



Scott S. Cowen



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Dear alumni, faculty, staff and friends,

You would think that being the president of a major American research university would be a full-time job. And, of course, it is, but in recent years, circumstances have dictated that I try on a few new and different hats.

On March 15, I had the honor of introducing President Bill Clinton to an audience of students from across the country who had packed Dixon Hall to hear a panel discussion on the efforts to rebuild New Orleans. It was part of a daylong series of events held by the Clinton Global Initiative University (CGI U) on Tulane's uptown campus.

The event was all about making commitments to effect positive change in the world and in my remarks to that audience of young people I contemplated how my life has been enriched by the commitments I have made to the New Orleans community. I'd like to share some of those thoughts with you.

COMMITMENT TO ACTION

This March, Tulane had the distinction of hosting the inaugural meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative University, a community of college students and university officials who come together to address pressing global challenges. More than 700 college students and 30 university presidents convened on Tulane's campus for three days to share information and commit to tackling the world's most urgent concerns.

Presiding over the event was President Bill Clinton, who launched CGI in 2005. In January 2008, Clinton announced the expansion of CGI to college campuses through meetings such as the one held at Tulane.

"Today's generation of young people has more power to change the course of our future than any previous generation," Clinton said during the closing plenary address.

*Office of the President
6823 St. Charles Ave.
New Orleans, LA 70118-5698
Tel 504.865.5201 Fax 865.5202
scowen@tulane.edu*

TULANE COMMITMENTS

All conference attendees were required to make a commitment to take action. For its part, during the conference Tulane University committed to two initiatives:

- To develop a model for North American universities that wish to implement a public-service requirement. As the nation's only highly research-intensive university to require public service from its students before they graduate, Tulane encourages other universities to follow suit. Tulane's Center for Public Service will be the resource and clearinghouse for information for other universities.
- To provide cost-effective, accessible health care for New Orleanians who cannot afford health insurance by establishing community-based health centers. The Tulane University School of Medicine is committed to working with local communities to build and manage new health centers that provide high-quality, preventive care. It has created the Office of Community Affairs and Health Policy to support community efforts in expanding access to care for the underserved and develop long-term sustainability of community-based health care.

In addition, in the week following the CGI U conference, Scott Cowen signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. In doing so, he pledged that Tulane will assess the impact of its activities on global warming and then develop a plan to achieve carbon neutrality through reduced energy use, green building, increased recycling and other measures. The commitment also calls for Tulane to integrate into its curriculum the concept of sustainability, which calls for meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

First, let me say that my day job is a great one. As president of Tulane I oversee an institution that is the largest employer in Orleans Parish and one of the largest in the state. There are many ways to illustrate the significance of this fact but I'm going to choose just one. One of my proudest moments as president of Tulane occurred on Jan. 16, 2006, when we opened the university after being closed for five months while we recovered from the damages inflicted by Hurricane Katrina. And within 72 hours of our reopening, the population of the parish went up 20 percent.

That is an amazing statistic, but it is in keeping with the almost unbelievable manner in which Katrina affected so many of us. The three other hats I now wear, in fact, were put on my head as a result of the storm and each reflects my own commitment to New Orleans and to civic engagement.

About a month after Katrina made landfall, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin asked me to head up a communitywide effort to develop a vision and plan for rebuilding New Orleans public education. It is an effort which I'm engaged in to this day. The plan, completed in February 2006, is now being enacted and is the most extensive experiment in rebuilding a public education system in America. I'm proud of that effort and believe it will have benefits for the children of New Orleans as well as, I hope, children around the country for years to come.

People often ask me why education is my passion and why I agreed to take on the challenge of reforming the city's public education system. The reasons are both personal and philosophical. As a youngster, I was one of those children who would have been left behind if a few teachers hadn't embraced me, taken me under their wings and helped me to develop into the person I am today. This is one small way I can thank those who helped me at a time when nobody else would.

I'm also passionate about education because I believe that at the root of so many of the heartbreaking issues we face today is the lack of quality education for all people no matter their race, location or socio-economic class. This is certainly true for New Orleans, where before the storm we had one of the most poorly performing school systems in America. There were lots of children being left behind and hopefully that will change.

Since the storm I also have functioned as the commissioner of the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, the agency that is responsible for the physical redevelopment of the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. NORA is leading efforts to redevelop blighted and abandoned property and initiate ways to improve city neighborhoods, public facilities and infrastructure.

And the last hat I wear represents one of the things I most enjoy doing. I am cofounder of the Fleur-de-lis Ambassadors. This is a group of 40 New Orleanians who commit every year to visit three or four major cities in America and engage TV stations, radio stations and newspapers to tell the story about what is happening in New Orleans. We've found that the news media doesn't always report the story as fully and accurately as it might, especially if the story is as broad and deep and complex as the recovery of New Orleans. So as



108 REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

During the CGI U conference, 108 Tulane students and student groups pledged to affect positive change in the world through a commitment of time and effort in addressing poverty alleviation, human rights and peace, energy and climate change, and global health.

Following is a sample of student commitments, described in their own words:

COMMIT

"I commit to creating a safe, educational and open-to-all community garden at the Lower 9th Ward Village Community Center."

"I commit to creating a usable and technologically advanced library at Samuel J. Green Charter School (K-8) in uptown New Orleans for student and community use."



"I commit to working with the migrant population in a metro city (New Delhi) in India and provide them with knowledge about basic health issues such as immunization, and educate them regarding various infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS."

"My Commitment to Action is to develop a scholarship fund that will provide access to higher education for underprivileged youth in rural areas. More specifically, I would like the scholarship funds to be accessible primarily by rural youths in Ghanian villages."

ambassadors, we go out and tell our story as many times as it needs to be told.

As time passes, the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, its citizens and institutions inevitably will occupy a smaller and smaller place in the public's awareness. But remember this: Because of Hurricane Katrina, 1,800 people died. Because of Katrina, 400,000 jobs were lost. More than 275,000 homes were destroyed—that's 10 times as many as in any other U.S. natural disaster. Eighty percent of Orleans Parish—a land mass equivalent to seven times the size of Manhattan—was under water for an average of 57 days.

By whatever metric you use, Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. It obviously had its impact on Tulane University. Seventy percent of our campus was flooded. Our entire downtown campus, which comprises our hospital, School of Medicine and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, was flooded. We had 13,000 students and 8,000 employees who were displaced for more than five months.

Tulane University became the first major research university to close its doors for an entire semester. All told, we lost \$650 million because of the storm.

And yet, two-and-a-half years later I can tell you in all honesty I have not been more optimistic about the future of our university and our city than I am today.

Why am I so optimistic about Tulane's future? The storm forced Tulane to take a close look at itself: who we are, what we were and what we could be. As a result, we knew we had to make significant changes in order to move forward as a university. Most importantly we knew we had to strengthen our commitment to civic engagement. If as an institution we couldn't do that, then our city was unlikely to fully recover.

And so we changed. We now have a public-service requirement that our students must meet in order to graduate. That requirement does not mean our students are mandated to go into the Lower Ninth Ward and to build or paint houses, which by the way, we hope they do. In actuality, the requirement demands that students develop a thoughtful, deliberate plan of public service for the four years they are here.

In essence, we thought differently about the meaning and purpose of a liberal education and realized that civic engagement is as important to the development of the heart and mind of students as is taking English or history or science or the arts. This is,

"I commit to helping the Latino population of New Orleans by teaching English and being part of a support system for them in a city that is not experienced with such a group."

"I am committed to raise funds (through awareness) to empower 100 Tibetan young women by enabling them to attend the Golok School for Girls in Golok, China for one year."

COMMIT

"I commit to converting 200 houses (25 houses per drive, 8 drives) in New Orleans from incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescent light bulbs."



"I will start an initiative to provide measles vaccinations to children in Sub-Saharan Africa. My goal is to raise \$1,000, which will be enough to vaccinate 1,000 children and give them an opportunity at life."

"I commit to purchase 100 laptops and send them to schools in Africa's Ivory Coast. I wish to increase the technological resources of these students, thus enhancing their education and giving them a better opportunity to rise out of poverty."

"To continue rebuilding homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina for the duration of my college experience and using my expanding knowledge of construction to help those in need of manual labor assistance."

of course, an experiment for a major research university to undertake, but I'm pleased that we are doing it.

I have to believe I am not the only one who is pleased. Today, the level of student interest in Tulane University is at an all-time high. Before the storm, we typically received approximately 17,000 applications for the 1,600 spots in our entering class. For fall 2008, we received 34,000 applications for a class of 1,400 and accepted the entire class by Jan. 1. It's not the number of applications that impresses us, nor is it the academic quality of the students, which also is at an all-time high. What got our attention was what these high school seniors wrote in their essays. Over and over again, within those 34,000 applications, were the stories of young people who said they want to provide service to America and believe right now in New Orleans is the best place to do it.

Amazing.

Now, let me tell you why I'm so optimistic about the future of New Orleans. With its own food, music, architecture and way of speaking, this is a unique city, and there's no way America can be America without New Orleans.

But there's more. Before Hurricane Katrina, we knew we had a problem with the levees, just as we knew we had problems with public education, crime, deteriorating neighborhoods and health care. Like so many American cities, we knew we had problems but just couldn't make the changes necessary to solve them.

We're now seeing improvements on all these fronts. We are coming out of this with a better public education system, a better healthcare system and better neighborhoods. Paradoxically, we now have expectations for the future that we didn't have before Hurricane Katrina.

What is taking place in this city is an example of civil society in action, where people have not waited for the government to do the job of rebuilding. People are engaged in the city's recovery every single day—individual citizens and collections of citizens remaking this city into a better place. This is one of the most inspiring things I've encountered in my life.

If it can happen here it can happen elsewhere. If people at Tulane can think differently and creatively about the challenges they face, people at any other institution can do the same. If the residents of New Orleans can join together to reshape their community and their lives, the same can be done in any town on the map.

We all have the authority and, indeed, the obligation, to effect positive change. Our students are beginning to learn this now, but it is a lesson that I suspect will deepen as they grow older. Every hat we put on in the service of others is a privilege.

Scott Clower