“Centre of the Mark:” A Call to Opportunity and Excellence in Kentucky
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I want to thank you for this opportunity to address Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education. I want to thank you for the work you've done and will do to serve the young men and women who will help to chart the future of this great state and nation. Knowing that all of you are busy women and men who might be doing other things with your time and energy, please accept my humble thanks in behalf of the Centre College community for having responded affirmatively to the Governor's call to service. So, let me begin.

4Him, a contemporary gospel group, had a hit song several years ago titled “Center of the Mark.” Its chorus captured the song's theme nicely: “To love God, love people; that's the center of the mark.” It was a good song, expertly performed, and its message was profound to my way of thinking—love God, love people; that's the center of the mark—mighty good philosophy for living in these troubled times.

Now, if you will allow me some liberty with the chorus of that song, I would suggest that the center of the mark for Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education ought to be “love opportunity, love excellence.” These two words—opportunity and excellence—are the absolute foundation pieces for a system of higher education in Kentucky that will provide the Commonwealth the essential resource it needs to become a leader in this region and the nation. And, let me be sure you understand that one without the other is false promise. We must pursue both with equal vigor, and we must not allow those who would seek to serve their own interests or settle for a second-rate system to prevail. The center of the mark for Kentucky's system of higher education must be two-part: opportunity and excellence. Working together, we must build a system of higher education that will bring distinction, vitality, and dreams to this state so rich in history.

Opportunity. Some of what I will mention here is not “new business.” The Council has already articulated a number of goals and objectives that focus on opportunity, and for this you are to be commended. Still, the question should be asked: what are some key elements to provide transforming educational opportunities for Kentuckians?

Opportunity and availability. Quality education must be available in our state at virtually any time, any place. This will be achieved by a thoughtful, coherent combination of public and independent institutions. This grouping will emphasize cooperation over competition and will be based on the needs of citizens rather than the ambitions of institutions. The Commonwealth Virtual University will play a significant role in bringing educational resources to Kentuckians literally at any time in any place. But I would caution that digital, high-tech instruction is a piece of the solution and not the solution. The highest of higher education will continue to require human interaction in our lifetimes and beyond.

Opportunity and affordability. Again, the combination that will create this
circumstance involves both public and independent institutions. Our public institutions offer real value to Kentucky's students, and that worth will increase as quality improves and education funding remains a priority. Kentucky's independent colleges are currently among the most affordable in the nation—35 percent lower than the national average for four-year independent institutions—and the availability of KEES funds to all students plays a significant role in making this the case. Also critical are our two need-based programs, The College Access Program and the Kentucky Tuition Grant Program. (I would add that though Centre is the highest in cost of Kentucky's independent colleges, it is also Kentucky's highest ranked national institution and the most affordable of the U.S. News top-50 national liberal arts colleges.) Progress will require steady gains in quality in both public and independent institutions, increases in educational funding, and policies that acknowledge and support the contributions of Kentucky's independent institutions—which award almost 22 percent of the state's baccalaureate degrees.

**Opportunity and choice.** Kentucky's students must be able to choose from a wide variety of quality educational options. As any good teacher knows, different students require different approaches. Some Kentucky students will be energized by the mass and enormous variety of a comprehensive research institution; others will thrive at regional institutions or community or technical colleges; and others will be challenged and inspired at independent institutions where the largest class they take may be fewer than 30 students. We seek diversity within our institutions; we should also nourish diversity among our institutions.

**Opportunity and the nation.** To advance to a position of leadership, we must think fundamentals, but we must also think big. Outstanding Kentucky students must be exposed to those who shape the national and international conversation in politics, science, philosophy, and the arts. This is the quickest and most profound cure for parochialism. When students see and interact with world figures, they quickly grasp that while these individuals may be brilliant and talented, they are subject to the same laws of gravity as the rest of us and their achievements are not beyond imagination or possibility. This expands the horizons of young people in a way that nothing else can. The lesson was reaffirmed to us at Centre when we hosted the vice-presidential debate in 2000. When our educational institutions have the opportunity to bring players on the world stage to their campuses, we must rally to support and participate in these endeavors, knowing their powerful educational value.

**Opportunity and place.** Educational opportunities for Kentuckians shouldn't just be in Kentucky. One of the published goals of the CPE is that our four-year graduates will “have a basic understanding of other cultures.” I would go a step further and say that a growing number of our graduates should have an in-depth understanding of other cultures. No second-hand study about “foreign places” can equal the personal revelation that comes from living and learning in another country for an extended period of time. This is been borne out to us dramatically at Centre as our rate of international study has climbed to 70 percent—among the top 10 study-abroad percentages in the country. Our students return from international study forever changed, with an astonishingly broadened view of the world and their privileged place of opportunity in it. We must
realize that students who leave Kentucky for foreign study and return with a global perspective are bringing an invaluable import to our state—one that will give us real advantage for success in the global economy. Knowledge is the wealth of all nations.

**Opportunity and retention.** I mean, of course, the opportunity for our students to successfully complete what they begin. This is a hidden weakness in the Commonwealth's system—public and private. Our young people should not only come to college in greater numbers, they should stay and get their degree, and in many cases go on to get an advanced degree. It's true that a little higher learning is better than no higher learning, but a six-year graduation rate of 40 percent—the current rate at our state universities—or the slightly better rate of 48 percent at our independent colleges will not move us to national prominence. The four-year rate for our most recent class at Centre was 80 percent, but our goal is the mid-eighties, and retention will remain a top priority until we achieve it. When we send high school students to college inadequately prepared, or allow them to get lost in the shuffle and become discouraged after enrolling—when we participate in their failure—more than an opportunity, we've provided a diversion. Educational leadership will require more rigorous and better-coordinated college preparation and more focused retention efforts once students enroll—especially in the critical freshman and sophomore years.

**Opportunity beyond the B.A.** As we begin to achieve national prominence in education, large numbers of our college graduates will attend top-ranked graduate and professional programs at universities around our state. But large numbers will also attend prestigious advanced study programs around the nation and around the world. And that's a good thing. When our students regularly complete post-graduate programs at the Harvards, MITs, Stanfords, Oxfords, and Cambridges of the world, and then return to help Kentucky advance, the state is well served. One needs look no further than University of Kentucky President Lee Todd for an example of this pattern. As we achieve educational distinction, it will become more and more common.

**Excellence.** That's probably more than you asked for or wanted on opportunity. So let me turn to excellence. Some of what I'll mention here isn't original thought, either, but some of it is, and this portion of my remarks is in the future tense, as nearly all of these goals are still in the distance. What will our educational system look like when we've achieved our goal of moving Kentucky to a position of national leadership?

We will have a flagship university that's nationally recognized, known for accomplishment in research, scholarship, and public policy development. News and analysis hosts such as Jim Lehrer and Ted Koppel will regularly invite faculty experts from this university to be expert commentators on their evening news shows; the National Science Foundation will use these faculty members as their expert evaluators, and national grants from the public and private spheres will be commonplace. The students enrolling will do so without extraordinary financial inducements; they will come to learn from the wise.

We will have a system of regional universities that doesn't promote or reward
competition among the various sites. Instead, each will be known for a different and special educational mission, such that students from all regions of the state travel to study where their undergraduate and graduate aspirations are best met. There will be minimal overlap in degree-granting programs and maximum respect for one another's expertise and special mission.

We will acknowledge and reward achievement of all sorts in public and independent higher education, recognizing the Commonwealth's dependence on private higher education to provide teachers, scientists, leaders, and many of the highest achieving graduates with an excellent education at virtually no cost to the taxpayer. With the passage of HB 191, Kentucky now has the opportunity to use not only her state institutions, but to utilize even more fully her independent colleges and universities and should do so. We will encourage partnerships between public and independent institutions, sharing resources when appropriate in order to treat all students in the state with the same respect whether they enroll in public or private colleges. We will recognize further that when any of our educational institutions achieve national or international recognition—through a top ranking in U.S. News, the production of a Rhodes Scholar, the winning of a conference or national championship in sport or national recognition in drama or music, or the publication of groundbreaking medical research—we all benefit. All ships are lifted by a rising tide.

We—and here I'm thinking short term rather than long term—through the leadership of the Council on Postsecondary Education, will have demonstrated the foresight and fortitude to search for and employ a new President for the Council who is a woman or man of vision, of wisdom, of courage. The Commonwealth lost such an advocate with Dr. Gordon Davies' departure, and we must not settle for leadership that will make us merely comfortable and collegial, and, thus, mediocre. That kind of appointment would chart a course toward the average, and the goal here must be excellence.

We will sustain and expand our commitment to continuity and rich inter-relationships in Kentucky's K-16 system. We will be sure that the best practices in higher education flow systemically to secondary and pre-secondary education and that the K-12 challenges and accomplishments are fully understood by those in higher education. This goal will require us to maintain the highest standards throughout the K-16 system, such that students earn high grades and learn to work harder when lower grades are assigned. We won't use high grades to mask mediocrity, understanding that all students can achieve within their capabilities. We will upgrade substandard facilities throughout the K-16 system, knowing that a superb learning environment will prompt achievement more than will a larger sports arena. We will have recognized the crisis in staffing throughout the K-16 system, will have dealt with a flood of retirements (which is underway in the school system even as I speak), and we will recognize and reward teachers for the good they do, instituting merit incentives and higher beginning salaries and respecting senior teachers for long and valued service. This state will be a leader in compensation comparisons, such that great teachers can be attracted to and kept in the system. Certification roadblocks will be eliminated and outcomes assessment will be emphasized.
We will trumpet the successes of the Commonwealth’s best initiatives like the Governor’s Scholars Program, which will be the largest and quite arguably one of the best in the country—as it is now. Kentucky leader Lil Press, as the first director, provided remarkable leadership at the statewide and national level with the Governor’s Scholars Program, and Sherleen Sisney’s leadership has followed that good work. At Centre we’re proud to have been part of the program for virtually its entire existence and to have contributed Milton Reigelman and, now, Clarence Wyatt to its leadership. It is a beacon, lighting Kentucky’s way to educational distinction.

In sum, we will experience a sea change in the culture of our state. A lifelong love of learning need not replace our accomplishments in basketball and horses—well-established features of the Kentucky character. Rather, excellence in education will join these as a defining characteristic of our Commonwealth. We will see, when our aspirations have become reality, a changed economic landscape. This change will be driven by a model educational system that provides choice, accessibility, the highest levels of quality, and familiarity with the world and the best it has to offer. The system will produce a work force that will allow us to create and successfully attract businesses based on innovative ideas and new technology. Continued education and training will be readily available, and lifelong learning will be a trademark of careers in Kentucky.

Our success in education and the economy will inspire even greater success as we move from a mentality of scarcity to one of abundance. When our educational leaders see that the economic pie has grown larger, they can more easily keep the greater good in mind, knowing that more resources are available for everyone.

And finally, an enhanced quality of life. Our enterprise is about more than money and education for education’s sake—important as those are. When we achieve our goal of an educational system centered on opportunity and excellence, then our state will have better citizens, individuals who are involved and informed about our commonwealth, the nation, and the world; better parents, knowledgeable about the developmental needs of their children and who experience less economic stress and more economic optimism; self-sufficient families who understand that education can give them a degree of control over their destinies and hope for a better future; vibrant communities that offer a standard of living unsurpassed in the nation and the world. From public health and safety to arts and recreation to a sense of civic pride and engagement, Kentucky will be transformed into a new and better place.

A Final Note. Is this center of the mark—opportunity and excellence—a tall order? You bet. But the target date for reaching it is 2020, seventeen and a half years. The time for a generation to be born, come of age, and begin post-secondary education. How will we inspire this generation—and the one after and the one after—if we lower our aim? Our time here is short, and our legacy is to those that follow. I would say that, in education, our legacy is those who follow. We owe them nothing less than our best effort at securing the brightest future we can envision. Centre College is committed to being part of that effort, leading by involvement, example, and hard work as we advance in the direction of our dreams.
A couple of my colleagues whom I asked to work with me on this address suggested I finish my remarks by singing some portion or all of the song from which I took my inspiration. I decided to save you from this, though I was tempted if only so you would “never forget” the speech. No, I think the two words central to my address are sufficient. Opportunity. Excellence. They combine to create the center of the mark. As distinguished members of Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education, they are your obligation, your responsibility, and your opportunity. Likewise, as citizens of this great state, they are our obligation, our responsibility, and our opportunity. They are the center of our educational mark.