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More Than Classroom Experience

Higher education is changing. Universities are under increasing scrutiny across a range of issues, and often the overall impression is one of an industry in crisis. Many of the issues that gain the most press, although important and serious, don't lie at the core of what we do and the education we provide. But it is that very education that has been in a process of change and will continue to be so.



What our students expect from their education, and therefore what we must deliver, is rapidly evolving. And while students and their families are, when they have the means, willing to pay substantial tuition, they are rightly demanding that what they get in return prepares them well and in quite different ways than in the past for the lives and careers that lie ahead.

Last year, I tried to capture this in a presentation slide titled "Education: The Changing Value Proposition." It portrayed what I perceived to be the value proposition that students accepted in 1985 and compared it to what I expected it would be in 2025. Originally it contained a warning: "completely fabricated data." But that didn't sound ideal for a presentation by a university president, so my staff changed it to "for illustrative purposes."

The point of the comparison was that classroom experience was becoming a much less important (but still significant) part of the overall college experience, and that other elements — leadership, research and entrepreneurial opportunities, civic engagement, international experiences and mentoring — were becoming more significant to students.

Later in the fall semester and independent of the presentation mentioned above, Rice's Student Association conducted a survey to see what was important. It turns out that my prediction of the future was uncanny with one small caveat: **the future is now.**

Rice must be a leader in this new world of higher education. We must figure out, better than anyone else, how to incorporate these elements into our unique environment. We must dedicate ourselves to giving students the education and experiences that will equip them to be innovative leaders who solve the problems our world confronts. This is in large part what the Rice Initiative for Students, which you can read about on Page 30, is about.

A decade ago, as Ping and I considered what we would like to contribute to Rice in addition to the new roles we were privileged to play, several things came together. I wanted to honor the memory of my sister, Kathryn, who succumbed to breast cancer just three years before I became president of Rice. Kathryn was on the one hand an international free spirit who accumulated travel experiences and languages in a remarkable way, learning

to speak Spanish, French, German and Chinese. And on the other hand, she was a financial professional who applied those skills and experiences to succeed in a complex and competitive world.

I wanted to capture her spirit and try to make sure that our students would have the kind of opportunities that had shaped Kathryn's life, and my own as well. In the last decade, the Kathryn Leebron Smyth international travel fellowship has sent 10 students on international experiences that we hope have changed their lives. These students write to us after they return, telling us of the impact their experience has had on them.

That's what the best education does: it opens worlds and changes lives. It fosters lifelong curiosity and develops the reservoir of experience and perspective that enhance our ability to learn at every stage. It positions people to learn and lead. Building on the dedication Rice has always had to the education of our students, it gives them the "Owl Edge." While many of us will choose to contribute financially, all of us can contribute advice or opportunity. I hope you will join us in this effort to deliver this broader and deeper set of opportunities, as an integral part of a Rice education, to every Rice student.

Education: The Changing Value Proposition

