INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Morris L. Marx
September 9, 1988

Many of us here today have attained enough age and perspective to know that twenty-five years is not such a long time, and 1963 is easy to recall. In that year, where we are now was a beautiful forest, part of a Spanish Grant, and very little changed from colonial times. Few of the more than 30,000 alumni of this institution had any notion that they would graduate from a university on this site. But in that year, the legislature authorized funding for a campus here. From that day until this, many have worked untiringly to support and nurture this university. Very few presidents have the privilege of making an inaugural address to an audience containing both former presidents and so many founders and pioneers in this noble venture. Their excitement, enthusiasm, and affection for the university has flowed into me, and they have made me feel a part of the building of what will become a great university. My inspiration comes not from the dim shadowy ghosts of remote ancestors but from the living body of founders.

What is most notable about this young university is the spirit of idealism in which it was begun. The buildings were subjugated to the beautiful landscape. Back doors were avoided, so that all portals welcome those who enter. Rather than merely paying a lip service to the library as the heart of the university, the planners placed it at the physical center of the campus and made it, in founding president Harold Crosby's words, "the best library any university in the history of the world has had on opening day". The credo of intellectual growth was adopted, through the metaphor of Oliver Wendell Holmes' beautiful poem, *The Chambered Nautilus*. Naturally, this provided the university emblem. The athletic teams were named not after ravaging beasts, but after the heroic Argonauts, thus celebrating the classical roots of universities. The university colors of blue and green are nature's most predominant hues. The organization of the campus was into residential colleges with unusual combinations of disciplines to stimulate creativity and novel interactions. At a time when many universities were busily turning themselves into research and doctoral training centers, this university affirmed the primacy of the student with these words for the first General Catalog:

The advancement of knowledge is a legitimate and indeed necessary function of a university; but it should occur as a part of the teaching-learning process. To the extent that a university's research activities occur in isolation from its teaching function, to that extent it has abandoned its primary educational mission. To that extent it has failed to utilize a most beneficial tool.

That same catalog asserted that the University could "provide its students a sound education comparable in its treatment of the individual with the best that is being done in small private colleges in the country."
President Robinson continued the theme of the ideal education in his inaugural address, calling for Milton's dream of "...a better education, in extent and comprehension, far more large, yet of a time far shorter and of attainment far more certain, that hath been yet in practice."

In fairness, we must say that the idealism and excitement of the early years has waned. The college system is gone, replaced by a more traditional organization. Many of the original faculty, staff, and administrators have lived through life's inevitable quenching of hopes and dreams. The community has asked whether the university has served it well. Some question whether it has fulfilled its promise.

Yet the credo of the founders has had its desired results. The faculty have taught well. They have attended to the needs of individual students and extended education beyond the classroom. The alumni are in strong agreement that they received a high quality and useful education. The past twenty years have brought the university to the point that our students are admitted to prestigious undergraduates schools and routinely achieve success in the national workplace. There are nationally recognized research programs. I have never known of a university where students got as much benefit from research activities. In many ways, the university has done what it had hoped, and there is a strong foundation on which to build.

While we could continue to explore with profit the past and the present, we must turn now to where we are going. Indeed, the root of the word "inaugural" is augury, that is, foretelling the future. I have not the gift of prophesy, but the future is coming. The only issue is how we will be a part of it.

Most of the discussion of the future in our nation at this time concerns the short run. As the President pointed out, "The things that will destroy America are prosperity at any price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living, and the get-rich-quick theory of life." The President was Theodore Roosevelt, so we see that the problem is not a new one. We must emulate such patient men as Sir Christopher Wren, one of the world's greatest architects. He began design on the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral at the age of 36. It was seven years before the first stone was laid. When he was 68, he was still making major design changes, and the work was not completed until he was 78 years old. But this forty-two year project has stood in sublime glory for another 265 years.

Universities are as susceptible as any other part of our society to immediate gratification. The drive to achieve quickly the status of a Harvard or a Stanford does lead to a publish-or-perish environment, which can create a burst of supposed excellence. All too often the changes are superficial rather than foundational and cannot be sustained.

What can we say about that long term future toward which we must carefully progress? The states of Virginia and North Carolina both have half the population of Florida. But, where Florida has nine universities, Virginia has
fourteen and North Carolina has sixteen. The population of this state continues
to increase, and there is very little taste for beginning new universities. Thus, it
seems inevitable that we and the other smaller public institutions in Florida will
all develop into major universities. The time frame for our growth will depend
heavily on the economic development of the Northwestern region of Florida and
on state revenues. Those of us here today must prepare the soil and sow the
seeds for a harvest that we may not reap, but that will come.

While we have control on our campus of much of what is to come, much of
what we would like to do depends on the support of our governing board. Thus,
to speak of our future, we must examine the framework of development set by
the Board of Regents for the State University System of Florida, that group of
citizens who are charged with the difficult role of intermediating between the
public and the academy. Most importantly, our Board has set an
uncompromising goal of excellence -- that our state university system be ranked
as one of the top five in the country. Some educators would instantly
understand that goal as one to turn each university into a University of
California at Berkeley or a University of Michigan. But our Board understands
that a public university system achieves excellence when it provides excellently
for the needs of the state. To do that, each university must attend to its own
unique mission, dictated by the special circumstances of its location, age, and
history. Accordingly, under the aegis of a system plan, each university has
revised and updated its mission statement, as a blueprint for the future and a
guiding plan of action.

One would hope that a university brilliantly achieving its approved mission
would reap rewards from its Board, its legislature, and its friends and donors.
All too often, that has not been the case because of, in the words of Frank
Newman, "a single pyramid of prestige." If the only way to be considered
important, to gain prestige, is to become a major research university, then it
matters not what the mission statement says. The university will be a
fragmented collection of departments and will lavish its attention and resources
on publication in scholarly journals. Our Board has adopted Dr. Newman's
"multiple pyramids of prestige". Each university has a chance for excellence
according to its success in accomplishing its own special mission.

The ability to seek our own destiny will allow us to continue our tradition of,
in the words or the mission statement, "educating men and women who think,
communicate effectively, cultivate an appreciation for life, and act with reason
and effect." Without jeopardizing this principle, we will seek a far more diverse
student body, with more students of traditional age. We will strive to increase
the availability of the benefits of the university to minorities, the handicapped,
the needy, the nontraditional student, and the military. Because of our size and
scope, we have an almost unique opportunity to offer a cohesive general
education that integrates into the major curricula. Compared to most public
institutions, we offer relatively small classes, with minimal reliance on graduate
students as instructors. We will intensify our efforts to encourage student-
faculty interaction. Both faculty and staff will work to nurture the physical and
psychological well-being of our students.
This focus on the student must be accompanied by, and harmonized with, the development of strong research programs and creative contributions to the public welfare and to the solution of contemporary problems.

While we do have a special obligation to a particular region, the university has not allowed itself to become provincial or parochial, nor will it. Our Board of Regents, in speaking of teacher education programs in the state, has said "quality will be judged by national standards." Let us here state that the University of West Florida extends that premise to all programs. We cannot even serve the cities where we reside, much less the region or the state, unless we have faculty, facilities, and academic programs that are nationally competitive. We have identified a dozen programs that have already achieved distinction, and we plan to focus our efforts and attention on bringing them to a position of national prominence.

I acknowledge that no progress will occur without a strong faculty. I call upon the Board of Regents and the legislature to assist us in supporting the faculty. For our part, we will work hard to recruit bright new faculty who will add capabilities and enable change. We will dedicate resources to faculty development programs for those already here, so that they will maintain intellectual vitality and stay at the forefront of their disciplines.

Much of what I have said here may seem idealistic, which only brings us back to where we began. If we can recapture the idealism of our founding, then we can dare, as the musical Don Quixote put it, to dream impossible dreams. If those of you in the community, who were here at the beginning, will renew the excitement of the founding of a new university, then anything is possible. If we take the short view, then we can hope for good quality in what we do and excellence in select fields, but we cannot be a great university. If we show the patience of a Sir Christopher Wren, if we do not make unnecessary choices that fragment and divide us, if we believe in ourselves, then we can be the architect of a great university.

I would like to close with some thoughts that bind together past, present, and future. Every day in the life of a university is a day when the human experience is celebrated. We have the same role as writers and poets, who, in the words of William Faulkner, "help man endure by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion, and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past." Our most important mission is to perpetuate our intellectual and cultural heritage, through which our faculty and students attain their growth. This concept cannot be stated better than in what must be our anthem, the beautiful poem, *The Chambered Nautilus*, by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Its last stanza reads:

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!