
view from the top



The Ohio State University President Dr. Gordon Gee discusses his passion and progress on creating a “One University”, high-performance culture to take the largest university in the U.S. from excellence to eminence. On the global stage, it is part of his vision to build a new model for the university of the 21st century: more agile, more responsive, less insular and less bureaucratic.



senn delaney

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from excellence to eminence: tumbling the ivory towers to build a model culture for the 21st century university

Dr. Gordon Gee’s courtly demeanor, with the ever-present signature bowtie, gives one the impression of a man steeped in tradition. But first impressions can deceive. While the president of The Ohio State University respects and celebrates tradition, he is critical of higher education for being tradition-bound. And at a time when economic crisis has paralyzed many universities and colleges, he is an apostle preaching radical reform.

Among the most highly experienced and respected university presidents in the nation, Dr. Gee extols the need to invent a more collaborative, “horizontally thinking” system of higher education in America. He writes and speaks often about the need for universities, including OSU, to move out of the silo structures of departments and budgets and mindsets that he says have calcified over time. “While breaking down barriers inside four-year institutions, university leaders must also aggressively seek new kinds of collaborations with business and industry, government, and advocacy groups of all kinds,” he says.

He is quickly making it happen at the massive land-grant school since his return in 2007. Already, the university is in the process of two areas of major change: moving the academic year from quarters to semesters and reconsolidating the university’s five colleges of arts and sciences.

“We have operated as most massive institutions do: in a very unintegrated way. My goal in creating this one university concept is to develop an integrated approach. Facilitating and rewarding collaboration across disciplines will advance scholarship, teaching, and health care in fundamental ways. Think of the exciting research results occurring now in human

health because our veterinarians are working shoulder-to-shoulder with our physicians, clinicians, chemists, and nutritionists. That kind of ground-breaking work can and should be happening in all fields of inquiry.”

Dr. Gee hopes the transformation he is leading at OSU will serve as a model for other higher education institutions, both public and private, to follow in order to remain relevant and vital. He sums up the key elements of his blueprint for fundamental change at Ohio State in two words: talent and culture.

Moving a massive institution from visible to visionary

Founded in 1870, The Ohio State University, along with its renowned academic medical center, is a research powerhouse with global reach. It employs 40,000 faculty and staff, has the nation’s largest single-campus enrollment in Columbus of more than 52,000 students and an alumni base more than 450,000 strong. It is comprised of several campuses throughout Ohio, including the main campus and medical center in Columbus, several regional campuses, and the Agricultural Technical Institute and Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in Wooster.

Dr. Gee led OSU from 1990 to 1997, and then returned to the state's flagship university after a decade as president of Brown University and chancellor of Vanderbilt University. He accepted his second tenure as the university's 14th president because he felt the time was right to make a lasting and meaningful difference there at the zenith of his 30-year academic leadership career.

Dr. Gee returned to an institution that was achieving excellence and recognition, but he had bold plans to take OSU from "visible to visionary." To create "the university of the American dream," he knew he would need to lead major changes in the university's structure and its culture. He says that like most large institutions, OSU has for too long operated as several distinct organizations. The result? Territorial thinking, less-than-productive behavior and missed opportunities. To remedy those problems and to more fully meet rapidly changing needs, he seeks to reshape the way colleges and universities have operated for the past several hundred years, starting with Ohio State.

"We cannot be 18 colleges connected by a heating plant. To realize our true potential, we must think and act as a unified, integrated, cohesive institution." That has been Dr. Gee's mantra since his first address days after his return to OSU. He got to work on reforms immediately by outlining six key strategies to move the university forward. The first overarching

strategy is to create "One Ohio State University", a single-minded institution with all departments, offices, faculty and staff focused on mutual success.

Other key strategies that he defined to guide OSU's transformation are:

- **Put students first.** Assure that our activities and our campuses are student-centered and that our work prepares students for life-long learning, success and leadership in a global, interconnected and interdependent world.
- **Focus on faculty success.** Retain, attract and reward world-class teachers and researchers and foster a way of thinking that is more broadly focused on the greater success of the institution.
- **Recast our research agenda.** Stimulate research and innovation, including developing external partnerships that may lead to new technologies and new companies to benefit Ohio and the nation.
- **Recommit to our communities.** Extend more broadly the impact of our teaching and scholarship to improve lives and enrich communities in Ohio and around the world.
- **Simplify university systems and structures to promote progress.** Streamline and simplify procedures and assure that resources are used to maximum effect.

Knowing that a shift in the OSU culture would be required to make radical change, Dr. Gee engaged Senn Delaney soon after his appointment to work with him and the university's senior leadership team to create the culture that would catalyze change to One Ohio State University.

The culture-shaping work began with the president's leadership team and built from the ongoing work already underway at the academic medical center, OSUMC. He was encouraged by the positive and rapid change in behaviors that occurred at OSUMC. Today, the medical center serves as a model for positive and productive change across OSU's numerous offices, schools, departments, campuses and institutes.

The culture-shaping process will be introduced in phases during the next few years to align everyone around the values that comprise OSU's high-performance culture. They are: commitment to excellence, collaboration, acting with integrity and personal accountability, embracing change and encouraging innovation, openness and trust, acting in respectful ways and valuing diversity, and striving for simplicity in administrative processes.

In this view from the top interview with Senn Delaney, Dr. Gee likens the journey at OSU to a ballgame in which his team is in the fourth inning with some home runs on the scoreboard.



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Q Why did you decide to change the culture at OSU?

I believe the times are really quite remarkable. People see this as a moment of real challenge, and it is. But I also view it as a moment of real opportunity. One only needs to read the newspapers to understand that there is a massive process of change and challenge going on out there. But this time of great change enables us to act and think differently, to make difficult choices for the long-term good of our institutions.

We need to be the architects of our own destiny rather than its victims. And we will do so by focusing on talent and culture and using those to create major changes in the way we do our work.

Q How important is transforming the culture at OSU to you?

It is one of the most significant actions I have been engaged with in my 30 years as a university president.

This is a massive organization. We have 40,000 faculty and staff. We have 62,000 students, including our regional campuses. We have nearly half a million alumni, and then we have 11 million Ohioans. All of these people are directly impacted by this university and therefore they are all a part of this circle of change.

Change is really the centerfold of what

we’re doing. Not for change’s sake but to make ourselves both relevant to the moment and more importantly to help shape the 21st century in broad and enduring ways. I believe that will be the role of the American university.

We will be the economic, social, cultural and change agent for the 21st century. In this knowledge economy, it is the American university that will lead the way through the development of ideas, in collaboration with corporations and other partners. This is our great liberating moment of opportunity.

Q When did you begin the culture-shaping process?

I had this in mind when I accepted the presidency in 2007. I wanted to move this process as quickly as I could. I started to reorganize the university almost immediately. I started bringing in some of my own team. I met with (Senn Delaney Chairman and Founder) Larry Senn almost immediately. I have known Larry Senn and his work for years, and I was thrilled to be able to persuade him and his team to focus on this massive university and to leverage the work they had already begun at the medical center.

It has been a marriage made in heaven. The catalytic effect of this culture-changing process is already reaping benefits. I really had no idea that we would see such commitment and such change so early.

Q Describe your vision for creating one university, and why this is so important to the university’s future?

My basic premise is this: Ohio State is the largest, most complex, most powerful university in the country but we were not using our size or our scope or our intellectual firepower to our best advantage. We have operated as most massive institutions do: in an unintegrated way without a common sense of purpose, values and structure. In order to take advantage of our enormous opportunities, we needed to change the culture of the place.

My goal is to develop a horizontally integrated approach in which the physicians and the philosophers lay down like lambs instead of like lions. The goal is that we create the environment and the culture which allows all of these folks who have this massive amount of intellectual acumen to connect together to create new ideas, new opportunities, new ways for thinking about the world.

Q It’s quite an ambitious undertaking on your part. What in your career led you to this?

During the past 30 years, I have had the privilege of leading several world-class universities, both public and private. Along the way, I have gained some useful perspective but I will tell you that my level of frustration for some things has only

increased with time. I see real human need in our communities, and I see real human expertise in our universities. I am utterly impatient for those of us in higher education to reach out more aggressively in partnership to address those human needs. The scale of our opportunity at this moment is tremendous.

I was talking to a candidate for a deanship today and he made the same point. He is a very distinguished and senior person. He said he would only want to move if he felt that he would be in a position to make an enormous difference and to implement the ideas he has accumulated over his career. I feel exactly the same way, and I want my institution to be filled with people who have the same sense of urgency.

Q How would you describe your approach to leading this effort?

The university environment is very different than the corporate one. University presidents do not make pronouncements and then something happens. We have to persuade. We have to cajole. We have to significantly advocate. And we have to do all those things because faculty members are not only very bright, they are fiercely independent.

Q What are some of the biggest challenges?

Institutions themselves have a tremendous amount of history and momentum in cer-

tain directions. We have traditions, alumni, athletics and a variety of other things, all of which have a historical nature to them that creates this sense of solidity and, in some cases, inertia. Those are nettlesome issues with which to contend.

We want to recognize the values of the institution. We want to applaud them and celebrate. But we also want to create a new culture that extends the power and promise of education much more broadly. One of our main challenges is complacency. Not money, not the challenges of the recession. The main challenge is always slipping back into complacency. We are a great university, to be sure. But we can be even better.

Q You say you are seeing change faster than you believed possible. What are some examples?

I will give you two examples. In 1990, in my first tenure as president of Ohio State, I proposed two things. I proposed that we move our academic year from a quarter system to one of semesters. And I proposed that we think seriously about consolidating our five colleges of arts and sciences. Well, I was thrown right off the beach. I proposed those things again when I came back in 2007, and within 18 months or so, both of those are approved and we are moving forward in implementation. In a remarkably short period of time, we embarked on two massive areas of change.

Q Why are these changes in structure so important?

Our change from quarters to semesters might not sound like a big deal, but really it is akin to planning the Normandy invasion. Faculty and staff must coordinate major overhauls of class structure and syllabi, information systems, records and so many other aspects of our day-to-day operations.

A group of students asked me the other evening about changing to the semester system. It is easy enough to list off the positives in terms of easing the process of students transferring among institutions, coordinating calendars with other universities, facilitating students' internships and summer job opportunities.

But the value of the change goes much deeper than that. It forces us to reevaluate the ways we conduct our processes, and forces faculty to review what they are teaching and how they are teaching it. This wholesale review enables us to determine whether we are meeting the needs of our students and, if not, to make the changes necessary to do so.

Q What changed from being thrown off the beach in 1990 to making major change?

I am much more seasoned. I understand the internal political landscape better than I probably did in 1990, when I was



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still relatively young. I have much more confidence in my position.

The other factor that facilitated these changes is the culture-shaping process. There is no doubt in my mind that we are where we are now because we made a discrete decision to undergo this process of culture-shaping and team building. It was very much a catalyst. It started to embed itself in the DNA of our leadership teams and our faculty and staff.

Finally, I think that if the world were right-side up, as it was 18 months or two years ago, we would not be able to have the same kinds of conversations and the same kinds of results as we do now.

Q Why did you choose to introduce the culture-shaping process at the medical center before other areas of the university?

Thankfully, it had already begun at the medical center when I returned to Ohio State. In a large organization, sometimes you have to start with component parts, and particularly those components parts that are in the greatest need of addressing immediately.

If you start at the top, it can take too long to reach the areas where the greatest need exists. The medical center was doing well in its research and clinical work, but the lack of cooperation and

trust was a substantial impediment to accomplishing even greater things.

Q What were the issues there?

The issues were the usual ones: personalities, turf, resistance to change and the arrogance of some people believing that they had all of the answers. We had to heal that. The intent was to stop the bleeding and then to migrate to the positive side, to migrate to this concept of the whole university. The medical center was the template.

Q What happened?

When I joined Ohio State, we brought in some new leadership and Senn Delaney worked their magic with us as a team, which allowed our better selves to prevail. Now, our medical center is one of the great strengths of the institution and is setting a tone and standard for civility, respect and culture change that the rest of us need to model. It is truly quite an achievement.

Q So you get that momentum and it builds from there?

We are a \$4.5-billion enterprise and about \$2 billion of that is our medical center. The truth is if you get the medical center thinking in this community-centered way, internally and externally, it is like a huge aircraft carrier that starts to pick up momentum and conveys it to the

rest of the institution.

Q There’s a lot of emphasis at Ohio State on partnering with community colleges and the business community. Can you talk about that in more detail?

The university can no longer exist in a cocoon. It has to act in the tradition of what was established in the Land Grant Act of 1862. In the middle of the Civil War, President Lincoln had the courage and the wisdom to invest in vastly expanded opportunities for education.

The purpose was to develop new community-focused institutions that could change people’s lives in very direct ways. We have to return to those founding land-grant principles, but in the 21st century model, which is to partner with our communities.

We must take a leadership role, think differently about how we work with business and industry, assume the responsibility of changing lives and changing minds rather than sitting passively and enjoying ourselves within the four walls of the academy.

All of this ties very much together. It is not simply about creating one university in the way we operate and think and function. It is about creating the university as a leadership model for the wider world.

Q How have the players at the state level perceived the change that's going on at OSU?

In Ohio, we have been having budget battles as have most other states. I made the point to both the leadership in the Senate and the House and to our governor about the critical role this university can and should play in the future of this state.

The president of the Senate called me today to tell me they had reached a budget agreement. One thing they all agreed on is that the university really does need to be a force for change in this state. They assured me that despite our budget woes, higher education at Ohio State continues to be a favored support unit, for which I am most grateful.

Q From the first week you returned to lead OSU, you outlined the strategies that would be your roadmap for change. Are they helping to guide the institution?

They are precisely what we ought to be doing, in the near and far terms. I measure everything we do against those and I want to get everyone else to do the same. They are at 10,000 feet and what we are working on each day is to develop very specific strategies to make them happen.

Q How do you translate the values you have identified from the walls

to the halls? Is shifting the mindsets and behaviors part of making that transition?

It is all about talent and culture. Part of it is getting very talented people who believe in the mission and who advocate and work and play the mission. The other critical component is to create a culture that allows those talented people to make effective changes and to do their best work. Those two elements are fully interdependent in my view.

Q Where do you feel you are in your journey to create that culture?

If this is a baseball game, we are into about the fourth inning now. We have had a few home runs. I think that we have accumulated a very talented senior team who like each other and are getting along very well.

Alignment is the issue now. I feel that my job is to be the chief psychiatrist. I have very competent people with whom I work and love dearly. I sometimes have to call them in and tell them I love them and tell them not to be so turf conscious, to appreciate one another and to realize that our sum is far greater than our individual parts.

Q What are you doing to keep that sense of urgency at the forefront?

I am constantly pushing, cajoling, niggling, irritating, hounding and keeping

my foot on the accelerator.

Q What do you see three or four years from now if you continue at this pace of change and reform as the economy returns to an improved state?

I think that we have moved into the blue water and everyone else is going to be on the seashore. I think I am going to look out and see the ships anchored in the harbor. We are going to be steaming away, reaching out as never before in partnership and achieving remarkable things for our state and our nation.

I think this is our greatest moment. This is a defining opportunity for us and that is where I see us in two to four years. I see people coming to Columbus, Ohio, to take a look and see how they might reorganize.

Q The culture is fundamental to this?

Again, talent and culture are the only two things that drive me. Everything else is gravy.

Q You've said that you are not that concerned about ratings, but that you want to operate on the greater stage and go from excellence to eminence. Can you explain this?

I believe a great university needs to have



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enough self confidence to say that we are going to define our own greatness. I want to be the very best Ohio State we can be. Any time you try to replicate others you become less than what you can be. We should aspire simply to be the finest university we can be.

Q What drives you personally and as a leader on this quest?

I have a lot of passion. I have an elephantine memory; people cannot get by me very long, so I expect to continue to press the issues in terms of accountability. I do not have a lot of patience for nonsense. At the core, I can see Ohio State's tremendous possibilities, and I want us to achieve them as quickly as possible.

Q What have you learned both personally and professionally from this journey?

I am very fallible. Senn Delaney has been wonderful for this university and it will continue to make a difference. I think the concepts of Senn Delaney have made a real difference in my own personal life.

I am trying to model much of that because I see on a large scale how it affects people. It is a journey for all of us, personally and professionally.

Q You have engaged your leadership team and several departments, offices and faculty and staff in the culture-shaping process already. How do you feel about the progress so far?

We are in the middle of the journey. I am not jingoistic. And this is not Alice in Wonderland. But I do believe we are aligned and moving in the right direction.

Q Are you seeing similar mindset shifts at the top of your organization?

Yes, but it is like sin and confession. You have to keep doing it. It is a never-ending process. People slip back into bad habits, as do I. We have to refresh ourselves, we have to reignite ourselves and we have to remind ourselves of the nobility of what we are doing.

We have to always remind ourselves that we do not simply have a job, we have a calling, and that calling is to make a difference in others' lives.

So we have to constantly be cognizant of modeling that good behavior. We have to appreciate one another. We have to be tenacious in pursuit of the greatness of the institution. ■

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