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A profile in courage in higher education

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Regional

A profile in courage in higher education

The 1957 Pulitzer Prize for Biography was for the book "Profiles in Courage." Its purported author was John F. Kennedy, although most of the writing was done by his speech writer Ted Sorensen. The book, which became a best seller, sketched the lives of antebellum senators who, despite all odds, defied the opinions of their constituents and party to do what they felt was right.

Two weeks ago it was announced the passing of one of the best examples of how a leader can truly transform for the best an institution of higher education. His name was Thomas Marshall Hahn, Jr.

A native of Lexington, Ky., Hahn obtained his doctorate in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1949. After several stints as a faculty member and administrator in higher education, on July 2, 1962, he became president of Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), taking office at the young age of 36. By pure coincidence that was 100 years to the date that Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Land Grant Act into law. That was one of the most important pieces of legislation regarding higher education in U.S. history because it propelled the creation of numerous public universities. VPI, founded in 1872 as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, was one of them.

One of the first public statements he made after taking office was that, "Land grant colleges were established as institutions of the people. Our mission is first to provide educational opportunities for the young people of Virginia and the nation."

Known as a highly energetic individual, Hahn started to talk about growth of the 90-year institution. Under his leadership, VPI achieved fantastic

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progress and evolution in all areas of the administrative, instructional, and extension programs. It became clear this this was no longer the relatively small college he found as president, but rather a rapidly growing and expanding land grant university. By 1970 legislation was passed to rename the college Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, reflecting its transformation into a full university.

This was a direct product of the vision he had as a leader of the institution. As he declared in an interview with The Roanoke Times in 1991, Hahn said that from the beginning he had seen a tremendous potential and opportunity to make VPI into a major higher education institution in the U.S. "I saw Virginia Tech as a sleeping giant that could be awakened," he said. "I thought the time was right."

His achievements were not only vast in increasing the size of his institution, but also in the substance and structure of Virginia Tech (as it is commonly known today). Hahn's accomplishments included transforming Virginia Tech from a regional military college with a mostly white, mostly male student body into a diverse, internationally renowned research university. Although students at the institute's associated women's college, Radford College (now Radford University), could attend courses at Virginia Tech, the student body was nominally

all male. And though the institute had admitted its first black student in 1953, it remained almost entirely white.

When Hahn took office, participation in the college's Corps of Cadets was mandatory for all students. Realizing that such a requirement discouraged many prospective applicants, he dropped that prerequisite in 1964 despite opposition from many alumni. Here he showed that sometimes you need to shake some traditions if you really want to transform the institution for the best. In a time when participation in active combat military service for women was unthinkable, he clearly saw that his move would truly open the doors of Virginia Tech to women.

The other area in which he excelled was in diversity participation. The year after his institution openly admitted women, Hahn established a scholarship program for enrollees of modest means, with most of the money earmarked for black students. He did so by raising a \$100,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, a significant amount at that time. It was probably the first occasion that a Southern land-grant college had done such a thing. Not only that, but he went forward with his integration plans despite the fact of being in a southern state that was in the throes of the civil rights movement.

Although he oversaw the construction of more than two dozen campus buildings, his most fundamental – though less visible – achievement was in the academic arena. In his 12 years as president, Hahn created 30 new undergraduate majors, including art, history, management, philosophy,

psychology and sociology. He added some 20 graduate programs while establishing the colleges of arts and sciences, architecture and education. He knew that in order to attract more and better students he needed to offer attractive academic programs. By doing so he completed the transformation of what was called a "cow college" in rural Blacksburg into a prestigious institution competing with the likes of its much more famous and wealthier neighbor, the University of Virginia.

By the time Hahn left the presidency of Virginia Tech in 1974, the school's enrollment had nearly tripled, to 17,400. Today, its student body comprises roughly 17,000 males and 13,000 females. Of them, more than 1,100 identify themselves as African-American, more than 1,500 as Hispanic and more than 2,500 as Asian.

In these times of doom and gloom for public institutions, where their leaders are obsessed with fads and cutting budgets as the only way out, Hahn serves as an example of what you can do to transform a rural institution from a very narrow niche into grandeur.

Vision, courage and determination, together with his emphasis in cultural changes and academic enhancements – not gimmicks – were his key ingredients. This should serve to all of us as an example of what can be achieved even under the most difficult circumstances.

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