“Our Nation? Our Commonwealth?”
Louisville Rotary, December 5, 2013

By Dr. John A. Roush, Centre College President

I open my remarks by claiming that I remain optimistic about the future of this nation and this Commonwealth. Abigail Adams, First Lady of the United States from 1797-1801 and married to John Adams, second U.S. President, was a woman of remarkable courage and stamina – often choosing to lift up her husband during his times of trial. Her 1779 letter of encouragement to him seems particularly apropos for these times. “These are times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or in the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised, and animated by the scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant, wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman.”

And, on those days when you need to have your spirits lifted, I invite you to read and learn more about one of Kentucky’s favorite sons, Abraham Lincoln. Centre College welcomed a magnificent sculpture of our nation’s 16th President to campus in the fall of 2012, and his presence on our campus stands as a constant inspiration to our entire community. Created by Louisville’s own Ed Hamilton, Centre’s Lincoln, who came to be admired and revered well after his assassination in 1865, has much to tell those of us living in these times. I commend his thinking; his courage; his style of leadership to you, but that is a conversation for another day.

Our nation, with its many challenges continues to be the envy of our all free nations, remains “.... a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere.” This quote, attributed by most to former President Reagan, has been used effectively by Democrat and Republican, for decades – ‘cause it’s not about party – it’s about the welfare of this great nation and this metaphor remains our guide and inspiration; remains true even when in the darkest of times.

Now, turning to my remarks, I begin by offering several observations about American higher education and, then, higher education in Kentucky.

With regard to our nation, America’s institutions of higher education remain the envy of the world and its students. Even with the problems we face, and they are substantial, America “owns” the enterprise. This said, the American academy must address the issue of the rising cost of attendance (a threat to access), the threat of inflexibility and unwillingness to change (stifling creativity and productivity), the waste of destructive competition for faculty, staff, and students (an “arms war” of sorts that gobbles up dollars by the hundreds of millions), the need to balance an educational experience that is “higher, not just longer” and relevant all at once, and a reviving of its commitment to quality and learning – not just credentialing and serving up degrees that do little to prepare young men and women for lives of work and service. The good news is that we can remain “king or queen” of the educational hill, if you will, but we must stop living off our history of success and high achievement.
With regard to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, I am encouraged by the leadership that exists currently in our public and private colleges and universities. Our governor, even in these tight economic times, has remained resolute with his support of higher education. Our Council on Postsecondary Education president, Bob King, is a seasoned professional who is leading well. Our private college president, Gary Cox, continues to do excellent work. The men and women in the presidencies of Kentucky’s institutions have never been stronger, in my opinion. There have been any number of changes in recent years at our public and independent institutions, but the new women and men being appointed impress me. So, there are many reasons for us to be encouraged about the Commonwealth’s educational future, but much work remains. Like the nation, we need to build on existing strengths, look for ways to work more effectively and efficiently, imagine ways to assure access and add quality.

My second points call for me to comment on several aspects of the American academy that threaten its future and, in my opinion, are compromising the intellectual welfare of our colleges and universities.

• I have spoken and written at the national level about the financial model being broken in American higher education – independent and public colleges and universities alike. [A word about the “rule of seven.”] This aspect – one that has been a decade-plus in the making – represents the most imposing threat to our nation’s institutions by far.

• And, let me say a word about the need for transparency? Poor leadership (as in telling half-truths and straight-out lying) has compromised leadership in our nation and our states and our communities – colleges and universities, too. The only fix is to correct the behavior and move in the direction of full transparency. (As I tell folks at Centre, I can keep a secret – I just don’t have very many!)

• Some institutions that have systematically abandoned their commitment to teaching undergraduates (driven in large measure by unfettered commitments to research), and, too many places have stopped paying attention to quality and learning. Instead, they are “offering up” degrees and educational experiences that do little to prepare young women and men for lives of work and service – lives that will see them change jobs and even professions several times during their work life of some 50 years-plus.

• My last threat has to do with an issue of “distortion.” And, who among you can call off Newton’s third law of motion. (“For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.) And, there are three distortions looming in higher education that are problematic. One, the prospect for increased federal intervention in higher education. Two, the alarming increase in merit aid over the past 20- plus years – a habit that is unsustainable. And, three, for those of you who have nodded off, I suggest that the ever increasing “professionalism” generated by colleges and universities that offer Division I intercollegiate athletics represents a real threat to the long-term welfare of our country’s colleges and universities.

So, you might ask, “What might we do about all this?” I contend that the best places – the ones with the brightest futures – will be the ones that . . .
• Continue to claim without apology that first-rate higher education is a national asset of considerable worth; that we are deserving of the nation’s support, the state’s support, your support.
• “Fight” with energy against those distortions that threaten American higher education . . .
• Play the value proposition . . .
• Focus on outcomes – students and their families have the right to know what “will happen” to me if I choose your college . . .
• Imagine partnerships heretofore unimagined . . .
• Grow modestly, in measured ways . . .
• Imagine how technology can provide efficiency and effectiveness – both administrative and with the instructional program . . .
• Work unceasingly to expand our college’s and university’s reach and reputation without apology
• Raise $’s for existing, basic operating commitments and endowment.