We can be better:
Confronting our nation’s greatest challenges

With forewords by
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President, Elon University
Brian Williams
Anchor and managing editor, NBC Nightly News
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Proceedings of the Elon University Convocation for Honors

April 7, 2011

Elon, North Carolina
Foreword
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How can we move beyond partisan gridlock and find the will to solve our nation’s most pressing problems?
David Gergen
Senior political analyst, CNN

How can we promote fiscal responsibility by government and not mortgage our children’s and grandchildren’s future?
David Walker
Chief Executive Officer, Comeback America Initiative

What investments in science and technology must we make to show economic leadership, environmental stewardship and greater energy security?
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President, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

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President, Interfaith Youth Core

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David Levin
Co-founder, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)

More about the issues and Elon University
It is the custom at Elon University to invite world leaders and other compelling public figures to give the address at the annual Spring Convocation for Honors, which recognizes the academic achievements of president’s and dean’s list students and inductees into the honor societies of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi and Omicron Delta Kappa. In the past, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former President George H.W. Bush, former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright, journalist Anderson Cooper and others have brought serious messages to the Elon campus.

As a member of the baby boom generation, I have often reflected on the mess we boomers are passing on to our children and grandchildren: unsustainable national debt; public school systems that have deteriorated seriously in a generation; a failure to invest in science and technology in order to provide energy security and greater environmental stewardship; national public discourse that too often resembles poor fifth-grade playground behavior; and dangerous levels of religious intolerance, mistrust and misunderstanding that aggravate tensions nationally and globally.

Economist Charles Schultze has famously noted that Americans respond to wolves at the door but ignore the termites in the basement. So, we at Elon decided to focus Spring Convocation for Honors on our very big national termite problem, the collective set of major issues we as a nation seemingly lack the courage, practicality, will and selflessness to resolve. We were fortunate to have Brian Williams, anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News and an Elon parent, as a moderator of a truly distinguished panel.
What was fascinating about spring convocation for me personally was to observe the palpable connection between the panelists and the Elon undergraduate audience. Our students understand the urgency of the national agenda and that their generation will have to behave differently from mine to renew the standing of the United States in the world.

Students listened carefully when David Gergen warned that American prosperity and power is indeed being placed at risk when ideological partisanship trumps reasonable, common-sense solutions that require a measure of give and take—something American undergraduates have not witnessed often in their lifetimes.

David Walker earned students’ attention early on, bringing the news that due to a lack of discipline and foresight on the part of baby boomers, each audience member “owned” $200,000 of our national debt and that strong medicine was required, including both cuts in federal spending and a revision of the tax code, to right the ship and prepare for long-term growth.

Students were inspired by Eboo Patel’s invoking of George Washington’s message to the Touro Synagogue in 1790, reminding us in the most powerful sense that America’s greatness is rooted in tolerance. Patel’s message was that interfaith dialogue and cooperation, expressed through community service toward common goals, are magnificent means to explore our common humanity.

President Shirley Ann Jackson of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute spoke about a wide range of issues related to national science and energy policy, but her summary advice – that there are no easy silver-bullet solutions to the complex problems we face in the United States – challenged our students to resist simplistic rhetoric we
are so accustomed to hearing in a society favoring the sound bite over the complex argument.

David Levin’s crowning message to our young audience – to take leadership now – authentically emerged from his own experience in founding the impressive KIPP charter school movement at a young age, with a bachelor’s degree from Yale and two years of service in Teach for America under his belt. David has achieved success in educating disengaged children by challenging the status quo and holding higher expectations of young people. We should all follow his example.

Seek practical solutions across political divides.
Compromise.
Be tolerant.
Know that real solutions are more complex than slogans.
Lead...now.

It was a fine and memorable afternoon indeed and gave me hope.
We can be better
On May 16, 1940, with war under way in Europe, Franklin Delano Roosevelt set an outrageous goal in a speech to a joint session of Congress. He called for our country’s production of military planes to increase from 12,000 to 50,000 aircraft a year. He walked offstage and his aide, Harry Hopkins, asked, “Boss, where’d you get those numbers?” And with his cigarette holder in his mouth, President Roosevelt said, “I made them up!”

The great thing about FDR, and by extension the great thing about America, is that we met and then exceeded those production numbers. No one had to know that the boss made them up. We were so great. We were threatened but running on all cylinders. We turned tyranny around and won World War II.

How is it that we’re the nation that invented the transcontinental railroad? How is it that Dwight David Eisenhower said, “Let’s build the Interstate Highway System?” How is it that Jack Kennedy was able to challenge us to make it to the moon in seven years because of a small spacecraft the size of a basketball called “Sputnik” that had one blinking red light on and did nothing?

Outlandish accomplishments!
Today, I am worried that we have lost that inner drive. In a 2010 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 66 percent of Americans did not feel confident that life for our children’s generation will be better than it has been for us. Put another way, most people believe our nation is in decline.

I worry about our changing country and culture. I look at the time we spend on electronic media and wonder what we used to do with that time. My palms itch when I’m away from my BlackBerry, my iPod and iPad for very long. I worry about what I am missing. What is happening on those websites I haven’t seen for at least 30 minutes? Our frenetic lives are filled with those preoccupations and distractions.

What did we used to do with that time? I suspect we interacted with people, we used it to think, we used it to read, we used it to get better marginally. Somehow, I fear, we are experiencing the erosion of our society, our sense of team, our cohesion and our collective sense that we can get things done.

These were some of my late-night musings when I received an intriguing invitation from President Leo M. Lambert at Elon University. He asked me to moderate a discussion that would invite the campus community to take a step back, consider our nation’s future and confront our greatest challenges. The opportunity became even more attractive when he invited me to identify panelists for the event who could contribute unique perspectives and clear thinking.
I was thrilled to be joined in the effort by five remarkable thinkers:

**David Gergen**, CNN’s senior political analyst and former adviser to four U.S. presidents

**David Walker**, former U.S. Comptroller General and president and chief executive officer of the Comeback America Initiative

**Shirley Ann Jackson**, president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and former chair of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission

**Eboo Patel**, author, commentator and president of the Interfaith Youth Core

**David Levin**, co-founder of the Knowledge is Power Program which operates a network of 99 KIPP charter schools

With the contributions of these panelists, and an engaged audience of students, faculty and staff at Elon’s Convocation for Honors on April 7, 2011, we have produced a good starting point for discussions on five serious issues facing our society. This book is a compilation of our best thinking at the Elon University event. I hope it will help you think more deeply about the world we are creating for our children and grandchildren.

I invite you to join the conversation via a special website that Elon has established. The site has video excerpts from the Convocation, along with pages on each issue and spaces for you to contribute your reactions and ideas.

I look forward to hearing from you online:

**www.elon.edu/wecanbebetter**
How can we move beyond partisan gridlock and find the will to solve our nation’s most pressing problems?

Maybe it has always been this way, and the digital revolution has simply amplified the vitriol found in a congressman screaming “You lie!” to the president, or a media titan comparing health care reform to a “Hitler-like policy” or activists referring to a political movement as “teabagging.” Still, for many Americans, what feels like the rise of partisan rhetoric has hastened the erosion of their trust in government, something that has been on a slide since the Nixon administration.

A 2010 study by the Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University found that three quarters of Americans use a negative word to describe the federal government. More than half of the country believes Washington is “mostly focused on the wrong things,” yet 82 percent believe the federal government has at least some direct impact on their daily lives.

At the same time, ideology is closely associated with where people get their news, according to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Republicans listen to Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity; liberals turn to the New York Times, MSNBC and The Daily Show. A “partisan gap” in media credibility continues to grow as Republicans show far more skepticism of news sources than Democrats.
Several issues generate political gridlock. With lawmakers again redrawing lines following the 2010 Census, organizations like the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law are urging state legislatures to reconsider the effects of gerrymandering, the practice of dividing communities, creating strongholds for incumbents and, in some cases, carving out a district to ensure that a longtime leader is voted out.

Many political scientists also point to the closed primary election often held by the two major political parties where candidates who emerge for the general election are more ideologically representative of the party. When this happens, candidates do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and values of all citizens, their constituents, which can alienate otherwise civically engaged people.

Research in recent years shows that divisions between “red state” and “blue state” voters are deepening. In “Purple America,” a 2006 article in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, political scientists found that economic issues – not moral issues – hold stronger influence over voting behavior and political ideology. The same researchers also cited “a growing political divide in the United States between religious and secular voters.”

Much has been made of partisan rhetoric since the January 2011 shooting of an Arizona congresswoman. President Barack Obama addressed this trend in his Tucson speech: “At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized – at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do – it’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.”
Courageous Voices

David Gergen is a senior political analyst for CNN and has served as adviser to four U.S. presidents. He is a professor of public service at the Harvard Kennedy School and the director of its Center for Public Leadership. He also chairs the Elon University School of Law Advisory Board.

Gergen joined the White House in 1971 as a staff assistant on the speechwriting team of President Richard Nixon. Two years later he took over as director. He went on to become the director of communications for presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan; an adviser to the 1980 George H.W. Bush presidential campaign; and a counselor on domestic and foreign affairs for President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher. In 2000 he published the bestselling book, Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton, which offers a behind-the-scenes account of six presidencies.

There was a time when many Americans believed the darkest hour of the night comes just before dawn. A growing number of Americans believe that the darkest hour comes just before it goes totally black. That is an issue that all of us are facing today. There is a pessimism, a melancholy, a sense of, “maybe we can’t get there.” I think it’s partially justified but not fully justified.

Part of our problem is that we have become so adept at and even addicted to not facing up to the issues early on, when they first appear. We let them grow and fester in such ways that it becomes very difficult to get at them. We just kept kicking the can down the road. Someone
once said that America is terrific when we have a wolf at the door; we’re just not very good when we have termites in the basement. I think there is a lot of truth to that.

Consider our energy challenges. I was in the White House in the early 1970s when OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) rose up as a power and tried to strangle us. Oil prices went through the roof and there were long gas lines. I wrote some of the early speeches for President Nixon and then for President Ford, declaring that the goal of this country was to achieve energy independence. That was our vow. At the time, we were 30 percent dependent on foreign oil. Today we are 60 percent dependent on foreign oil. Boy, those speeches were darn effective – I’m really proud of the contributions I’ve made to American public life!

I was there in the White House when President Reagan received a report from a bipartisan commission that first rang the alarm bells about the state of K–12 education, citing a rising tide of mediocrity that was sweeping across our schools. The president went barnstorming around the country calling for educational reform, and several good governors really went to bat, including Jim Hunt here in North Carolina, Bill Clinton in Arkansas, Tommy Thompson in Wisconsin and John Engler in Michigan.

But 30 years later, the dropout rates in some parts of the country are higher and test scores are lower than our international competitors’, who are streaking ahead of us.
We didn’t fix it when we should have, and now we’re paying the price.

White House after White House, and president after president, has talked to us about dealing with our financial deficits, and yet we let them accumulate year after year. The brief exception came when President Clinton was in office, working with the Republicans in Congress. We actually got a surplus three years in a row. Going all the way back to the early 1960s, that’s the only time we’ve really balanced the budget.

What I’m suggesting is that we let these things accumulate and build up, and unfortunately, we may get hit with a crisis and pay a huge price. Our growth rates are going to be lower. We face a tough future, and I think it’s going to require a lot more people who put the good of the country first.

When I first arrived on the scene, the people governing our country were from the World War II generation, people who had lived through the war. We had seven presidents in a row, from John F. Kennedy through George H.W. Bush, who wore a military uniform. Six were in the war. Only Jimmy Carter was not; he was in the Naval Academy when the war ended and then went on to serve honorably. I think they brought a certain kind of philosophy, an attitude toward public life.

Of course, they were strong Democrats and strong Republicans, but they saw themselves first and foremost as strong Americans. With the passing of the World War II generation, a new generation has come to power that does not share that sense of common sacrifice. Very few people in our generation sacrificed when they were young. They didn’t have to do anything for the nation, and they don’t have this overriding sense that the well-being of the nation should come first.

Today we see a king-of-the-mountain kind of environment, in which his loss is my gain. He gets defeated – I win. I remember so well when
Ronald Reagan was in the White House and Tip O’Neill was speaker of the house. They were both strong partisans and had very deep philosophical and ideological differences. But they also had a capacity, at five o’clock in the afternoon, to put down their differences, lift up a glass and enjoy each other’s company. They developed a mutual respect, so they got things done.

We have this big issue with Social Security today. It shouldn’t be a hard problem to solve. Tip and Reagan, with very strong philosophical differences, put together a bipartisan effort in 1983, and we got it done. We can do it again today, but the atmospherics are hard.

There are two issues that are in crisis. The near-term issue is that we’re slipping into a debt crisis. There are a variety of studies that tell us this, particularly one that is well respected by economists Kenneth Rogoff at Harvard University and Carmen Reinhart at the University of Maryland. They’ve looked at financial crises going back 700 years and found that if you allow your total government debt to exceed 90 percent of your GDP, the annual size of your economy, your economic growth almost inevitably slows down. We are now well over 100 percent in the United States. Only once since records have been kept, since 1916, have we ever gotten this high. It is clearly dampening our economic growth, and it’s going to get worse. That’s why, to me, the near-term issue is the debt.

The long-term issue goes back to educational reform. We have to make sure our kids can compete in a 21st-century economy. Other countries are taking this very seriously. One of the reasons we were such a powerful nation in the 20th century is that we entered the century as the most educated nation on earth, with the highest percentage of people going to college. We maintained that lead right up until the 1970s, but we’ve now dropped back to 15th or so. President Obama has called for 10,000 new teachers a year in math, science and technology, and that is really important for the future of the country.
If there’s any lesson to be learned from the social revolution in Cairo, Egypt, and across the Middle East, it’s that today’s youth are not the leaders of the future. They are the leaders of today. We cannot wait for today’s young people in America to spend another 10 years before they jump in. It takes a long time to get hard work done. You have to commit yourself not just to improvement, but also to making the rebuilding of this country the work of a lifetime.

Of course, those of us who talk about public service have in mind going to work for non-profits or government. But the majority of the next generation will work in business, which can play an extraordinary role in rebuilding this country. A flourishing business creates jobs; that’s one of the toughest problems we have. Yes, corporations work for the stockbrokers, but they also work for the public good.

I was recently visiting Coca-Cola where Muhtar Kent, chairman of the board and chief executive officer, is on fire about what Coca-Cola can do by going green. They think they can make a lot of money by going green, and many other businesses are coming to understand that embracing renewable energy can improve the bottom line and help the country.

So whether you go into business, a nonprofit or government, you are part of a larger calling to serve the country – we all owe something. We didn’t get here individually. We got here because there are a lot of people who helped us in life.
How can we promote fiscal responsibility by government and not mortgage our children’s and grandchildren’s future?

The national debt topped $14 trillion in January, more than double the federal government’s tab eight years earlier. Put another way, every man, woman and child in the United States today owes more than $45,000 to creditors who have funded recent government spending, and that number promises to grow as demand for Social Security and Medicare accelerates with the pending retirement of the baby boomers.

In December, the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform put forward several recommendations for decreasing the national debt by $4 trillion in the coming decade. Yet the commission, which pointed the finger at both political parties for “two wars and a slew of fiscally irresponsible policies,” couldn’t muster enough votes within its own ranks to send its plan to Congress.

The commission’s report warned of dire consequences for failing to act. “In a worst-case scenario, investors could lose confidence that our nation is able or willing to repay its loans – possibly triggering a debt crisis that would force the government to implement the most stringent of austerity measures.”

The problem of overspending isn’t limited to government. Household debt – a figure that includes credit cards, student loans, car loans and
mortgages – is only now coming down after peaking during the height of the real estate market. Many argue that risky loans by banks, the greed of Wall Street firms, and the recklessness of many Americans who bought homes they couldn’t afford were major causes of the current recession. Many overspent and took on too much debt. Just like Uncle Sam.

A slow real estate recovery, tepid growth in wages and rising consumer prices continue to taunt Americans. The Labor Department reported that commodities such as food, clothing and gas rose faster in February than at any point in nearly two years.

While there have been some signs pointing to healthy economic growth, any attempts to speed up the pace of the recovery would require more spending, which arguably is one of the underlying causes for the recession.

And for the United States to avoid a potential default to foreign creditors, as the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform concludes about Washington, “continued inaction is not a viable option and not an acceptable course for a responsible government.”
David M. Walker is founder and chief executive officer of the Comeback America Initiative (CAI), an organization that promotes fiscal responsibility and sustainability by encouraging key policymakers, on a non-partisan basis, to help achieve solutions to America’s federal, state and local fiscal imbalances.

Prior to assuming his current position, Walker served as the first president and CEO of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. From 1998 to 2008 he served as the seventh comptroller general of the United States and head of the U.S. Government Accountability Office. He has 16 years of total federal service and more than 20 years of private sector experience. Walker has written three books, including his 2010 national bestseller, Comeback America: Turning the Country Around and Restoring Fiscal Responsibility. He is a frequent writer and commentator and is a subject of the critically acclaimed documentary I.O.U.S.A.

Based on our current debt of $14.2 trillion, every American carries a burden of about $45,000. But that’s not the real problem. The problem is the tens of trillions of dollars of off-balance-sheet, unfunded obligations for Medicare and Social Security, as well as other commitments and contingencies. If you add those debts, the number
The biggest deficit our country faces is a leadership deficit. We have too many people focusing on today and not enough of us trying to do what it takes to help create a better tomorrow.

We can be better rises to more than $200,000 per person. In fact, if our representatives in Congress were paid for performance, they would owe money.

The simple truth is that our country was founded on certain principles and values, and we’ve strayed from them, especially in connection with fiscal responsibility. America was founded on the concept of opportunity, not entitlement. It was founded on the concept of thrift, savings, investment, limited debt and stewardship. Our responsibility is not just to generate positive results today, but to leave the country better positioned for the future.

We lost our way starting in the early 1980s when we became addicted to conspicuous consumption and debt, both as a country and individually. We found our way, at least at the national level, in the 1990s under two presidents, George Herbert Walker Bush and Bill Clinton, and came back to our senses for a period of time.

But we lost it again within the last 10 years, and we have to come back to the principles and values that made us great if we want to be sure that our future will be brighter.

Today, as part of the fiscal 2011 appropriations debate, Washington is arguing over less than one percent of federal spending while we sail toward an iceberg that could sink the ship of state. It’s like arguing over the bar tab on the Titanic. Our leaders in Washington need adult supervision. The president is the chief executive officer of the United States government, and he needs to lead. The entity he is responsible for has a deteriorating financial condition and could be plunged into a debt crisis within the next two to three years.

The biggest deficit our country faces is a leadership deficit. We have too many people focusing on today and not enough of us trying to
do what it takes to help create a better tomorrow. The leaders of both parties need to put country over party and progress over partisanship. We need to learn from the past and bring back some budget controls that will force us to make tough decisions on spending. We also need comprehensive tax reform that will generate more revenue.

We can’t afford to do nothing.

The U.S. government spends $3.8 trillion a year out the front door and forgoes more than $1.1 trillion a year in deductions, exemptions and exclusions to the tax code. The first thing we have to do is reach agreement on spending levels for 2011 and 2012. Then we need to bring back tough statutory budget controls that will begin in 2013. Very importantly, we should set specific debt targets as percentages of the economy. If they’re met, great. But if they’re not met, then there should be specific spending cuts – freezes on certain mandatory program indexing and subsidies, as well as temporary tax surcharges that will come into effect.

The first entitlement program that ought to be reformed is Social Security, because it’s the easiest to solve. The first tax reform we ought to do is for corporate taxation, because it can improve our competitive posture, enhance economic growth and generate jobs. But ultimately we’re going to have to reform entitlement programs, complete another round of health care reform and implement comprehensive tax reform along with defense cuts and constraints. It’s going to take us a number of years to get there, but we need to get started now.

I’m very concerned about the America that my grandchildren will inherit. I’m a baby boomer, and my generation is the first in our nation’s history that is not leaving the country better off than when we received it. We’ve failed in our stewardship responsibilities, and I’m
doing everything I can to make sure that we change course, not for me, and not as much for my children, but for my grandchildren. I believe that we can, I know we must and I hope that we will do so.

Young people need to understand that government has over-promised, and it’s going to have to restructure its promises and increase taxes over time. With their future being mortgaged at record rates, young people must plan, save, invest and preserve for retirement. They’re probably going to have to work longer and should not count on the government to do as much as it’s doing right now. Investments in their future are being cut because more and more of the budget is going to consumption, primarily for seniors. In addition, they’re going to face tough competition in an increasingly connected global marketplace. We need a virtual movement, a social networking march on Washington, to continue to start making these tough choices in all these areas, so that our future can be better than our past.

Today’s youth must make sure they get a good education and develop a positive attitude, strong work ethic and positive moral and ethical values. With those assets, in this country, they have unlimited potential.
What investments in science and technology must we make to show economic leadership, environmental stewardship and greater energy security?

In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama pressed for additional government investments in science and math education, in clean energy technology and in promoting American innovation. He argued that such funding was necessary because “this is our generation’s Sputnik moment,” a reference to the nation’s massive investment in science in the late 1950s following the Soviet Union’s startling head start in the space race.

The challenge is obvious in science and math education. According to a 2005 U.S. Department of Education study, only 13 percent of American adults are proficient in the knowledge and skills needed to search, comprehend and use information, or to perform computational tasks. Today, government spending on STEM education (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is under debate in Washington and across the country as major challenges confront the next generation of Americans. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2007–2008, business, social sciences and history, health sciences and education accounted for nearly half of the bachelor’s degrees awarded in the U.S., while only about five percent of degrees were in engineering and fewer than two percent of degrees were in the physical sciences.

A 2009 paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that more than half of Ph.D. recipients in the science and engineering fields were from outside the United States.
In addition to educational challenges, there are many other factors to consider in the global competition for technological leadership. A report prepared for Congress by the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine pointed out many reasons that U.S. leadership in science and technology is eroding. Other nations are more aggressively investing in basic research and development and offering attractive incentives for innovation. There are fewer regulatory restrictions overseas, lower risks of legal liability, lower labor costs and tax rates, and more vibrant research cultures with amazing new high-tech centers filled with skilled personnel.

America’s failure to sufficiently focus on key scientific challenges seems most frustrating in the closely related fields of energy, climate change and environmental protection. Heavily dependent on foreign oil resources, the United States has made only incremental progress on developing new energy and conservation technologies. Meantime, the threat of global warming polarizes public policy debates, and the reality of events such as the Gulf oil spill, political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, and Japan’s Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster expose the vulnerability of energy supplies.

The U.S. has failed to develop and implement a comprehensive energy security strategy, while at the same time, the United Nations Environment Programme report on global trends in green energy identified China as a world leader. China surpassed the U.S. in 2009 as the country with the greatest investment in clean energy, spending $34.4 billion, nearly twice the investment made by the United States. That pace continued in 2010, and China is developing a new five-year plan to press ahead with its large-scale green energy initiatives.

Across the political spectrum, leaders agree that it will be impossible for America to “win the future” without sustaining the spirit of scientific discovery and technological innovation that has been the hallmark of our nation’s prosperity.
We hear a lot about our country’s “addiction to oil,” but I believe the problem also is our addiction to easy solutions. We look for the silver bullet approach to solving problems. The difficulty is that energy security is much too complex for that. There is no one source of energy that will solve all of our problems.
The recent disasters in Japan, the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Katrina and the situation in the Middle East and North Africa tell us that we are facing intersecting vulnerabilities that require a national conversation and a more sophisticated and committed approach to dealing with energy issues in a comprehensive way. The United States needs an energy security plan. We have to be able to think our way through prioritized and focused investments.

Energy security is national security, and it is economic security. From where I sit, being smart about energy security involves innovation and an understanding of the role that science and technology can play in building a portfolio of solutions. This will help us create a redundancy of energy supply and diversity of sources. We also must have transparent and well-functioning energy markets with consistent government regulation, including laws to protect health and safety.

If we are going to find new sources of energy from extracted sources, we have to be able to do so in a more environmentally benign way. These sources will be harder to find. Renewable sources of energy will certainly depend upon innovation, developing new materials and new designs. The only way we are going to get there is through robust innovation across a broad range of fields.

We also must do more to improve our energy infrastructure. If we are going down the renewable energy path, what kind of electric grid do we think we are going to put these renewables on? If we are going to stick with conventional sources of energy, how can we create a more robust infrastructure to function when there are various natural disasters?

The United States often approaches energy issues as if we were the only ones affected, but we live in a globally interconnected world. People in other countries have their own aspirations. They also want to elevate
their living standards. Energy is required to provide people with decent places to live, the ability to educate their children, to be able to read at night, to heat their homes and conduct commerce. We must focus on the challenges and opportunities of addressing global energy needs, rather than focus on the troubling misnomer of U.S. energy independence.

I am concerned about what I call the “Quiet Crisis” in America, the looming gaps in our nation’s science and technology capability because of growing shortages in our nation’s science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workforce. It is really due to three things.

The first is that a fairly large percentage of our current science and engineering workforce who came of age in the post-Sputnik era, inspired by the space race, have begun to retire, and there are not enough people in the pipeline to replace them. That trend will really take hold in the next five years.

The second is that the United States has been the beneficiary of exquisite talent from abroad, enjoying the benefits of immigrants who have come here to power our industries and create new enterprises. But while many people from other nations still come here for their education, more and more of them are heading back home after college. They see attractive opportunities where they came from, particularly in emerging economies that are growing very rapidly, such as in India and China.

And the third is simply that our own young people, the coming generation, are not as well prepared in the STEM areas and do not express the same degree of interest in science and engineering as their counterparts in India and China.

The simple truth is that innovation derives from people, and if we do not have people making the scientific discoveries and creating the
technological innovations we have depended on to build our economy over the past 50 years, then we will not have the economic strength necessary to drive the economy in the future. We must have a high-performing workforce, particularly in these fields, to maintain our security, whether it is economic security, energy security, homeland security or defense.

Despite our challenges, I am optimistic about the future. As a child of the 1960s, I experienced and understand the role of young people who are informed, committed and can push our government to change. In my era, the issues related to social justice, and those changes opened a talent pool to this country that we have benefited from for generations.

Today’s college students who are focused in the STEM areas are well educated and very motivated. They are committed to rebuilding our infrastructure and manufacturing industries. They are focused on what they can do in biotechnology and the life sciences to improve people’s lives and address our health care challenges. And they are mindful of the environmental footprint they are leaving and the benefits of a sustainable approach.

With this promising generation ready to go to work, our job is to inspire them. To do that we need the right leadership in business, the non-governmental sector, academia and in the government at multiple levels. We have the responsibility to uplift, to make hard decisions and to hand to them a society and an economy that will allow our nation to continue to be the greatest on earth.
How can we promote reconciliation and understanding in an era of religious extremism that often fuels strife around the world?

Al-Qaida’s attacks on the United States marked a turning point for many Americans’ attitudes toward Islam. In 2011, to be a Muslim in America is to be a suspect. Oklahoma lawmakers have “banned” Sharia law. Millions of people spoke out against a proposed Muslim community center near Ground Zero in New York. The president’s most ardent political foes push the derogatory meme that “Obama is a Muslim.”

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life predicts the American Muslim population will double between 2010 and 2030, and in a February report, the nonprofit organization found that coverage last year of Islamic events and topics dominated U.S. press coverage of religion – 40 percent of all religion stories.

While Islam received the most coverage, other faiths have made headlines as well. The Westboro Baptist Church invoked a virulent form of Christian rhetoric when protesting at funerals of fallen U.S. soldiers, as did a Florida pastor who very nearly led his small church in a public Quran burning. The Catholic Church sex scandal reverberates to this day. Religious undertones can be found in popular political movements such as the Tea Party. Even atheists found themselves under attack for their
beliefs – one would need to look no further than the city of Asheville, N.C., which made headlines in 2010 when a city councilmember’s election was constitutionally challenged because of his belief that God does not exist.

Promoting reconciliation, understanding and education about issues of faith is becoming more crucial in an age of growing religious pluralism. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey in 2007 found a splintering of religious beliefs. Twenty-eight percent of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all. One in four young adults say they are not affiliated with any particular religion, and nondenominational megachurches are growing. As the House Committee on Homeland Security opened hearings in March into the possible radicalization of American Muslims, a coalition of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders with the “Shoulder-to-Shoulder” campaign issued a statement that reminded Americans of the risk incurred by demonizing one particular group: “To assert that Muslims as a broad group are not deeply devoted to America’s safety and the peaceful interaction of its entire citizenry – that is false witness.

“By subjecting American Muslims to such scrutiny, we weaken our more perfect union, and we harm the national vision of our common good that is a witness to the nations.”
**Eboo Patel** was named by *US News & World Report* as one of America’s best leaders of 2009. He is founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a Chicago-based organization building the global interfaith youth movement. Author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, Patel is also a regular contributor to the *Washington Post*, *National Public Radio*, *USA Today* and CNN.

Patel served on President Barack Obama’s inaugural Advisory Council of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and has spoken at the TED Conference, Clinton Global Initiative, Nobel Peace Prize Forum, and at universities around the world. Along with IFYC, Patel was honored with the Roosevelt Institute’s Freedom of Worship Medal in 2009. He holds a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University, where he studied on a Rhodes Scholarship.

In his book, *What It Means to Be an American*, philosopher Michael Walzer writes that throughout the generations of political philosophy, people believed that democracies could only exist in ethnically and religiously homogenous nations. He ends that section of the book and begins the next one with the line, “except in the United States.”
Our nation is precious and unique, the first country to give rise to the notion that people from the four corners of the earth and from every faith background can come together to build a nation.

In 1790, George Washington received a letter from Moses Seixas and the Hebrew Congregation of the Touro Synagogue of Newport, R.I. Seixas was basically asking President Washington if the Jews would be hounded and hated in America as they had been for so many centuries in Europe. Washington replied to Seixas saying that the United States had a government that would give “bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

I heard those same thoughts echoed in President Barack Obama’s inaugural address when he said that America’s patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, of Jews and Hindus and non-believers. We believe a shrinking planet will reveal our common humanity and that America will play its role as a force for peace in the world once again. I think the first thing we have to do is get back to those deep values of faith and nation, of service and cooperation, to know that we inherit not just debt but debts to those who inspired us in the past, to the prophets and poets who have come and gone. Our responsibility is to follow through on that inspiration and make it a reality.

Martin Luther King Jr. once observed that we can see the stars most brightly only when the night is most dark. These days, as we learn through the media just how ugly religious extremism can be, and just how terrible religious intolerance can be, we also have the opportunity to stand up for the American values of tolerance and pluralism.

There is a beautiful line in Surah 49 of the Holy Quran that says God made us into different nations and tribes so that we may come to know
one another rather than despise each other. As a Muslim whose parents immigrated here from India, I believe that America is humanity’s best chance at getting that right. Difficult days might be in the short term, but America always gets it right. Always.

My best friends in high school included a Lutheran, a Mormon, a Catholic, a South Indian Hindu, a Cuban Jew and a Nigerian Evangelical. We did everything together. We studied for math tests and played ball together, talked and dreamed about what colleges we might go to. That’s what religious diversity was to me when I was growing up.

But every time I turned on the television, especially from the mid-1990s forward, whenever religious diversity was presented on TV, it was always somebody killing somebody else to the soundtrack of prayer. It just got into my head at some point. Why can’t the world, why can’t the evening news feel and look more like my high school lunch table? Why can’t we have a world in which people from different religious backgrounds are interacting in ways that are about respect, relationships and cooperation?”

As movements of religious extremism and as the dynamic of religious violence became more apparent in the public imagination in the mid-to late-1990s, I realized something. The people on front lines of those movements were frequently young people. Think about it. Every time we read about a suicide bomber or a terrible attack, it’s always someone who is 19 or 22 or 26. I started examining the history of some of my faith heroes and I recognized something. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and Dorothy Day, some of my faith heroes, had all started their work when they were very young. Martin Luther King Jr. was 26 years old in Montgomery, Ala., leading the bus boycott. That’s remarkable.
So a question occurred to me: is the next chapter in the history of religion, which is really the history of national and world affairs, going to belong to young people who are foot soldiers of religious extremism? Or is it going to belong to young people who are the architects of interfaith cooperation? When you ask yourself that question and take your faith tradition as seriously as I do, you make the decision that you have to try to help answer that question. The Interfaith Youth Core is my answer to that question.

What we know about college campuses in the United States of America is they set civic priorities. They advance a knowledge base, model what good looks like and train our society’s next generation of leaders. What could be a higher civic priority right now than making sure America’s religious diversity moves toward cooperation and not conflict? We think that college campuses have to be the leader in setting interfaith cooperation as a civic priority, advancing the knowledge base of interfaith literacy, showing what good looks like and training the next generation’s leaders.

Every generation of Americans has risen up to meet the challenge of the time. There is a beautiful thing that President Bill Clinton said during his presidency: “There’s nothing that’s wrong with America that what’s right with America can’t fix.” What’s right with America is the energy and the good will and the idealism of her citizens. I get to experience that every day because I’m on college campuses so often. I watch these young people literally thirsting for leadership opportunities. I think to myself, “Wow, Elon University, with a forum like this, is giving them exactly what they want,” which is saying “Hey, listen, this is the next era of challenges in American life and you are going to be the architects of the solutions.”
What are the most effective measures we can take to improve the quality of K-12 public education in an era of declining government support and changing demographics?

In 2010, the results of an international test administered to 15-year-olds in 65 countries showed that students in Shanghai, China, scored higher marks than their counterparts elsewhere when it comes to math, reading and science. In that test, the Programme for International Student Assessment, the United States ranked 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 34th in math.

While parents, politicians and even educators use disappointing test scores as shorthand for the challenges facing our schools, the issues are far more complex. The Alliance for Excellent Education has found that each year, 1.2 million students do not graduate on time, and only 69 percent of American students will ever earn their high school diplomas. Minority students – black, Hispanic and Native American – are especially at risk of not graduating, even as the nation’s population moves toward a numerical “minority majority” status, which will fundamentally change the complexion, languages and levels of poverty that characterize the typical public school classroom.

America’s school systems have been in flux for years. Now, President Barack Obama wants to overhaul his predecessor’s “No Child Left Behind” education reform law, a revision that would come as state and local governments are slashing school budgets and laying off thousands...
of teachers. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle agree that change is needed. They just don’t agree on what changes to make.

That is in part because of the difficulty in defining a “good education.” Many school systems have focused resources on preparing students for standardized tests, often at the expense of funding for arts, athletics and other extracurricular programs. Spending also varies widely by state. In 2007-08, it cost Idaho about $6,900 per student to fund salaries, wages and benefits for those who work in public education. In New York, that number topped $17,000.

Yet another factor affecting public classrooms is the pending retirement of baby boomers. In a 2008 report, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future found that more than half of the nation’s teachers are baby boomers, while the attrition rate for new teachers is steadily rising. It stated that high turnover is a “central factor” in an uneven distribution of quality educators, which disproportionately affects poor and minority communities.

Attracting the best and the brightest to careers in teaching is a challenge. Ninety percent of top U.S. college graduates say teaching does not offer a competitive starting salary. A 2010 study by McKinsey & Company found that only 23 percent of entering teachers in the United States came from the top third of their graduating class. By comparison, in the world’s top-performing systems, Finland, Singapore and South Korea, 100 percent of new teachers come from the top third of the academic cohort. In Scandinavian countries, all teachers receive two to three years of graduate-level preparation for teaching, generally at government expense, plus a living stipend.

Together, these trends will be defining issues that must be addressed soon if the United States wishes to remain competitive in the global economy.
**Courageous Voices**

**David Levin** is co-founder of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a network of 99 free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools that serve 28,000 mostly low-income minority children in 20 states and Washington, D.C.

After graduating from Yale University with a degree in history in 1992, Levin joined Teach For America and taught elementary school for three years in Houston, Texas. In 1994, he co-founded KIPP with Mike Feinberg. The following year he founded KIPP Academy New York, where he currently serves as superintendent. Levin received the Robin Hood Foundation’s John F. Kennedy Jr. Hero Award in Education in 1999 and was appointed to the New York State Commission for Education Reform in 2003. Along with Feinberg, Levin was awarded the Thomas B. Fordham Prize for Excellence in Education and the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by a Private Citizen in 2006.

The problems with education in America come down to expectations and accountability. We’re simply not expecting enough of our public schools. The rigor of what is expected and the accountability of those delivering those results are too low. Therefore, as kids fall behind, there’s no accountability for them to catch up, and it just gets worse over time.

When you ask students in public schools in America how they’re doing in math, they say, “good.” Then they take a test and do horribly. If you ask people in the rest of the world how they’re doing in math, they say, “horrible,” but when they take a test they do great. We simply have an inflated sense of ourselves.

*We can be better* 37
We can be better

In low-income neighborhoods, only eight percent of children go on to graduate from college. It only got that way because we let it. As a society, we are not taking our promises to our children as if they were sacred, and we care most about our own kids and don’t think much about anyone else’s kids.

KIPP schools work because we look at our kids and promise that we will be there for them from kindergarten through college graduation.

KIPP is a national network of public schools. Eighty-five percent of our kids qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Our schools are located in low-income neighborhoods where the predicted college graduation rate is 8.3 percent. But we believe that demography should not determine destiny. Over the past 17 years, we’ve doubled that high school graduation rate, tripled the college matriculation rate and quadrupled the college graduation rate, exceeding the national average.

How do we do it? With an emphasis on character and academics. It sounds really cheesy, but our motto is “work hard, be nice.” We know that school has to compete with everything else in our students’ lives. We emphasize songs; when you walk into KIPP schools, you’ll hear joy, and you’ll see movement.

Once kids like coming to school, anything is possible. Once kids believe they can, anything is possible.

There are “five pillars” common to all KIPP schools:

« High expectations for academics and character
« More time in the classroom
« A commitment from students, parents and teachers to be there
« The power to lead for our principals and our regional leaders
« A focus on results
Our attendance is about 98 percent and our kids go to school from 7:25 a.m. to 5 p.m. Every night, they go home with a couple hours of homework. They come to school on Saturdays, and they are back in school for a month during the summer. By and large they enjoy it, because they feel special. People want to feel like they belong to something, and when kids come to KIPP there is a sense of team and family.

All of our kids come to us through a blind lottery, without any regard to their prior academics or behavior. Their names literally get picked out of a box. Following enrollment, we do home visits with every family. We have a “commitment to excellence” form, which outlines the expectations that we have for teachers, parents and students. We give every parent and every student our cell phone numbers, and people call us all the time. We talk about team and family. It’s basically this natural relationship. That relationship really makes KIPP work.

Outside of public schools across America there are signs that read, “All children can learn.” Have you seen those signs? But when you walk into KIPP schools, you see signs that read, “All of us will learn.” We will do it, and we’ll do it together. That makes KIPP work.

What makes great teachers? Of course, good salaries matter, but also working as part of a team and getting support from principals. KIPP schools work because we have outstanding principals and outstanding teachers working together. That’s how you attract people and, more importantly, that’s how you keep people. If you think about why teachers leave the profession, very often it’s a lack of support, and there’s an uncertainty about what the future holds. You could have a great year but then the next year your work may or may not be continued. At KIPP you know your work will be continued, K through 12th grade and then through college.

How do we do it?
With an emphasis on character and academics. It sounds really cheesy, but our motto is “work hard, be nice.” We know that school has to compete with everything else in our students’ lives.
Technology over the next 5-10 years is going to fundamentally transform what classrooms look like, both at KIPP and elsewhere, in three main areas. The first change is the rich multimedia experience teachers will be able to bring to students. For example, science instruction may fundamentally change as teachers can provide video lessons, using iPads to explain concepts and ideas.

Second is the idea of independent practice. No longer will all kids have to do the same activities at the same time in the same way. They’ll be able to work much more independently in a much more adaptive way, based on their own individual needs.

Third, teachers will gain access to real-time data in their classrooms, instantly understanding what kids need and adapting and adjusting activities and resources in response to students’ learning tracks.

Next year will be my 20th year of teaching, and that is certainly unusual for a person of my age, who typically switches jobs seven or eight times within the first 25 years of their career. I can introduce myself in a million ways but I prefer to say, “I teach kids.” I take great pride in saying I am a teacher. I believe one of the big things we need to change about education is our national view of what it means to be a teacher. There is no higher calling than teaching, and in countries such as South Korea and Finland, the teaching profession is considered the most noble.

I think there is cause for optimism in America, especially with the success of such initiatives as Teach for America, which is attracting many of our brightest college graduates to pursue careers in teaching. You’re starting to see more and more young people committed to these public causes. College kids are eager for the challenge.
Learn more
For further information about Elon’s 2011 Convocation for Honors, see video excerpts and contribute your comments on the issues, go to: www.elon.edu/wecanbebetter.

ELON UNIVERSITY

Website: www.elon.edu
Elon’s strategic plan: www.elon.edu/eloncommitment
www.facebook.com/ElonUniversity
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Elon University is a selective, independent university renowned as a national model for engaged learning, along with excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and professional programs. Elon’s beautiful and historic campus in central North Carolina is designated as a botanical garden.

Elon’s rich intellectual community is characterized by active student engagement with a faculty dedicated to excellent teaching and scholarly accomplishment. The curriculum is grounded in the traditional liberal arts and sciences and complemented by distinctive professional and graduate programs. Elon students put knowledge into practice, fulfilling their roles as global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good.
Elon Facts
2010-2011

Enrollment
Undergraduate 5,032
Graduate 677
Total 5,709

Freshman admissions
2010-11 Applications 9,771
Acceptance rate 49%
SAT average 1829
(1218 critical reading and math)
Academic GPA 3.94

Academics
50+ majors
Full-time faculty 358; 86% with Ph.D.
Student:faculty ratio 13:1
Average class size 21
6-year graduation rate 81%
Freshman retention rate 90%

Graduate programs
Total enrollment 677
Law (JD) 342
Business (MBA) 116
Physical Therapy (DPT) 114
Education (M.Ed.) 68
Interactive Media (MA) 37

The Elon Experiences
Undergraduate participation:
Volunteer service 83%
Internships 78%
Study abroad 70%
Leadership 42%
Undergraduate research 18%

Athletics
16 intercollegiate men’s and women’s sports
in NCAA Division I (FCS in football);
Southern Conference