State of the University: 2012 was a watershed year

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This is a watershed year for higher education, President David Leebron told more than 100 faculty and staff members in McMurtry Auditorium during his Oct. 5 State of the University address. He cited many challenges confronting all of higher education, reported on major progress Rice has made during the last decade and spoke of challenges and opportunities ahead as Rice enters its second century.

Challenges include growing financial pressures on almost every revenue source, increasing public and political concern about rising college costs, and fundamental changes in university activity and teaching brought by new digital and communication technologies, including the emergence of open online courses.

“Elite universities have now embraced online education and it is not going to go away,” Leebron said. Rice is among the select universities that have partnered with online course provider Coursera and, since joining in July, enrollment in Rice’s first five course offerings has grown to more than 92,000. “That’s more students than Rice has graduated over the entire course of its history,” Leebron said.

Despite the challenges, he noted that Rice has flourished. As part of Rice’s Vision for the Second Century, the undergraduate population grew 30 percent, with increased quality and diversity. Between 2002 and 2012, the number of applicants more than doubled – from 7,079 to 15,133 – while Rice became much more selective, with an admission rate declining from 24 to 17 percent. Graduate student enrollment increased 37 percent over the last 10 years, and several new Ph.D. programs were added, along with professional master’s degrees.

The undergraduate student body is more diverse geographically and socio-economically, with about 11 percent now from other countries. Almost 19 percent of the class that matriculated this fall received Pell Grants, and many of them are first-generation college students. Rice maintained its commitment to keeping education affordable and accessible over the past decade, Leebron said, even as some peer schools cut back on financial aid during the economic recession that took a toll on university endowments.
He noted that Rice continues to score highly in various surveys of students and alumni, including the Princeton Review ranking Rice No. 1 for happiest students two years in a row and the new Alumni Factor ranking of Rice as No. 4 for alumni satisfaction. Rice was again ranked 17th in the U.S. News ranking of top research universities in the country.

Other areas of growth over the past decade included:

- Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty grew to 531 from 469.
- Research funding increased from $52.3 million to $107.3 million.
- Classroom space grew by 18 percent and research and instructional lab space by 33 percent.
- Housing and dining space increased 46 percent as new residential colleges, serveries and graduate apartments were built.
- Twelve works of public art were added to the campus.
- Operating revenues increased by 84 percent in the last 10 years to $551 million in fiscal year 2012.

As of the end of September, the Centennial Campaign has raised $888 million toward its $1 billion goal, with more than half going to the core academic mission.

Leebron praised the accomplishments of the Faculty Senate, including the new Program in Writing and Communication and the development of a process for creating and approving minors. The Senate has been “a remarkable contributor not merely to the principle of shared governance but really making things better,” Leebron said.

Looking ahead to the first decade of Rice’s second century, Leebron cited some of the challenges that the university needs to focus on, such as improving teaching in the digital age, building deeper international partnerships, strengthening faculty and research support, expanding impact through online education and fostering more collaboration with the Texas Medical Center, museums and industry.

“One size has never fit all when it comes to teaching,” Leebron said. “But we really have to have both a collective and an individual revolution” to teach better and to engage with students in different and more effective ways. “If we at Rice are going to be competitive, we frankly have to up our teaching game,” Leebron said. “Our strength is a combination of providing what a liberal arts college provides and being a great research university.”

Leebron cited several emerging themes and potential areas of focus that will require broad campus engagement to be successful: mind and brain; food, energy and water; global health; and developing both technology and processes that will enable us to use effectively an increasing amount of data to make better decisions.

Leebron was introduced by Senate Speaker Carl Caldwell, the Samuel G. McCann Professor of History.