March 20, 2014

Dear Rice alumni and friends,

While only about three fourths over, this academic year, our first following the spectacular centennial celebration of 2012, has been exciting and gone by quickly. I find it hard to believe that we are now only a couple months away from commencement. Despite the many happenings, I promised that I would keep my letters shorter, and so here goes.

In the fall we officially celebrated the completion of our $1 billion campaign. We raised $1.1 billion, and this generosity from alumni, friends, parents, foundations and corporate donors has made an extraordinary amount possible on our campus. While the effects of the campus are physically visible everywhere (new academic buildings, new residential colleges, new social venues, new and renovated athletics facilities and extraordinary campus art), an equally large impact has come from the support you can’t see but would certainly hear about if you talked to our students, faculty and staff: new faculty positions, enhanced scholarship support and new programs, centers and institutes. We are engaged both locally in Houston and around the world as never before.

Extraordinary generosity toward the end of our campaign has meant that construction continues. The new Anderson-Clarke Center, home of the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies, has been completed except for finishing touches on a much needed auditorium and cinema, and is a stunning beginning to what will soon be rapid development on the western end of our campus. A spectacular new tennis facility is also under way near the stadium and just off Rice Boulevard. We are completing fundraising and architectural plans for a new social sciences building, Robert Klein Hall; an interdisciplinary arts center, the Moody Center for the Arts; an opera center and theater; and a football facility to be located at the northern end of the stadium. This activity is also necessitating a comprehensive look at campus development, including some additional underground or above ground parking so that we can preserve green space and playing fields.

The growth goal we set under the Vision for the Second Century of our student body has been met, and now stands at an entering class of 950 students for a total undergraduate student body of about 3,800, plus a graduate student body of about 2,500. Even with the growth, we remain the smallest elite wide-spectrum research university. We are now nearing the completion of our 2014 admissions season, with the staff having to make difficult choices among more than 17,700 applicants, up an astonishing 15 percent from last year. The composition of that pool has changed radically, with more than 10,000 applicants from the United States outside of Texas, and nearly 2,800 from international students. The applicant pool and the student body are incredibly diverse along every dimension. Like the city of Houston, there is no single group that constitutes a majority.

Our faculty continues to win acclaim. Let me provide just a couple of recent examples. Naomi Halas was recently elected to the National Academy of Engineering, making her
one of the few who are members of both the NAE and the National Academy of Sciences. Caleb McDaniel, a history professor, recently won a major award for his book “The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery,” as did art historian Joe Manca for his book “George Washington’s Eye: Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon.” Both books are available on Amazon. Rebecca Richards-Kortum and Maria Oden were awarded the MIT-Lemelson Award for Global Innovation “for their life saving inventions and dedication to mentorship.” Recruiting talented people is important as well, and we recently announced a major initiative in economics under the leadership of our newly appointed chair of economics, Antonio Merlo, who is director of the Penn Economics Institute and former chair of the University of Pennsylvania’s renowned economics department.

In two areas, we have had a particularly momentous year. The Shepherd School orchestra performed in Carnegie Hall in New York as well as at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore, their first performances outside of Rice. The reaction of the audience, which included many alumni, was enthusiastic. And not far from Alice Pratt Brown Hall, home of the Shepherd School, our football team turned in a historic year, racking up a pre-bowl record of 10-3, including for the first time in 57 years an outright conference championship. And at Reckling Park, Wayne Graham celebrated his 1,000th win for Rice! In Tudor Fieldhouse, Jessica Kuster set new all-time Rice career scoring and rebounding records, and our women’s swim team won its second consecutive conference championship. We have great new leadership for our athletics program in our new director Joe Karlgaard, who was recently named one of the “Forty under 40” in all areas of sports endeavors, and indeed the only university-affiliated person on the list.

Perhaps my favorite project, one which emerged out of the Oshman Engineering Design Kitchen, was the robotic arm that our students designed and built for a young man suffering from osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease. This work brought together every aspect of our mission: teaching, research, service. You can see the video here, which has become Rice’s most viewed video with more than 815,000 views. These students didn’t simply complete a course assignment; they went beyond any requirements and on their own initiative saw this project through to completion and made sure that it had impact on a young person and his family. That spirit is evident across our campus as, for example, we set yet another record in United Way contributions this year. Our new board chair Bobby Tudor has picked up the reins from Jim Crownover in helping us with that campaign, one of the signature ways Rice gives back to its home community.

The talent and exuberance of our students extends in so many dimensions. We now even have our own mariachi band, Mariachi Luna Llena. And while they probably won’t be in Carnegie Hall anytime soon, they have already contributed much to campus life and events. The students themselves are no doubt the primary reason that, according to surveys conducted by the Princeton Review, our students have ranked us No. 1 or 2 in the country for student happiness and quality life for the past several years. (We ranked No. 3 this past year for “best-run colleges” as well!)

The success of our graduates is every bit as important as that of our faculty and students. Forbes recently published a list of “30 under 30” in various fields, including science and health care. Two Rice recent grads and a current graduate student made that
list, which is just extraordinary given Rice’s small size. A Shepherd school alumna, Caroline Shaw ’04, won both a Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy. And Kevin Schell ’11 was named one of 18 Luce Scholars. Of course, extraordinary Rice grads are not new. If you missed it, see the story on Noel Parrish ’28, commander of the Tuskegee air force base who fought for the right of the Tuskegee Airmen to undertake combat missions. Ultimately, it is the success of our graduates, and the degree to which they attribute some measure of that success! to their Rice experience and education, on which we must be judged. In a survey of alumni of several hundred colleges and universities a couple years ago, Rice ranked fourth in the country in alumni success, happiness and satisfaction with their education. I certainly hope that is the case with you.

But we cannot rest on past success. You have no doubt read about the very substantial forces and changes buffeting higher education today. One of the most important is digital education. I am pleased to say that our faculty has responded both thoughtfully and enthusiastically to the challenge. We now have a half dozen MOOCs — Massively Open Online Courses — with 20 more in development. Rice is one of the few universities to have joined both of the two major consortiums — Coursera and EdX and we continue to explore other possibilities as well. We see online education as presenting first and foremost better opportunities for our on-campus students, but ultimately also for students who cannot study at Rice — young and old! — as well as our alumni and other audiences.

Equally important is the push, both external and internal, to deliver more in terms of our education. This past year we implemented our new Program in Writing and Communication, including a mandatory first year writing seminar. All across the campus you will see a new emphasis on leadership. The revamped Leadership Rice program and the now five-year-old Rice Center for Engineering Leadership have been at the vanguard, but the effort is broader and deeper. Similarly, there is a new entrepreneurial spirit on campus, which I spoke about in my centennial address and wrote about in the last issue of Rice Magazine. One recent development is the student organization OwlSpark (I love that name!), which supports students and recent alumni in starting entrepreneurial ventures. You can read more about that in that issue of Rice Magazine as well. And the Rice Alliance for Technology and Entrepreneurship continues to grow, launching new! companies and conducting one of the most successful business plan competitions in the world. Our students also actively participate in each other’s education, with record numbers serving as residential college-based Peer Academic Advisors or Academic Fellows and Mentors. When you take into account as well the small army of O-week advisors, you can see that this is truly a community in which all are expected to both teach and learn.

Which brings me to one big change for me. For the first time since I arrived at Rice just under a decade ago, I am teaching a full course. It’s called “The Legal Framework of Religious Tolerance” and focuses on the religion clauses of the first amendment. It’s designed both for people interested in the problem of religious freedom and tolerance in a secular and diverse state, and for those who would like some exposure to law and legal analysis. As I tweeted (what do you mean you don’t follow me on Twitter?), I have had to take it on faith and circumstantial evidence until now how extraordinarily talented our students are. Now I get to experience it firsthand.
And that reminds me, I better get to grading some of those papers. Please do come and visit the campus and talk with our students, faculty and staff. I think you will find that the most important things that distinguish Rice remain true as we have moved boldly into our second century.

Warm regards,

David W. Leebron
President

P.S. I enjoy connecting with you to share the many amazing stories from campus. Please take a minute to provide us with your preferred contact information. Your information will only be used by the Rice community. http://alumni.rice.edu/expressupdate.