

A Fragile Document, A Bold Idea

It is truly an honor to be here today to view this important piece of Iowa State University and ISU Extension's history. What better place for the Morrill Act itself to be made available to the people of Iowa than in Morrill Hall at Iowa State University, our nation's first land-grant institution. I am very aware that the privilege and opportunity that I now have to lead Extension at Iowa State would not be possible without this Act. I also am the product of the land-grant educational system and owe my entire career to what this Act established.

The document may be fragile, encased in glass — but the bold land-grant idea has never been stronger, as it continues to live and grow in our hearts and minds. The Morrill Act was the beginning of a visionary idea of higher education that called for embracing practical knowledge as well as traditional scientific and classical studies. The Morrill Act gave *all* people an equal opportunity to become citizen leaders and to shape a new, wider range of knowledge required by our rapidly growing nation. In addition, the Morrill Act paved the way for Extension, another bold idea that began at Iowa State.

Justin Morrill described the Morrill Act this way: "The design was to open the door to a liberal education ... It would be a mistake to suppose it was intended that every student should become either a farmer or a mechanic, when the design comprehended not only instruction for those who hold the plow or follow a trade, but such instruction as any person might need — with 'the world before them where to choose.'"¹

Justin Morrill's legislative triumphs still stand among the most important acts of the American Congress from the 19th century. But the great contribution of his vision for the land-grant university was not to create technical schools that addressed a specific challenge. Rather, it was to bring the power of the university to bear on whatever challenges lay before society in that day.

Today the future of Iowa State, Extension, and our land-grant mission depends on dealing with economic development and other key issues facing Iowa—including the bioeconomy, health care, K-12 education, poverty, and, yes, even global climate change. In fact, we're phrasing our Extension mission in terms of healthy people, healthy environments, and healthy economies. It's a short cut we can use to illustrate our relevance to

¹ 1887, as quoted by Alfred Charles True, in *A History of Agricultural Education in the United States*. From "Shrine to Justin Smith Morrill, Justin Morrill on the Morrill Act."

<http://www.ndsu.edu/instruct/isern/morrill.htm>

the people of Iowa and demonstrate that we're in sync with the opportunities they seek.

But as Iowa State and Extension confront these great challenges of our time, we remain deeply rooted in the land-grant ethic. Iowa State and Extension are addressing today's challenges by building a model 21st century land-grant university and extension service. Our roots are set strongly in the values of the Morrill Act, but our vision reaches out to the challenges of the next decades.

In 2004, Martin Jischke, a former president of Iowa State University, spoke to the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. Jischke stated the need "to see the land-grant mission of the 21st century as embracing all sectors of society." Jischke said, "All of this is about change. Change can be seen as a threat or an opportunity. There are those who respond to change in the wind by trying to hunker down, preserve what is, and keep from being blown over. They fear change. And there are those who welcome change and see it as the means of opening new possibilities and potentials. Change produces opportunity."

Justin Morrill did not author the Morrill Act with his eyes locked on the past. Rather, he was looking toward the future, ready for change, and welcoming opportunity. And maybe now, more than ever, the public needs a reliable source of unbiased, research-based information. Today our fundamental responsibility, still, is to the people of Iowa. We strive to demonstrate practical and tangible benefits from research, and we create opportunities where people can learn from others who are applying new innovations in the real world. Thank you.