United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
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No. S-98-35

Perpetuating a Tradition of Excellence

by

Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Acceptance Speech for the Presidency of
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
December 11, 1998

Thank you, Mr. Heffner.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen–members of the Board of Trustees, alumni, faculty, staff, and students.

What does one say at a time like this? I wish that I could share with you–not only in words but also in actual sense–all that I am feeling as I join this very distinguished assembly, this community of high-caliber individuals, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I can tell you that I am feeling gratitude ... pride ... anticipation ... the weight of responsibility ... the exhilaration of a new challenge.

Let me provide you a brief self-introduction of a different sort than you have just heard, by telling you a story from my childhood. As I was growing up, I became fascinated with the notion that the physical world around me was a world of secrets, and that science, as applied in direct experimentation, was the key that could unlock those secrets. As an example: during one 3-year period, I collected and experimented on live bees of all sorts–bumblebees, yellow jackets, and wasps–adjusting their habitats, their diets, and their exposure to light and heat, and all the while keeping a detailed log of my observations of their behavior. My parents, needless to say, were very indulgent (given that much of my laboratory was buzzing under our back porch), and they encouraged me to pursue my developing interest in science.

Now I can tell you that, for a young African-American girl growing up in Washington, DC in the 1950s, becoming captivated with the experimental method was hardly the norm–although, given an audience like this one today, this story might be similar to experiences that many of you had in your youth. From my perspective in those days, experimentation was like a good mystery novel, a tangible, unfolding narrative of what made nature click. In other words, it was a set of ideas with concrete, practical application. Best of all, in this "docudrama," I was at the controls, in contact with the characters, changing the plot and scenery according to the direction of my own interests. Experiences of this kind solidified my passion for education, for experimentation,

for scientific research, and for science policy. I have never regretted my choice of vocation or the path of my career. I went on to become a theoretical physicist and condensed matter physicist, once again captivated by the exploration of complex ideas and their applications.

In the broadest sense, even in my current position as the Chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), I still am proceeding along similar lines of inquiry–studying the environmental interactions around me, and taking responsible action based on that understanding. Whether examining the world at a microscopic or a macroscopic level, studying biological or physical systems, or developing and implementing regulatory policy, my focus still is on asking perceptive questions, making keen observations, drawing insightful conclusions, and using this learning as the basis for making sound decisions.

Given that background, you all should understand the anticipation and the overwhelming sense of pride that I feel today in accepting the presidency of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Those of us in this room are the inheritors of a 175-year tradition–a tradition in which all of you have participated and helped to sustain, a tradition that I hope to perpetuate. It is a tradition of excellence in engineering education, of outstanding scientific research, of innovative teaching methods, of serving as a springboard for entrepreneurial activities, of providing educational opportunities, in the words of Stephen Van Rensselaer, to those "who may choose to apply themselves in the application of science to the common purposes of life."

In short, the Rensselaer tradition is one of cutting-edge ideas with practical application. It is about the future, in building it with inquiry, entrepreneurialism, energy, and commitment to excellence. Long before these walls came to be covered with ivy, Amos Eaton and Stephen Van Rensselaer had the idea of a degree-granting technological institution, and had the strength of vision to bring that idea to its practical application as the Rensselaer School. Even at that early stage, as many of you know, Eaton was interested in pioneering innovative instruction techniques, and we can only imagine the fascination he would have with the "studio model" classroom that the Rensselaer faculty has pioneered in recent years. On a more personal note, I find it gratifying that Eaton, as the co-founder of Rensselaer, was an early advocate of educating women in the sciences.

In such a context, leadership also is a matter of ideas and their practical application. I hope to bring to Rensselaer a leadership that will be characterized by the development of a shared vision, the clarity of that vision, the skill to articulate it, and the perseverance to bring it to fruition. Given that most, if not all, of the leaders of the Rensselaer community are present here today, you should know that, in my view, leadership must begin with setting an example–an example of hard work, creative thinking, and commitment to mission. To be effective, a leader also must be able to motivate those she leads, to build consensus among diverse stakeholders, to delegate responsibility in a manner that continues to build other leaders within the organization, and to make, and take responsibility for, difficult decisions, while valuing all members of our community, especially our students, because they/you are our future. And finally, at this time in history, a leader must have and must be able to instill in others a global consciousness, an awareness of how the decisions we make and the direction we take here at Rensselaer can be of benefit not only to ourselves and our immediate society, but to humankind around the globe. I commit to you that this is what I will strive to do as your president.

The Rensselaer mission, of educating the leaders of tomorrow for technologically based careers, has never been more relevant–and relevant on a global scale–than it is today. I feel

deeply honored to be entering this position at this particular juncture–poised as we are on the edge of a new millennium, fortunate to be able to draw on the enormous strengths of this great university–the quality of its faculty and staff, the wisdom of its Board of Trustees, the support of its alumni, and the extraordinary caliber of the students it attracts–in order to further the vision of Rensselaer as a technological university with a truly global impact.

To actualize this vision requires us to innovate on the innovations already achieved in teaching our students, to strengthen and enhance the research base of the university, to continue and to expand the upgrading of our facilities, and to engage the larger community–locally, regionally, nationally, globally. All of this is predicated on a fundamental strengthening of Rensselaer's financial base.

Each of you, in your own particular way, have helped to set the stage for our continued success as a technological university. For that reason, I begin my relationship with each of you with a sense of gratitude–to the Rensselaer student body, the Rensselaer faculty and staff, and the entire Rensselaer community.

In particular, I would like to express my thanks–and, I am sure, I will echo your thanks–to Neal Barton. In speaking with students, faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, and campus friends, I have discovered how important President Barton's work has been in bridging gaps, building trust, expanding communication, healing wounds, and increasing university pride and hope during the past nine months. He is a man of immense depth, sensitivity, understanding, wisdom, and devotion to Rensselaer. The enthusiasm we all feel right now, and the confident spirit with which we enter the new year, is very much the product of his work and his generous heart. So, for myself, and for the entire campus, we thank you Neal!

I also would like to thank the Search Committee–for finding me, for articulating so clearly the goals and mission of this institution, and for sharing my delight when we found that we were aligned so closely in our vision of "the Rensselaer of the 21st Century." I would like to thank the Rensselaer Board of Trustees, for selecting me to become the 18th President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I am deeply honored to accept the responsibility and duty that accompany this position. I pledge to you–and to the entire Rensselaer community–that I will do my utmost to serve you in a manner that is worthy of the Rensselaer tradition.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Dr. Morris Washington–who is also a physicist–and our son Alan–without them, I would not be here. They could not be physically present with me today. You will meet them very soon. They share my enthusiasm and excitement in joining the Rensselaer family. Thank you.