“State of the College and the American Academy”
Rotary Speech, Glasgow, Ky., September 2009

By John A. Roush, Centre College President

To give you a glimpse of what’s happening at Centre College and provide you with a brief commentary on the status of the American academy, let me share with you small portions of the report I gave to the members of Centre’s faculty and staff at our Opening Conference, this year titled, “Surprises.” I will finish with an observation about the nation’s and the Commonwealth’s colleges and universities. But first, Centre.

The academic program at Centre College remains the heart and soul of what we do. The quality of our teacher-scholars, both those with a history at Centre and those who joined us for the first time this fall, isn’t really a surprise, of course, but I included it in the list as Surprise #1. It is a surprise we must never take for granted and one that we must encourage, foster, cherish. Centre’s very culture is built on the foundation of putting the best teachers we can find in academic settings that allow them to challenge, support, and transform some of the very best students in this nation. This is our reason to be!

Surprise #2. At Centre, we continue to go about remaking the face of our campus. Our $15 million Campus Center, new home to our Cowan Dining Commons, will open officially in mid-October. The remarkable renovation of the Norton Center, a $3 million project, will be completed in early October. And the new and renovated Young Hall, a $20 million project, is well under way and will open in fall of ’10. These three major projects were identified in our strategic plan as our top three building needs, and they are complemented nicely by several other more modest projects – the remaking of the field space and track at Farris Stadium (the fourth facilities priority in our strategic plan); the remaking of the field space at Wright Field, our baseball facility; and the renovation of Ruby Cheek Hall, a new residence for 20 students. All these projects are the result of generous gifts from trustees and friends of the College for these specific purposes. Our students and the College’s general budget are not burdened with the cost of these facility improvements. I noted for them, as I do for you now, that this is how it’s done at premiere colleges and universities, and I am delighted that Centre is able to conduct its “building business” in this manner.

Surprise #3. In a fall when any number of colleges and universities, to include some brand-name places, did not make their class, Centre’s effort in admission generated the most-talented and most diverse entering class in the history of the College. It was also the largest opening enrollment in Centre history. What we accomplished this past year—for those who graduated (80+ per cent in four years), those who returned in record numbers this fall, and those who joined us two weeks ago—is extraordinary.

The upshot of our successes in admission and retention: Centre College is now a place of 1,220 students. The College has emerged as a more cosmopolitan place that attracts and retains an increasingly diverse student body—a goal of our strategic plan. I was also pleased to report that, in spite of our slightly increased size, commitments made to the
teaching staff will keep our average class size at 18, the same as last year, and the clear majority of our classes contain less than 20 students—another mark of excellence for those who measure such things.

**Surprise #4.** Transformational Education—Still! Other colleges, to include good ones with a national reputation like Centre that not so long ago might have claimed to offer transformation education, have lost their personal, engaging relationship with students. Centre College remains known as a place that cares about the young men and women who choose us. We transform their lives—nothing less!

**Surprise #5.** Oh, my goodness—*Forbes* picked Centre as #14 among all colleges and universities in the US. The folks at *Forbes*, again this year, hit the long ball for Centre College. This bi-weekly magazine is a staple for many serious-minded Americans, and for Centre to rank this high, again this year, among U.S. colleges and universities of all types and size is good for us, though I am quick to point out that we should enjoy the attention while not taking it too seriously. We remain listed by *Consumer’s Digest* as the #1 best value among all national liberal arts colleges. And Centre remains the highest nationally ranked Kentucky college or university by a wide margin. *U.S. News* this year ranked us at #46 among national liberal arts colleges, put us as the only Kentucky school on the “strong commitment to teaching list” at #11, placed us in the #25 spot among its listing of “Great Colleges, Great Prices” and listed us on the “programs to look for” for our study-abroad program.

I reminded our faculty and staff to never forget that it is good others think well of us. Centre College remains at a moment in its history when folks inside and outside the academy are prepared to acknowledge our many strengths. As I tell students, parents, and others, Centre has become one of “those places” in the American academy, and this is profoundly good for us and for the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

**Surprise #6,** had two parts. First, the good news: The fiscal year 2008-09 was a very successful one financially. Centre ended the year with a healthy surplus, with reserves put in place for future projects. This is the kind of end-of-year results that the best institutions experience every year, and this has been Centre’s habit in the past several years.

**Part two of Surprise #6 (sorta #7)** was less than good news, and it took me a few minutes to describe the College’s current financial challenge. I began by noting that the road back to national and international wholeness, economically speaking, will be long and filled with many challenges.

Centre has been able to stay away from draconian measures like cutting pay or benefits or laying off faculty and staff or eliminating academic and student life programs or other things that we know would damage the educational experience of our students and diminish the Centre College experience as we know it. A great number of colleges and universities around the nation and here in Kentucky have already made serious, even harmful, cuts to their programs, and some of them anticipate having to do more.
But challenges remain! The endowment that supports Centre experienced a 30% drop during the fiscal year, and that drop will affect the impact of our endowment in meeting our financial needs for the next three years. We are more dependent on student revenues than ever. And, while our admission stream remains stronger than ever, it cannot make up the entire difference.

The College’s financial models—acknowledged to be conservative—report that we must lessen the increases we pass on to students, carefully manage our commitments to student financial aid, and lower some of our costs all at once. These models will challenge us to maintain the culture of this place while charting a financial course that is sustainable over the longer pull.

**Surprise #8** – In spite of the economic recession we experienced in the 2008-09 year, our development program had a record year for gifts and grants received—this on top of an all-time high the previous year. Gifts and grants received this past year totaled $28,681,350, a remarkable $11 million increase over the 2007-08 year.

**Surprise #9** – Planning In spite of the economic challenges that are quite real here at Centre, we have continued and must continue to press forward on those elements of the strategic plan that are crucial and possible. We are able to do this at a time when many colleges and universities have set their own plans back on the shelf. The bullets that I called off for them are, for the most part, “finished.”

- It was in our plan to address critical facilities needs.
- It was in our plan to make engaged and experiential learning a more central part of the educational experience.
- It was in our plan to establish Centre as a leader among undergraduate institutions in America in the development of global citizenship, which we have done and are continuing to do.
- It was in our plan to achieve greater public recognition of the quality of this institution.
- It was in our plan to establish a marquee scholarship program.
- It was in our plan to find ways to use information technology to strengthen the educational experience at Centre.
- It was in our plan to increase the diversity of our student body with regard to ethnic and national origin.

**Surprise #10**, in fact, was a reminder that I sincerely want the College’s faculty and staff to be comfortable with asking Why? How soon? What are our options? I reminded them that the answer they receive may not be the one they seek or prefer, but they could be certain that they would get an answer that is open, honest, and timely.

Finally, I pointed out that these are times that demand our best, and that I was confident the College’s trustees, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends of Centre were equal to the task. Centre’s chance to achieve real greatness as an undergraduate, residential college devoted to liberal learning in the arts and sciences remains real, and this at a time when a lot of colleges and universities have scaled back their expectations to staying at
average. That is not Centre’s future! Centre College has the potential to play above the rim, and we intend to meet that expectation! Every member of our campus community counts for much when faced with such challenge, such opportunity, such adventure. Good for us!

Now, before I entertain your questions, let me make two brief observations about higher education—one about the national scene and one about Kentucky’s system of higher education.

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 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), and the need to balance an educational experience that is “higher, not just longer,” and relevant all at once. 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 indicated his plan to support education. Our new CPE president, Bob King, is a seasoned professional who will do well. Our private college president, Gary Cox, is doing excellent work. The men and women in the presidencies of Kentucky’s institutions have never been stronger, in my opinion. Four of us—Larry Shinn at Berea, Lee Todd at the University of Kentucky, Jim Ramsey at the University of Louisville, and I—locked armed a couple years ago to look for ways to provide leadership, academic and otherwise, for Kentucky. 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.