

**INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF DR. GEORGE E. COOPER
TENTH PRESIDENT OF SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
UNIVERSITY
MARCH 27, 2009**

***EMBRACING EXCELLENCE: MEETING TOMORROW'S
CHALLENGES***

Governor, members of the Board of Trustees, Mayor of the City of Orangeburg, alumni, legislators, city, county and state officials; The first Lady of South Carolina State University, Dr. Hefferan, fellow presidents, former colleagues, stakeholders, distinguished university and college delegates, faculty, staff, students, members of the SC State Community, visitors, friends, and members of my beloved family, thank you for your presence; thank you for coming today to share in this celebration of a new chapter in South Carolina State University's history. I feel a sense of joy and excitement as we— together—

embark upon this lap of our journey to ensure that SC State remains true to its mission and uncompromising in its quest for excellence.

I would not be here today were it not for the unconditional love and support of my family. Will the first lady of the University, my wife Diane Shaw Cooper, please stand and be recognized. Will my two daughters, Nikki and Carey please stand and be recognized. I would like to give a very special recognition to my father, Bertram Cooper, who had his 92nd birthday on March 3rd. Dad, I just want to say that I love you and thank you for making me the man that I am today. Will you please stand.

As you may have noted the celebration that you witnessed today was ceremonial and ritualistic in nature. Like the chorus in a Greek play, rituals and ceremonies are intended to arouse emotions, express intentions, and provide the audience with information that might be missed in dialogue and action. So, today I stand before you to transform the ceremony or ritual you just witnessed into words that capture our purpose and meaning—that is the South Carolina State University Purpose and Meaning.

On June 6, 2008, George E. Cooper was named the 10th President of South Carolina State University.

“Tenth President of South Carolina State University”—
 ah such a short phrase! But a president may not be shortsighted or short-tempered, and he may not fall short on the duties that have been entrusted to him. The phrase “tenth president of SC State “ may indeed be short, but the order is tall, very tall. As a former President of Brown University said: a university president is

- expected to be an educator
- to have at some time been a scholar
- to have judgment about finance
- to know something about construction, maintenance, and labor policies
- to speak continuously...with charm and never offend
- to take bold positions with which no one will disagree
- to do everything through committee but with great speed

And I would add , of course,

- to raise money
- to appear at all 2 million events that occur in an academic year looking sharp and refreshed

- and the President's mate, who is unemployed by the University, must appear as well.

This brings me to a story that I would like to share about a new college president before I approach the substance of my address. The story is told that a new college President, like many newly elected presidents, had a very ambitious agenda for his first 100 days. Everyday, he was in his office at 6:00 a.m. He attended university functions; he networked; he met with the faculty, he met with alumni; he served on forums; he prepared elaborate presentations for the Board and monitoring agencies; he addressed university challenges, and so forth. It was not unusual for him to arrive home many nights well after 8:00 p.m. and to work most weekends. After about 60 days of this, the new president was exhausted, and his wife told him, he looked like it. So, the President decided that come what may, he was going to take a break and indulge in his favorite pastime—fishing.

He had heard about a lake not too far from the university where he could rent a boat and fish to his

heart's content. Come what may, early Saturday morning, he planned to go fishing. As fate would have it, late Friday evening he received a call from the Executive Assistant to the President. She told him that the editor of the newspaper (Maybe the T and D) called and wanted to speak with him. The newspaper wanted to publish a front-page lead article on the new president, and the best reporter on the staff had been given the assignment. The problem was that the reporter could interview the President Saturday Morning only. It was to be a feature story, so the president, who had a plethora of experience in making adjustments and handling a multiplicity of things simultaneously, decided he would take the reporter with him. He stuck with his conviction: Come what may, he was going fishing!

They met at the dock; the President cranked the boat motor, and they motored out to the deep part of the lake. He told the reporter a little about his childhood, why he applied for the presidency, and about the charge from the Board. In a conversational tone, he answered question after question about himself and the university while

calmly gearing up his rod and reel and casting his line in the water. Suddenly, he snagged his lure on a sunken log. Cool and collected, the new president continued to answer the reporter's questions as he stepped out of the boat, walked across the water, and bent to untangle his line and free his lure. He then—

with the same calm—walked back to the boat and climbed in. The new president enjoyed the reporter's company, caught a lot of fish, and returned home after a very eventful day. He could not wait to see Sunday's newspaper.

Early Sunday morning, he got out of bed and went to his front walk to retrieve the paper. Glaring at him on the front page was a large picture of the new president and a big bold headline that read: "New President Cannot Swim." Upon reading the article the President found that he was not the only person interviewed. It seemed the reporter had followed up with interviews with a couple of faculty members who were not at all surprised about the president's lack of swimming prowess, and one faculty member even said "I suspected as much all along."

It is true that University Presidents cannot walk on water, but during my years in higher education, I have known and had the privilege of working with a number of university presidents who could swim reasonably well. As a boy who grew up in Florida, worked summers as a lifeguard, and was practically reared on the campus of Florida A & M University, I can assure you that this president can swim in the waters of Higher Education and Academe! Twenty (20) years of experience in Higher Education as a faculty member, Academic Administrator and Cabinet level administrator and 18 years with USDA, one of the most powerful funding agencies in the nation, have greatly enhanced my swimming skills. I have accepted the position of President because I believe that we can work together to build upon that great legacy that is South Carolina State University! Together we can capitalize on the calm and unexplored waters and adjust and adapt to the muddy, unpredictable and even turbulent waters of Higher Education. Swim we must and swim we will!

The foundation upon which the university was established is the first and second Morrill Land Grant Acts, 1862 and 1890. Founded in 1896, South Carolina State University is a land-grant institution and as such has an obligation to effectively execute the land-grant mission. It is a mission based upon the ideals of President Abraham Lincoln and Justin Morrill, a Vermont legislator and the author of the land-grant movement. According to President Lincoln our American institutions should be “the public’s universities,” and Morrill espoused that “learning should be more widely disseminated.” SC State’s land-grant mission, then, is a covenant with the public. SC State University is a **public** institution. Its mission, therefore, is that of meeting the needs of the public. Examples of meeting the public’s needs are as follows:

SC State has

- the only undergraduate environmental sciences field station in the nation.

- the only undergraduate degree program in nuclear engineering in SC and at a historically Black College/University.
- the only Master of Science degree in transportation and the only master of Business Administration degree with a concentration in agribusiness in SC.
- the only Doctor of Education degree in the State with a concentration in Educational Administration.

SC State University is

- the lead institution for the South Carolina Alliance for Minority Participation Program a consortium of 12 colleges and universities that promotes careers in the sciences and provides academic programs in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
- a participatory university in providing mathematics and science textbooks to the country of Zanzibar in East Africa.
- a member of the SC Minority Teacher Recruitment Partnership and the education program for non-traditional students. Certified

teachers for South Carolina, teaching in 49 of the state's 85 school districts, with nearly 80% of these certified teachers teaching in a state-declared critical need subject.

- an outreach university with graduate program offerings at the Greenville Center in Greenville, SC, and other off-campus program sites across the State.
- Our land-grant legacy of providing access and service to the citizens of the state and nation is well documented.
- Eighty-seven percent of students come from South Carolina and the remainder comes from states across the United States and 21 foreign countries. Thanks to the hard work of former faculty and staff and the vision of the nine presidents, and three interim presidents and preceding me, we have transformed from a basically agricultural and mechanical institution—with 25 pigs, 10 milk cows, a few chickens, 13 faculty members, 8 buildings, and 9 degree programs—to a senior comprehensive, teaching University with the talents of faculty serving all community and

states through fundamental applied research and outreach activities.

- 1) Will the retired employees of this university who served on the faculty and staff, please stand and be recognized. Thank you.
- 2) Will the retired employees of this university who served as vice presidents, deans and department chairs, please stand and be recognized. Thank you.
- 3) Will our past presidents who are present— the 8th President, Dr. Leroy Davis and the 9th President, Dr. Andrew Hugine, Jr.—please stand and be recognized. Thank you.

Our theme for this occasion is “Embracing Excellence: Meeting Tomorrow’s Challenges.” Let’s explore this theme as it relates to the land-grant mission. Yes, Lincoln and Morrill beckon us still. Our mission has not changed, but the context in which we pursue it is very much different. The 21st Century has launched us into the information and telecommunications age. It is projected that this age will demand focus on the biological sciences,

medicine, and recognition that we are a part of a fully integrated global economy. According to the Kellogg Commission's Final Report on the Future and State of Land-Grant Universities, the 21st Century we "will be dependent on the power of intelligence and the use of technology." Our 44th President Barack Obama has already demonstrated this. He effectively used technology to launch a successful campaign, raise funds, and garner support for the highest office in the nation. We would do well to follow his example!

Higher Education is already being reshaped by the demands of the 21st Century. Not only will we find a new public seeking to venture into the water, but also this public will constitute an older and more diverse pool of traditional students. Further, the more mature adults will demand new and more relevant training. We need only to examine the state of our nation's economy: the home mortgages fiasco, and the rapidly rising unemployment rate to know that a college education is essential. As President Obama so amply phrased it in his first joint address to Congress, "The answers to our problems

don't rest beyond our reach. They exists in our laboratories and universities, in our fields and factories, in the imagination of our entrepreneurs and the pride of the hardest-working people on earth." Historically, the panacea to public needs and ills has always been higher education. We must meet this challenge! We must remain true to our mission even in a recession!

The challenges are here, but **together**, we can resolve problems and navigate through the challenges posed by troubled waters and we can capitalize on our strengths in calm waters. The question is how will we meet tomorrow's challenges? Well, we will swim, of course. You have heard me introduce members of the faculty and staff and being on the swim team

S W I M. Let's examine this concept of swimming for a moment.

In Solving Tough Problems, Adam Kahane noted that "no CEO can transform a company's ability to innovate, or single-handedly create a value-based

culture...A problem cannot be solved with a prepackaged solution from the past. A solution has to be worked out as the situation unfolds, through a creative, emergent, generative process.” He further noted that complex problems must be solved from inside. Solutions cannot be shipped in. Rather, we must engage and listen to others who have a stake in the system. Will the esteemed faculty of this university, the members of our current swim team, please stand and be recognized. Thank you. Likewise, will the dedicated staff of this university, also members of our current swim team, please stand and be recognized. Thank you.

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- SECURE THE FUTURE OF OUR STUDENTS BY EXUDING A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE AND PLACING STUDENTS FIRST.

The most valuable treasure an institution has is its students. Students are not goldfish. You can't simply deposit nourishment (knowledge) in

the waters of Academe and expect them to be successful. As Friere points out in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, we have to be more than depositors of knowledge that students are expected to memorize and repeat. We must provide a problem-solving education for our students so that they become critical thinkers engaged in solving the real problems of the world. We get in the water with them and involve them in discovery learning and creative activities, therefore transforming ourselves into “guides on the sides” rather than a “sages on the stages.”

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- **SCRUTINIZE THE QUALITY OF OUR PROGRAMS IN CONTEXT OF PEER AND OTHER STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.** Are our Program offerings preparing students for the 21st Century? How will we scrutinize our curricula in the varied programs to ensure that programs meet the standards of our land-grant mission—preparing graduates to meet the public need. The public

need has changed and the education that we provide our students must change with it.

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- **WORK TO PROMOTE A COMMITMENT TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.** Our land grant mission requires that we, as a public institution, advance the common good. The University is an ideal place to espouse political awareness. As agents of democracy, we must prepare our students for active citizenship. This can be achieved through curricular and extra-curricular activities—courses, civic partnerships, community-based learning projects, research, and the creation of leadership institutes.

- **WIN SUPPORT FOR THE UNIVERSITY BY LEVERAGING STAKEHOLDERS' INTEREST IN THE "FUTURE" THROUGH THE FORMATION OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS.** This is essential. We will need to form strategic alliances with businesses, corporations, public and private organizations on projects that are mutually beneficial, market our unique capacity to fulfill

basic needs of organizations and communities, create Centers of Excellence, and form or join research consortiums that engage in programs that address public needs and provide access.

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IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES THAT VALUE AND PROMOTE DIVERSITY IN GLOBAL, ETHNIC, ACADEMIC, AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS. I am sure that it is clear by now that we are talking about a new kind of public institution. In this 21st Century, the Information and Telecommunications Age, changes the boundaries between the University, the nation, and the world. The word, “globalization” has taken on a new meaning! Our land-grant mission started with an emphasis on fully serving the citizenry of the State, progressed to the nation, and new technology demands inclusion of the world. It is now technically just as easy to deliver instruction on nutrition and health to a nation in Africa as it is to provide extension to a local impoverished community. Moreover, the world itself is changing. It is incumbent upon us as a public institution to prepare our students to work and live with people of varied cultures and ethnicities, and to value all

cultures. We must recruit a diverse population into our University and provide varied cultural experiences for our students. We will need to initiate service learning, internships, co-op learning, and exchange, and travel opportunities for faculty and students to have a global perspective. The concepts of an international education must be re-examined in light of the new global realities that I have shared, and we will need to INTERNATIONALIZE our CURRICULA, as well.

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- MAXIMIZE RESOURCES THROUGH PROGRAM INTEGRATION, COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS, AND ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROGRAM REALIGNMENT. That we are in a recession is well documented. We will be cost-effective by integrating programs with small enrollments, where cross-pollination of disciplines is feasible. We will examine an interdisciplinary approach as related to our general education courses. Further, we will form and/or strengthen

collaborative partnerships, such as the Community Higher Education Council, to effectuate cost-effectiveness in teaching and learning. And finally, we will implement administrative and program realignment to ensure cost effectiveness in the operation of our program and services.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in Strength to Love that “the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” I say to you today, “the ultimate measure of a university is not where it stands and how it fairs in moments of convenience, but where it stands and how it fairs at times of challenge and controversy.” Indeed, we are at a crossroad in American History. Our nation is in crisis and no individual, institution, or entity is exempt. In the words of President Obama: “the cost of action will be great, but the cost of inaction will be greater.” Let us embrace excellence as we meet the challenges ahead. Together we can capitalize on the calm and unexplored waters and adjust and adapt to the muddy, unpredictable and

even turbulent waters of Higher Education. Swim we must and swim we will!

Thank you, and God bless South Carolina State University!