities, along with so many others, and the availability of many faculty and graduate and undergraduate students with industrial experience, puts RIT in an ideal position to become a kind of low-cost "corporate R&D center" for U.S. businesses who, facing increasing global competition, can't afford to do anything other than the shortest-term research and development projects in-house. Why shouldn't we seize this opportunity to serve the corporate community, and our country, in this manner? Why don't we fashion a new kind of industry-academia partnership at RIT by being more flexible on intellectual property issues and other policies that have historically prevented the corporate sector from using our colleges and universities as their corporate research centers?

These questions do not have easy answers, but if we can positively address them the rewards for these efforts for RIT, for the Rochester region, and for our nation will be great, indeed. And the greatest beneficiaries of all, of course, will be our students, who will, by virtue of the experiences they have at RIT, become better world citizens while they gain the edge they will need to compete against the world's best. The university that best addresses these questions will, I believe, capture the new "high ground" in higher education. Given our head-start in so many of these areas, why shouldn't that institution be RIT?

In conclusion, all of the important preparatory work has been done. RIT is now in a position to take its place among the world's pre-eminent institutions of higher education. Rebecca and I are so grateful for the opportunity to work with all of you to move RIT forward to the next level. *Carpe Diem, RIT!*