

**Zayed University Convocation  
2009**

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**“Destined to Lead – With Distinction and Courage”**

I want to begin by thanking you for the very special opportunity to visit your distinguished University, to enjoy your progressive and cosmopolitan city and to experience some of the excitement, history and tradition of your forward-looking and rapidly moving country. I can express genuine awe for the accomplishments Zayed University has made since 1998, when under the leadership of your late President His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Zayed University was founded to become a “beacon of science, knowledge, and a bridge between cultures” (in his words) in a nation that was then only 27 years old. His Highness was truly a visionary leader who was committed to the importance of education. He supported not only the growth and development of the University, but also believed that education underpinned the advancement of U.A.E. In the words of His Highness, “Education is the essential mechanism to give meaning to our national purpose.” “It is the key component for prosperity and success as well as a barometer of the Nation.”<sup>1</sup>

You have established a mission, values and the noblest of goals:

- To support student learning and their personal and professional development so they may become the leaders who will “shape the future of the region and the world”
- To promote excellence, world standards and quality assurance in all endeavors
- To preserve and sustain appreciation for your culture and heritage

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<sup>1</sup> The first statement is quoted from H.E. Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan.

- To promote innovation in your research and education in order to make an impact on the regional economy and society, and
- To establish a learner-centered environment where culturally diverse students, faculty, staff and administrators share knowledge together and create new knowledge in today's technologically advanced and global environment

And as you have worked to achieve these goals, you have established campuses with first rate facilities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, developed meaningful learning outcomes to guide the curriculum and instruction, embraced interdisciplinary approaches to education, established international academic partnership and student exchange programs with universities world-wide, engaged in relevant, funded research, added new graduate programs, launched new journals, developed collaborations locally with public schools, government and private industry, empowered and prepared women for their roles in the workplace, enrolled men, hosted important international events, earned international accreditation from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and as a result, earned a glowing reputation for which you can be rightfully proud. And consider how rapidly you have earned that reputation!

Your progress has been truly exceptional and your goals are aligned with those of the world's top universities, all of which are focusing on: innovation, interdisciplinarity, collaboration and partnerships, impact, accountability, responsiveness, relevance and excellence. Universities have recognized and accepted their role to prepare students for a future as global citizens, to provide value to society and to the economy, and to serve others through knowledge. A study of the eight research universities in the Boston area summarized very clearly the value of universities as “developers and employers of talent, incubators of business and industry, storehouses of cultural resources, research centers, purchasers, economic magnets and community partners committed to... society and... government.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Engines of Economic Growth, The Economic Impact of Boston's 8 Research Universities on the Metropolitan Boston Area, 2003

One has only to scan the strategic plans, vision statements, lists of goals and strategies of most universities in today's world to see that Zayed University is among them with virtually identical goals. My former University, The Ohio State University, identified its goals to:

- Build a world-class faculty
- Develop academic programs that define them as the nation's leading public Land-Grant University
- Enhance the quality of the teaching and learning environment
- Enhance and better serve the student body
- Create a diverse university community, and
- Help build Ohio's future.

Building a faculty of excellence was stated specifically in your 2003-2005 strategic plan, and all the other goals put forth by Ohio State match those incorporated in your present and future plans. My current university, The University of South Florida crafted a strategic plan with the goals to:

- Expand world-class interdisciplinary research and scholarly endeavors
- Promote globally competitive programs of interdisciplinary inquiry, intellectual development, knowledge and skill acquisition and student success through a learner-centered campus environment
- Expand local and global engagement initiatives to strengthen and sustain healthy communities and improve the quality of life, and to
- Enhance all sources of revenue, maximize effectiveness in business practices and assure financial management to sustain the economic base in support of USF's growth

Again, there is strong coincidence between your plan and Ohio State's and USF's plans. And, one your even younger neighbors in the Middle East, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (known as KAUST), will open its doors in just

three weeks to welcome an international group of students who will arrive in Saudi Arabia to participate in an education that will support goals to:

- Develop and diversify the national economy
- Advance science and technology, and
- Serve as a catalyst for transforming lives through: Innovation, collaboration and partnerships, entrepreneurship, interdisciplinarity, boundarylessness, and new opportunities

As a final example, let me draw your attention to the 2008 University of Tokyo Action Plan that will guide their institution to meet their “dreams ... to strive towards [an] ideal university.”<sup>3</sup> They have outlined, in significant detail, the steps to improve education, prepare global students, invest in research that benefits society and solves global problems, expand international collaboration, enhance financial resources, upgrade and enrich the campus environment, improve efficiency of the administration and communicate and connect with society.

It is abundantly clear that our universities, world-wide, have pledged their commitment to prepare students who will find new ways to create a more understanding, caring, safe, connected and peaceful world, serve their countries, improve the quality of life locally and globally, and to improve their own performance by pursuing excellence in programs and operations and optimizing the academic environment for innovation to flourish. The goals among universities bear striking resemblance to one another, regardless of the location or age of the institution.

Zayed University is very young compared with many others in the Islamic world. The University of Al Karaouine in Fes, Morocco is 1148 years old, and Al Azhar University in Egypt is 1134 years old. The first University in the Western World, Bologna University in Italy, was established in the year 1088 and 70 years later was “legally declared a place where research could develop independently from any other power.”

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<sup>3</sup> A University at the Forefront of the Times, The University of Tokyo 2008 Revision of the Todai Action Plan, Hiroshi Komiyama, President.

Experimental science began at Bologna in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century representatives from the world's top universities gathered in Bologna to celebrate common roots of progress and tolerance. Today, now 921 years old, The University of Bologna's principal values are knowledge, innovation, subsidiarity (giving responsibility to individual units), responsibility and integration. Their business school, as an example, emphasizes a unique, interdisciplinary approach to education....as you have heard to be characteristic for modern universities.

Even though there are great similarities among universities of all ages, there are many advantages to "youth." As a young university, Zayed University is unencumbered by a past and has the opportunity – and even the responsibility - to create the right template for student success and progress for the country, but you also have the challenge to differentiate yourself in the competitive market of higher educational institutions.

My University, the University of South Florida, is 40 years older than Zayed, and older than the Federation of the Emirates overall, but is considered "young" by U.S. standards<sup>4</sup> and still experiencing the growing pains of an adolescent. We are struggling to gain a sense of our own identity, and like most youth we are eager, ambitious, energetic, opportunistic, gaining in confidence, and committed to promoting our own success. We have bold aspirations, expressed in a strategic plan that, like yours, has clarity of focus, and our slogan for an upcoming fund-raising campaign is "Unstoppable."

I believe Zayed University is also "unstoppable" and is living up to the vision of His Excellency, Sheikh Nayahan Mabarak Al Nayahan to "become the leading university in the region, embodying the same rigorous standards and intellectual elements found in major universities throughout the world."

Perhaps the first ten or so years are the easiest for a new university to demonstrate success. You had the opportunity to start with a clean slate and financial security. You could establish and prioritize your goals before or in concert with the recruitment of

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<sup>4</sup> Harvard University is our nation's oldest university at 333 years of age.

faculty, and create your own traditions as an institution. You are now an established University taking the next step in designing the University's future as described in your present plan "Destined to Lead," and you are contributing to the pathway toward the goals expressed in the U.A.E. Education Vision 2020 plan penned at the turn of the century to address the challenges of society and the economy and to create a learning environment that promotes creativity and innovation.<sup>5</sup> You are also moving forward in a very different environment from 1998 into an era that promises great opportunity as well as dramatic change. The document you have prepared demonstrates your ability to adapt and evolve.

"Destined to Lead" is an extraordinary statement. I thought about it very carefully when I first read it, because the word "destined" suggests that your leadership is preordained - certain to happen – inevitable - governed by fate. Zayed University is in an enviable position where His Excellency Sheikh Nayahan has proclaimed that the University is "expected" to be the leading university in the region. As an outsider, I can state unequivocally that such a designation by a state or national leader for one of our universities would be unlikely, although a university, itself, may assert that it aspires to this role of leadership as a goal. A U.S. university might "earn" a position of leadership on the basis of criteria such as financial prowess (endowment), research success (typically measured by external funding), academic excellence (as documented by academic rankings), age and tradition, or even upon success in athletic competitions.

It would be wonderful if my university were designated by a state official to be the leading University in Florida or in the southeastern region of the United States, and were awarded the resources to do so. But, I also pause because tied to this designation would be many expectations, for example:

- To understand the criteria that must be met to be world-class and the responsibility of living up to this standard

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<sup>5</sup> Medilyn Manibo, AME Info FZ LLC, "Education sector in UAE poised for major growth as government steps up support towards public and higher education," April 4, 2007.

- To compete successfully with others to sustain our leadership
- To define universally acceptable metrics to evaluate our success
- To determine the strategies that would differentiate our institution among many others
- To work cooperatively with others in the region who may feel slighted by not being the leader, and
- To understand the unrelenting pressure to perform at very high levels

There may be similar and other considerations for Zayed University to hold its position as the leading university in the region that you take into account in your planning and operations, and that you reflect upon in defining the essential qualities of leadership and performance to set Zayed University apart as the leader. In short, you have a challenge to carve out a niche that differentiates your university in the marketplace of competitive national universities as well as the foreign universities that have developed programs or entire campuses within UAE and the surrounding regions.

It is not easy to identify the specific elements that make a university distinctive, especially considering the theme I presented earlier illustrating that the goals of contemporary universities worldwide suggest “we are all alike.” What, then, qualifies a university for leadership? What are your unique competencies, what can you do best? Perhaps for Zayed University, the combination of your commitment to nurture and sustain the heritage and culture of UAE and the Muslim World, while looking straight ahead into the future is a foundation for your distinction. As your 2003 faculty and Staff Orientation document articulates elegantly, your university is about the goal “... to foster the growth of international understanding and the promotion of progress within the boundaries of the local culture.”<sup>6</sup> Developing distinctiveness can be a long-term, evolving aim to keep focused in your sights.

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Ryan Abu Wardeh, English Language Center, Zayed University, Dubai, U.A.E.

Finding answers to the questions related to your destiny as the leading institution in the region is a great responsibility and calls for exceptional leadership. At no time has leadership been more important, for Zayed as an institution, for its leaders and for the nation.

It has been stated that we live in a time that is characterized by “relentless change and escalating uncertainty,”<sup>7</sup> a time when “the ground seems to shift beneath your feet,”<sup>8</sup> when the issues that demand resolution are so complex that many of them simply may not be resolvable but must be managed. Under such circumstances one might believe that leadership would be more difficult than ever and, in fact, articles about leadership have titles such as “Leading During Uncertain Times”<sup>9</sup> and “Leadership in a Shifting World,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that there really must be something different about effective leadership today, just because it is today. But, how can leadership be only for a given time if our goal is to develop sustainable organizations? Granted, leadership must be in tune with the current environment, but it also must accept and adopt the values of the past in setting the vision for the future, and then act with the knowledge that doing what you did yesterday, only better, will not advance your purpose.

Then, if one pauses to think for a few moments, you ask: “When were times not unique?” Any era is bound to be unique simply because the set of issues we confront corresponds to the world as it is at the moment. Today is a world unsettled - religions and cultures in conflict, an economy in crisis, technology dividing society and facilitating an extraordinary speed of communication, environmental challenges of energy deficits, climate change, water shortage, loss of biodiversity, threats to the health of our populations with the potential for pandemics and new infectious diseases, and escalating competition on all fronts...and yet, one aspect of the times which is not unique is that together we confront the same issues, each of us from our own and perhaps our unique perspectives and in spite of our cultural and regional differences,

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<sup>7</sup> Publisher statement re: the book of John P. Kotter, What Leaders Really Do, LeadershipNow.com

<sup>8</sup> T. Heuerman

<sup>9</sup> David Utts, 2008

<sup>10</sup> Robert Terry, Action Wheel Leadership

we all understand that education will be at the forefront in providing resolution to those problems.

The task of leadership is to cope with the undeniable change that is startling in both its nature and velocity. Just consider a few facts:

- The top 10 jobs currently in demand did not even exist five years ago, and if history is any indication, we are preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented to solve problems not yet identified
- If MySpace were a country, its population would place it as the 5<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world
- 31 billion searches are done on Google each month, and
- It is estimated that 4 exabytes ( $4 \times 10^{19}$ ) of unique information will be generated this year - greater than all information of the previous 5000 years.

This rapid change argues that leading institutions such as Zayed University must rely upon a constant set of grounded values to see ahead not just what is on the horizon, but beyond, and around corners to uncover the competitive pressures. They will also embed their deliberations into the cultural context of their own countries, communicate their direction clearly to their constituencies, engage others in sharing the responsibilities and rewards...and dare to dream. Leadership is not only the responsibility of the president, provost and deans. It is an institutional capacity that must flourish throughout the organization's structure. According to John Kotter of the Harvard Business School, people are energized by a sense of belonging, achievement, recognition, self-esteem and living up to ideals. They need to be involved.<sup>11</sup>

Solo leadership in an academic institution fails to take advantage of the talent and diverse perspectives, creativity, innovation and ideas of faculty, students and staff who can (and should) enter into decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup> Strong leaders provide an

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<sup>11</sup> John P. Kotter, *What Leaders Really Do*. Chapter 1, Harvard Business School Press, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Pasternack, Thomas D. Williams, Paul F. Anderson. "Beyond the Cult of the CEO: Building Institutional leadership." *Strategy + Business*, 2001.

umbrella of protection for others whom they empower to also serve as leaders, creating interdependence among those who are invested in the institution so that all move together in the same direction.

This statement reminds me of an image from the movie “The Graduate” that was filmed in 1967 on the Berkeley campus. One scene showed a group of students walking down a street in the business district, all in a line, and bound together by a single, long rope. I am not sure what symbolism this act was intended to portray, but one could interpret it as solidarity and commitment (in this case a forced commitment!) of the group to move together in the same direction behind the leader. The challenge of a leader is not to “bind” people to the goal – either physically or emotionally - but to communicate with them - excite and engage them in embracing mutual goals and wanting to move together toward the target (without the confines of ropes!). Leaders - individuals and organizations - set a vision that is “motivating and inspiring”. Your success and your future plan are strong evidence that this leadership is in place.

Quality organizations step up to the responsibilities of leadership by establishing ethics and values that motivate others by formulating worthy goals and taking reasonable risk. They continue moving forward even in hard times, keeping fear in control. They believe in themselves and their future, make collegiality a priority, and are inspired and led by individuals who act with the consistency that engenders credibility, trustworthiness and integrity. They are honest and they demonstrate discipline and courage to drive a bold institutional vision and agenda.

Courage is the one leadership trait that informs and strengthens all others. It makes vision and values real and gives leadership its backbone.<sup>13</sup> It encourages others to step up to challenges and has the greatest impact when it is focused on activities to better the lives of others.<sup>14</sup> Courage is a critical organizational value, a virtue in nearly every culture that is strongly linked with inspiration as stories of remarkable courage

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<sup>13</sup> Organizational Courage, C.M. Perine & Associates, Vol. 1(3), 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Treasurer. “Courageous Leadership: Modeling the Way.” Leader to leader, Spring 2009, pp. 13-17.

inspire others to undertake actions they might have otherwise avoided. “Courage brings the organization alive for people.”<sup>15</sup>

As part of the groundbreaking ceremonies for KAUST in the fall of 2007, I was asked to participate on a panel where one of the assignments was to prepare advice for the founding president of the University. I reviewed my suggestions in the context of preparing for this talk and concluded that they might be equally relevant to Zayed University, and perhaps for any university as its leaders stop to consider their future.

My thoughts were:

- Engage the faculty for they establish the quality
- Engage business for advice and insight. The boundaries between business and academia are blurred.
- Strive for openness, transparency – easy access to information
- Couple science and technology training with entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation, leadership and ethics and social responsibility
- Be nimble and flexible – leave space for the “wild card”
- Identify possible barriers to the success of Zayed University and devise solutions to overcome them before you are up against them
- Become part of the network of Middle Eastern Universities and at the same time grow roots around the world for mutual benefit. Mr. Lee Hsein Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, remarked at a roundtable of university presidents in 2007 that:

“Universities are key institutions that help societies to prepare for change, but they themselves are subject to the same powerful pressures to adapt. They must learn from one another and change with the times to better prepare the young for a different future.”

Leadership was intended to be the theme for this talk, but as I delved into what has been accomplished, the signs of positive leadership at Zayed University are evident:

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<sup>15</sup> Monica Worline, “Sustaining Courage in Trying Times.” Ross School of Business, University of Michigan.

- You have worked together and engaged networks of people in developing the plan
- You have reached out beyond your borders to establish relationships and create partnerships to obtain success rapidly
- You understand the environment in which you are working
- You monitor your results, and in the words of Dr. Johnson, “you have reached boldly for the future.”

I am afraid I have done less to enlighten you about the leadership your fine institution needs to embrace for your future than to offer an analysis and praise for your vision, leadership and success as measured by the rigorous standards you have put in place to serve your students, respond to the needs of your country and “build bridges of international understanding and co-existence.” The best way I can close this presentation is to quote the very eloquent words of His Excellency Sheikh Nayahan on leadership as spoken at the Festival of Thinkers, 2007, Abu Dhabi:

“Thinkers and innovators will shape the future of the world.” “...your work, as thinkers and intellectual leaders, must not only be about knowledge and ideas, but it must also be about leadership – the leadership to assure wise, effective and humane use of knowledge and ideas. To achieve that, we must create and maintain institutions that foster and support creativity, knowledge, intelligent and informed debate, effective mechanisms for change, and above all, capable leadership.”

Thank you for your kind attention and for the tremendous honor to participate on this occasion. I predict that Zayed University will sustain, and even accelerate, its remarkable progress with the level of leadership and energy that has been invested to date and the commitment of everyone involved. I wish you great success.