

Prof. Gene Nichol's Acceptance Comments

Thanks to all of you. Especially to Pat Conway for his extraordinarily generous nomination and to the Honorary Degrees and Awards Committee. And the Chancellor.

I was wondering, as I sat here, what kind of faculty would give an award like this to someone like me. It occurred to me that, at this moment, there is probably a group of legislators in Raleigh wondering the same thing.

I can't say, though, how much it means to me – coming from the university I love most in the world. The university that, despite the occasional challenge, is most deserving of the affection and aspiration and attachment of its broad family. There are different kinds of honors, of course. And as one gets old, it's traditional to gather some.

But for me, without more, an award whose past recipients include Bill Aycock, Dickson Phillips, Doris Betts, Dick Richardson, Dan Pollitt, Chuck Stone, William Blythe and Henry Brandis sets the highest water mark. It, of course, reminds of one's inadequacy as well. I cannot run in that company. But I'm delighted some thoughtful folks ... erred.

I would say a word about this place.

A few years ago, I debated a friend who was then dean of the law school at Virginia. He began by announcing he hailed from "a school that has a quasi relationship with a university that has a quasi relationship with a state." In other words, "we're a private school and the quicker we become completely private, the better we'll like it." I suggested this 'was yet one more piece of evidence that if Thomas Jefferson were alive today, he'd be a Tar Heel." The comment wasn't well received in Charlottesville.

I came here believing Carolina is the nation's greatest public university that actually wants to be a public university. I believe it still. For me, that means two foundational things. First, we exist to assure that the sons and daughters of NC – whether high or low, black or white, rich or poor, rural or urban – have access to the best education and opportunity the world has to offer. In Frank Graham's words: "to savor and preserve for even the poorest youth the intellectual and spiritual resources of mankind."

Second, a great public university embraces the progressive era notion of "the mind in service to society." For this reason, Edward Kidder Graham described the boundaries of the university as extending to the borders of the state and beyond. John Egerton characterized Frank Graham's presidency as a golden era because he "skillfully turned the scholarship of the institution from esoteric detachment to utilitarian engagement -- that it might enhance 'the human qualities of the State and the South'."

My late friend Bill Friday put it more bluntly once to my students: "A million North Carolinians living in poverty pay taxes to support your education. I want to know what you're going to do to pay it back." A public university removed in its efforts and attentions from the crushing difficulties of its constituents is a contradiction in terms.

It is this mission of mutuality that, in Charles Kuralt's famed words, 'binds us to this place as to no other.' And, even if we forget it on occasion, as we have too frequently over the last decade, there remains no higher calling or accolade than "university of the people."

I'm immensely grateful for, even if concededly unworthy of, this high honor. Thank you very much.

Gene Nichol