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The Northrop Auditorium Inscription
(It was harder than you think)

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In the December 15, 2003, issue of The New Yorker there appeared a book review by Adam Gopnik of books about tall buildings. In the course of discussion about the Rockefeller Center and how people perceive it beyond the architecture alone, Gopnik describes a passage in which the author "tells how Hood [who designed the Rockefeller Center] brought in a 'thematic engineer,' a Midwestern weirdo named Hartley Burr Alexander . . . to provide a thematic program for the center." Alexander's "thematic program" for Rockefeller Center was rejected, Gopnik tells us, but Alexander, originally from Nebraska and thus a "Midwestern weirdo," had more success with an institution in his own backyard, the University of Minnesota. But that jumps ahead in the story.

When philosophy professor George Conger first suggested the idea of a Northrop inscription--in 1924, four years before the building opened--he made it clear to Coffman that profundity mattered. Fine sentiments and catchy phrases would not do. Conger wrote: "It seems to me that this great building, fronting on the Mall of the Greater University, and standing there in memory of a great man, offers us the finest opportunity that we shall ever have to place before the eyes of our students an imposing heroic inscription. I recall particularly the great inscription on the front of the Library at Columbia, and the quotation from Herodotus on the New York General Post-Office." For the inscription committee, failure was not an option--although, through the months of committee debate, it was a distinct possibility. Good, they understood from the outset, would not be good enough. It was January of 1928, and President Lotus Delta Coffman had charged the committee with an unprecedented challenge: compose fifty words for the façade above the ionic columns at the entrance to the University of Minnesota's gorgeous new landmark and destination. Expectations for the inscription ran high.

Conger set the bar high. The immediate result of his suggestion and Coffman's charge was eight years of public silence and a blank façade after the building opened. Perhaps universities too can be lost for words, confused and inaudible at the very moment when an encompassing institutional rhetoric is necessary. On the surface, it must have seemed as though this blank tablet of monumental proportions had caused writer's block of epic duration. By October of 1929, there was stress within the committee. One member feared that whatever inscription they might recommend "may appear totally out of place and laughable to the generations that come after us."

Below the surface of this eight-year silence, the committee was involved in a vigorous and delicate discussion. Records preserved by University Archives reveal a lively internal

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correspondence about the inscription. The correspondence suggests that the public silence grew out of private tensions within the committee. They went round and round trying to find the right questions to ask.

There was division of opinion about the inscription from the very outset of Coffman's appointment of the committee, in January, 1928. It was Coffman's view that "the auditorium constituting the central building of the great group surrounding the mall, is, in fact, the central building of the whole University group and I believe the inscription should pertain to the University of Minnesota as a whole, rather than to the special dedication to Cyrus Northrop." He noted that Northrop's name would be on the frieze above the inscription and, impliedly, that was enough for Northrop. Others, however, believed the auditorium, in the words of one of the committee members, should be "a memorial of a man, not an institution. This man was predominant on account of his power of oratory and almost universal sympathy and understanding of human nature." Either the language should reflect these characteristics of Northrop "or some universal educational truth." This was the first matter the committee had to deal with.

The committee was chaired by Graduate School Dean Guy Stanton Ford (after whom Ford Hall was named, and later President of the University after Coffman died in office in 1938). Other members included the University Librarian, Frank Walter (Walter Library), Professor Richard Price (Director of the Extension Service), Professor F. M. Mann, the University's advisory architect and head of the architecture department, E. B. Pierce, the Secretary of the Alumni Association, and T. F. Wallace, apparently an alumnus. After Coffman appointed them, Ford wrote to the committee members and asked each of them to think about what the inscription might say. He concurred with Coffman: "Quite clearly it should have a general university implication and need not, as the President pointed out, have any relation to the fact that the auditorium is a memorial to Mr. Northrop." Ford himself threw out a suggestion in his initial letter to his colleagues: "**Founded in pioneer days, the University of Minnesota serves in freedom, the highest interests of the Commonwealth. Here (succeeding)(successive) generations (of its sons and daughters) may be dowered with the wisdom of the past and dedicated to that fearless and unending winnowing and testing of facts which alone can yield Truth for each new day.**" Ford's first draft and the subsequent exchanges between the committee members yield small but interesting (and perhaps unintended) debate about the role of the University and about academic freedom.

The committee first met in March, 1929. Mr. Wallace, who was absent, was the advocate for the personal tribute to Northrop. The committee read a letter from Wallace but concluded, however, that "all present favored an inscription that had institutional implications." They did agree, however, to scan Northrop's speeches to try to find "a quotation that would embody the state relation and basic task of a free university." They also decided that each would try his hand at a 50-word inscription. In a recollection Ford wrote in 1950, he recalled that "the point of view that it should say something about Mr. Northrop was presented and discussed. . . . I was not interested in celebrating the many virtues of President Northrop or any particular facts about him. I felt that the inscription on this central building should be an impersonal and vigorous statement of the purposes of a university and, in a sense, a dedication of the university in the future to those purposes."

Apparently Ford wrote to others on campus seeking suggestions. Professor O. W. Firkins responded to Ford's draft with rather sharp criticism--and in passing made an interesting observation about state funding and institutional autonomy. Firkins' proposed that the inscription read **"The University of Minnesota offers all the truth to all the people. It aims to suppress nothing and exclude nobody. It sees in freedom the means of truth and in truth both the reward and the instrument of freedom. To these ends, exemplified in the fathers and awaiting new exemplification in the sons, it dedicates this building."** Firkins offered editorial suggestions on Ford's initial draft. "'Dowered' seems to me affected, a little simpering. . . . I say 'dedicate themselves' because will is better than passivity. For the same reason I prefer 'persevering' to 'unending.' I don't like the 'testing' of facts; the ascertained is that which has been tested. 'Which alone can yield Truth for each new day' halts for the ear. . . . The original alternative which I submit is perhaps a little too rhetorical, too Macaulayish. I insert 'freedom' to please you. Personally I think is rather a vain boast. Nobody that is fed by another body can really be free; the legislature can shut our mouths tomorrow. Fortunately it doesn't shut our mouths but its liberality does not constitute our freedom."

Walter, Wallace, Price, and Pierce all wrote to Ford about the two alternatives now before the committee (Ford's and Firkins'). Walter reported that he could find nothing in Northrop's papers "which is quotable and at the same time not a platitude." He expressed a preference for the Ford draft and told Ford "I rather object to the phrase 'offers all the truth.' This is a trifle pretentious. It [the University] offers the chance to find the truth rather than claims to have all the truth to offer." Wallace, in the meantime, reported that he had given the two proposals "to three people who might be said to represent, first, the academic type, second, the business type, and third what you might call a 'man on the street,'" and that they were "unanimous in saying that as a whole, neither appealed to them." Wallace confessed that he felt the same way. He apologized for being critical rather than constructive and concluded that if the committee could not find something that would be widely approved, "I think this simple statement is best: 'This building is dedicated to the memory of Cyrus Northrop, President of the University of Minnesota from 18-- to 19--.'" Wallace continued to lobby for some link to Northrop. Price had also looked through Northrop's work and found nothing and told Ford that "the draft proposed by Mr. Firkins leaves me cold" although he liked Firkins' changes to the Ford draft. Price said the ideal "should embody some worthy sentiment, expressed in language that is sententious, dignified, sonorous, and stately," and proposed his own version. Pierce told Ford that "I am glad you gave us something to shoot at." He also had searched Northrop's papers and found nothing suitable, and as with Price, made clear that he did not like Firkins' language. He said he liked Ford's version, with a couple of changes. In Ford's 1950 recollection, he wrote that "Professor Mann as an architect could not conceive of an inscription that did not have in it dates that would be incised in Roman characters. To him it wouldn't be an inscription unless it had a few M, D, C, and X's in it and an identification of the building. Everybody took a hand in rewriting my proposal and nobody was quite happy with the results."

At the end of May, 1929, Ford wrote to the committee members to summarize the situation. He communicated the two drafts before them (and reported that none liked the Firkins language), noted Wallace's preference for a statement connected to Northrop, reported on yet a third proposal (which went no further), and called for a meeting. He also said he was going to

submit the two alternatives to "one or two other people in whose taste and judgment I think we all have confidence." Wallace, one never to give up, wrote back to again argue that "I feel that if possible we ought to have something that is a part of the personality of the man whose memory the building preserves." He suggested an excerpt from one of Northrop's speeches.

At this point in early summer the chairman of the Board of Regents chimed in. Fred Snyder wrote to President Coffman that he had learned from Professor Mann of the deliberations about the inscription and urged that "the sentiment should be taken from something uttered or written by President Northrop during his lifetime." Snyder suggested an edited version of a speech that Northrop had given at the opening of a hotel: **"Let us make Minnesota an intellectual power all through this western continent, infusing a culture and a moral purpose to ensure that our children shall be true to their country, true to their truth, true to the highest civilization and true to everything that makes men and women noble and happy."** One might say that thankfully this suggestion, even though from the chair of the Board, went nowhere.

The final version of Ford's draft approved by the committee read as follows: **"Founded in pioneer days through the vision of our fathers the University of Minnesota serves the highest interests of the commonwealth. Here succeeding generations may share the wisdom of the past and dedicate themselves to the fearless and persevering search for the facts from which alone the truth for each new epoch shall emerge."**

At this point the committee went in a completely different direction. They met in early July, 1929, after which Ford wrote to Mann to communicate the language the committee had decided upon (a further-revised version of the Ford draft), subject to review by "a group whose judgment we valued." Ford had received one suggestion from English professor Martin Ruud. Ruud told Ford that "inscriptions are a ticklish business, and English in particular seems to be weak on the 'monumental' side." The problem, Ruud wrote, is that the inscription needs to be "stately without being flat or pompous. The proposed draft is, I think, good, on the whole, but I am not sure that it is entirely successful." Ruud commented that "entire success can be hoped for only by some miracle" and offered language entirely different, Chapter 4:8 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: **"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."** These words, Ruud maintained, have "always seemed to me a complete summation of the end and purpose of a liberal education." He added that "I cannot help thinking that President Northrop would approve." Ford wrote to Mann that he thought this suggestion had "so much merit that I am sending it out at once." Ford, writing in 1950, recalled that "we were not under pressure, and the matter dragged along, as I recall, without our coming to a unified judgment about the phrasing. Then we dropped the matter." After Ruud's suggestion, "the committee, somewhat fed up with its own efforts, responded with an approval."

Matters moved quickly. Within less than a week Walter, Wallace, and Pierce had approved the suggestion from Ruud. (Importantly, we shall see, Mann did not.) Ford thereupon wrote to Coffman to transmit the committee's recommendation that the inscription should be the quotation from Philippians, said it should be "incised without quotation marks or reference,"

acknowledged Professor Ruud's contribution, and concluded that "the Committee may, I suppose, consider itself discharged." At the end of July, Coffman wrote to the Regents reporting the committee recommendation. He commended the committee "for the wisdom of its selection. It seems particularly appropriate to me." He asked that each Board member vote on the suggestion so that they could have the inscription completed before the next Board meeting in September (1929). (One of the Regents wrote to ask why there would be no reference; Coffman responded that the committee believed that "this inscription does not need a reference; in other words, it is universally known and recognized as being a quotation from the Bible, whereas, if it were from Bacon, or Locke, or Erasmus, or Spencer, or some other distinguished individual," it would require the name and quotation marks. (Apart from the questions that would certainly be raised about the propriety of using a quotation from the New Testament on a building at a public university, one wonders if Coffman and the committee would make the same assumption today about how many would recognize the source.) The Board approved the recommendation.

Here is the small mystery in this tale. Nothing happened. One member of the inscription committee, the Advisory Architect, Professor Mann, wrote to Coffman in the autumn of 1929. "I have been holding the cutting of inscription" on the auditorium because he did not believe that words "would constitute a proper inscription for the position in view." He apologized for not having obtained authorization for the delay but said he had not had time to think about the issue. He enclosed a letter he had written to Ford asking that the committee "give some further consideration to this matter which seems to me of great importance." If, however, his objection was overruled, he told Coffman, "the work of cutting can be arranged for within a few days."

Mann wrote to Ford the same day recalling that he had been in a "hopeless minority" on the committee but since his "objections were rather vague" he had considered the matter settled. When it came time to cut the inscription, however, he asked that it be delayed so he could formulate his thoughts. The more he thought about it, he told Ford, "I have found myself increasingly impressed that it [the Philippians quotation] is not a proper record to inscribe in such an important position." He asked Ford to reconsider. Mann laid out his reasons. An inscription on a building should accomplish certain things ("record its origin" or "the purpose of its builders" or "recite the facts which the builders wished to perpetuate"); the Philippians quote "to posterity would appear accidental" because it was in no way connected to the building; if the quote "typifies the personality of Cyrus Northrop," it should say so because no one in the future would know that; it was necessary to avoid the risk that "to posterity this inscription might seem to be merely a noble sentiment plastered on a convenient wall space"; and the front of such a monumental building "should not be considered as a convenient wall space for hanging mottoes" but rather where this generation could speak to the next either about Northrop or about the University.

In mid-November 1929 Coffman wrote back to Mann to tell him he had raised with the committee the possibility of changing the inscription. He reported that Ford told him the committee members were "unanimously of the opinion" that the inscription approved by the Regents should be approved. Mann was dogged--and continued to drag his feet. In mid-winter of 1930 he wrote to Coffman that he continued to believe "that the verse chosen from Philippians is inadequate, adds no significance to the purpose of the building nor to the person Cyrus Northrop, and does not suggest the regard in which he was held by the generation whose lives he

influence so profoundly." He charged that the committee did not "apprehend the importance of this inscription nor gave it more than passing thought." Since he could not by himself devise better language, however, "I will retire, therefore, to my sphere of advisory architect and will see to it that the letters of the inscription are properly designed and the words properly grouped and attend to any other aesthetic and practical details involved."

But he didn't. And nothing happened for over five years. Was Mann nearly guilty of insubordination? Was Coffman frustrated by the inaction? Or had the overwhelming pressures and strains associated with the onset of the Great Depression simply shoved the inscription matter far off to the side?

In the spring of 1935 Messrs. Willey and Middlebrook (the academic affairs and finance vice presidents, respectively) talked; Middlebrook, according to a letter Willey wrote to Coffman, "raised the question" of the inscription. Willey had reviewed the files and reminded Coffman that the Regents had voted in 1929 for the quote from Philippians. But Mann had objected, and the committee was supposed to have met in the fall of 1930 "but there is no indication . . . that the committee met in September or that any action has been taken since that time." Willey suggested two options: cut the inscription the Board had approved or start over again. Three days later Coffman wrote to Mann again to ask if he still objected and if so, what should he (Coffman) do? Mann replied that he had been thinking about the inscription over the years and that his "impression has become more confirmed." He promised to think more about it. Coffman asked him to do so and told him that "if you will suggest a new inscription, I will see that it is given consideration by the Board of Regents." He said he would like to settle the matter that spring.

Somewhat miraculously, a fitting and agreeable solution arrived from an unlikely source—the nation's leading inscription consultant! That "Midwestern weirdo," Hartley Burr Alexander, a philosophy professor at Scripps College in California, working for the princely sum of \$50, quickly suggested wording very close to the inscription as we know it. Alexander had sent out to all and sundry a brochure advertising his expertise as a consultant on inscriptions and noted the various buildings to which he had contributed appropriate language. Mann must have been delighted to receive the brochure, for he had clearly written to Alexander and received a response. Alexander knew his business. He had written inscriptions for facilities as diverse as Rockefeller Center, the Los Angeles Public Library and the Department of Justice in Washington. In the case of the Northrop inscription, Alexander understood the university's responsibility to provide the state's citizens with a durable and unifying rhetoric--a rhetoric that would express the University's multiple yet cohesive missions.

Very shortly after writing to Coffman, Mann contacted Alexander, thanking Alexander for agreeing to advise the University on an inscription. Mann was excited enough that he told Alexander he would personally assume financial responsibility for the costs until he could obtain University authorization for compensation. Mann sent Alexander a description of the building and its importance as well as photographs and blueprints. He recalled that there had been a committee, on which "my function was more to object than to suggest. Now I feel that if I cannot suggest, it will be proper for me to remain silent." He sent Alexander the two suggested inscriptions.

Alexander wrote back to Mann and said that "the problem of the inscription puzzles me," because, he observed, neither of the two alternatives would fit into the pattern for the inscription called for in the blueprints. Alexander dismissed the Ford committee recommendation; it "appears to me frankly impossible. To me it is devoid of the dignity that is demanded for epigraphic composition" and, moreover, "it nowhere lends itself to significant division." (The inscription had to be a certain number of words in a certain number of lines. Clearly Alexander's expertise was coming into play, because the Ford committee seemed to have given no thought to how, in a technical sense, the phrases would be formatted in the space available.) Alexander thought the Philippians quotation was fine but "it is most adapted to an interior." But not outside; "it connotes a range of sentiments not at all implied either in the architecture or the setting of the auditorium." Given the centrality of the building and the fact that the "façade is the feature which may most effectively be regarded as its official portal," Alexander suggested

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He specified that the first line should use larger letters. He asked Mann for the number of letters that would be allotted to each line and commented that "often, I find, there are problems of patterning that can be obviated by careful composition, suiting the phrases to the spacing." He advised Mann that it "is important to make line and rhetorical divisions coincide so that the reading may be facilitated and end-line awkwardnesses avoided. It seems to me a first rule of monumental epigraphy that each line should represent a unit of meaning." Alexander was bringing professionalism and experience that the Ford committee had woefully lacked. Alexander followed up later in the summer with two more letters to Mann with revised language and more commentary on the technical aspects of the inscription. He also urged that the first letter of the word "University" be the "U" rather than the "V." Again, Alexander's experience showed: "The whole line has a predominance of angular letters, and I am confident that it will gain here by retaining the curvilinear 'U.'"

In mid-summer 1935 Willey wrote to Ford, recapitulated what had happened, pointed out that no subsequent meeting of the committee had ever been held in 1930, and reported that Coffman had given Mann approval to consult with Alexander. "Out of this consultation have come various suggestions which Professor Mann now wishes to lay before the original committee. President Coffman wishes the matter re-opened." Willey asked Ford to reconvene the original committee. If the committee still wanted Philippians, it would be cut. If not, the President was prepared to present a new recommendation to the Board. But he urged Ford to act; "the President is rather anxious to have the cutting proceed this summer."

Mann wrote to Coffman at the end of the summer, 1935, to report his recommendation. In this letter he made clear the reason for his obsession about the wording. He commented that "it would generally be agreed that the space might be left without an inscription without raising serious question." But if there is to be one, he continued, "it commands attention and carries meaning and implication for all time. As I see it, we of this generation propose to say

something, presumably the most significant thing we can say, to future generations." If that is how important the words were to be, then perhaps Mann had been right to object for years to what the Ford committee had recommended. Mann told Coffman he had been unable to get a meeting of the committee during the summer, but he related the interactions with Alexander and provided Coffman with blueprint renderings of the Alexander language and the language from Philippians.

Ford received the suggestion and made two changes:

DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING AND ~~THE PROGRESS OF DISCOVERY~~ AND THE FREEDOM OF TEACHING

DEVOTED TO ~~THAT~~ YOUTH UPON WHOM RESTS THE HOPE OF ~~THE~~ STATE AND NATION.

Ford noted tartly that "this cuts tautology and puts in what is in my opinion the vital part of the creed." Ford's change answers one question that many may have had about the word "state": does it refer to "the state" as the government in general, the commonweal, civil society, or does it refer to the State of Minnesota. In Ford's view, it was Minnesota.

Ford's first suggestion again provoked exchanges about academic freedom. Walter wrote to Ford to commend the changes but expressed doubt about "the freedom of teaching." "I think I get your meaning and I also think it is excellent so far as the real purpose of the institution goes. At the same time, I wonder if the public at large (if they give any consideration to the inscription at all), will not interpret it as meaning 'freedom for teachers to do as they please.' You know the rather unfortunate floods of correspondence which very frequently follow the unguarded use of the term 'academic freedom' in public discussions." Price concurred. "I am not at all attracted by the words 'Freedom of Teaching.' . . . There is still much vagueness as to what we mean by freedom of teaching and I doubt if the idea was even thought of when this university was dedicated. Certainly the founders thought of the advancement of learning and the progress of discovery." In Freedom of Teaching, Price wrote, "I seem to detect in it a little self-consciousness and a little lifting of the voice to show one is not afraid." There was also regental reaction to Ford's suggestion; Wallace had shown the Alexander draft to Regent Fred Snyder (who had earlier proposed the lengthy excerpt from Northrop's hotel speech). Snyder proposed striking "freedom of teaching" and substituting "the search for truth." He told Wallace that "I think it would be a mistake to use 'freedom of teaching' and invite still further criticism, however unjust, that the University is teaching things which should not be taught. Whether there is any truth in such criticisms or not, why should we use an expression which may be an invitation for more intensive criticism? The words I suggest avoid this danger." Wallace conveyed Snyder's comments to Ford, saying he concurred; he also expressed reservations about "upon whom" but confessed "I am unable to better it." Without ado, the committee appears to have accepted Snyder's change.

When Price wrote to Ford, he asked for a meeting of the committee to discuss the language before any recommendation went to Coffman and the Board. He also vindicated Mann's delaying tactics: "I greatly admire the draft drawn up by Professor H. B. Alexander. . . .

I agree with you that the Committee should express its thanks to Professor Mann." The committee did meet; in October, 1935, Ford was able to write to Coffman to tell him that the committee voted unanimously for the Alexander version with Snyder's phrase "search for truth" substituted on the second line and the deletions Ford sought in the third line. The Regents met four days after Ford's letter to Coffman and approved the new inscription. Coffman shortly thereafter wrote to the committee again thanking them for "faithful and distinguished" service and to Professor Mann instructing him to cut the inscription on the face of the auditorium.

The matter was still was not settled! In November Alexander wrote to Mann after he had learned from Mann the final words for the inscription. He wrote that he was still not satisfied with his own fourth line and that he did not like "state and nation." He suggested "commonwealth" because "I do not altogether like the elision involved in the appositive form as you have it. It suggests oratory rather than inscription." Just before Christmas, 1935, Willey wrote a note to Coffman to report that Mann was having difficulty with the arrangement of the letters and asked for a small amount of money for redrafting. "In view of the fact that we have already given a good deal of attention to the inscription and want to have it as perfect as possible, it seemed to me wise to authorize this sum of money for the employment of a draftsman to aid Mr. Mann." Coffman jotted a note on the file copy on Christmas Eve that he approved.

Mann must have taken most of the winter, because in May, 1936, Ford is again writing to Coffman. "Apparently the committee on the inscription for the Northrop Auditorium makes as many final appearances before the Board as Adelina Patti [one of the most famous and highly-regarded opera singers of the 19th Century] ever did, but this is the absolutely last for the most meticulous of the committee is now happy and the whole committee is unanimous in recommending the inscription below."

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Ford wrote that "this is the same inscription that has already been approved, except for the last line which we are joined in believing is a little more suitable and in diction and rhythm corresponds more nearly to the two preceding lines. Professor Mann says that they are all ready to cut and if they do go to work promptly, it is our hope that we ought to have this inscription on the front of Northrop by Commencement Day." There is no indication in the existing record how the last line came to be. But that is the one that was cut into the stone. And so it reads today.

With the exception of the word "welfare" every other word (or concept) in the final formulation is one that was suggested by someone at some point in the 8 year process. In other words, we suspect that the committee had an "aha moment": "This is what we meant--and nearly said!--all along." Or they got tired of the whole thing. We believe that Alexander rearranged their words and phrases rather than creating an entirely next conception. And that is how they took ownership. When Regent Snyder added "search for truth" they had an inscription that spoke of, by, and about the U.

Epilogue: In 1947 the Provost of the University of Michigan wrote to University of Minnesota President James Lewis Morrill to ask for the text on the façade of Northrop. Morrill wrote back with the words and commented that "I find myself using it time and time again in speeches. It seems to me one of the most significant statements I have ever seen." In his 1950 recollection, Ford wrote that "I was quite happy with the result for, though it was a joint product, it preserved in spirit and purpose and to a considerable degree in wording the objectives that I had set. I had more interest in this larger purpose than I did in any special wording. It will always be a source of great satisfaction to me that through the years this inscription, the joint result of careful thought of the committee, sets a goal for all those who in the future are concerned with the welfare of youth, learning, and the state." Even as late as 2003, President Robert Bruininks alluded to the inscription in a meeting with the Faculty Consultative Committee of the Faculty Senate.