

THE GREAT PLAINS LAND GRANTS

The Morrill Act of 1862 is a landmark in the history of education and democracy. Its creation, the land-grant university, belongs to America and to the world. Nowhere is this landmark more salient than on the Great Plains of North America.

Beginning as an idea germinated in the fertile mind of Justin Smith Morrill, a congressman from Vermont, and written into law by the federal Congress in 1862, the land-grant university has emerged most clearly on the western prairies as democracy's college, fulfilling the visions of Congressman Morrill. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, we reflect upon the past, present and future of the land-grant university on the Plains.

If Congress had not made provision for land-grant colleges, with access for all and with a breadth of field that injected agriculture and other "practical" studies into higher education, then surely the people of the Plains would had to have invented such institutions for themselves. The Great Plains land grants are, to begin with, embodiments of the regional character, egalitarian in spirit and manner.

The egalitarian character and the programmatic breadth of the Great Plains land grants have made them institutions of choice, with strong enrollments and institutional growth for the past half century and brilliant prospects for the future. The people of the Plains take interest and ownership in these institutions as they do no other institutions of higher education.

Moreover, these institutions, responding to the regional situation, have assumed potent roles in regional development. Their traditional strengths in agricultural research and Extension have helped prairie farmers meet the challenges of prairie farming and rural life in a vast land. With diversification, modernization and globalization of the regional economy and society, including the advent of the Digital Age, the land grants serve as engines propelling the Plains states to global leadership. Institutionally, too, the land grants emerge as intellectual and technological powerhouses.

The reasons for the remarkable success of the land-grant university as democratic ideal and as palpable reality on the Great Plains of North America are many, but surely the qualities of innovation and reinvention are central to its history and its prospects. We now reflect upon how the Great Plains land grants have, in the past, met every challenge posed to them; how they stand today as products of continuing innovation and reinvention; and how, given the rising challenges of region, nation and globe, they stand ready to continue to deliver on their promise.