

DAVID W. LEEBRON

Remembering President Emeritus Malcolm Gillis



The job of a university or college president is an odd one. As with any leadership position in a major organization, developing a strategy and then successfully executing it are critical elements. But universities are passionate communities, especially our students and alumni, and I am not sure you can do the job of president solely on the basis of strategy and results. More is demanded and expected. The university president must be a true part of that passionate community.

No one represented that passion more than Malcolm Gillis. Being president of Rice wasn't just a job for Malcolm, it was a calling — a calling he felt destined for. Dedication and enthusiasm characterized all he did for Rice. Universities are unusual in their breadth, encompassing an array of endeavors that sometimes seem not to be rooted in a common vision. Malcolm embraced every part of the university, from athletics to music to nanotechnology and everything in between, and he linked them together into

a compelling, coherent narrative of the incredible story of Rice.

I first met Malcolm in December 2003, the day I arrived on campus for the public announcement of my appointment as his successor. He and his wife, Elizabeth, greeted Ping and me warmly at what was then O'Connor House, the residence of the president. Malcolm's warmth and enthusiasm enveloped me. He presented me with my first owl tie, knowing no doubt it would be my first of many.

It took years of engagement at Rice to fully appreciate all that Malcolm had contributed as president. It was under his watch that the Baker Institute was launched and the Jones School of Business began its ascent. Malcolm renewed and expanded the commitment to nanoscience and nanotechnology. He made Rice a forceful participant in the Texas Medical Center and helped start organizations in Houston and Texas that leveraged Rice's contributions to and engagement with the city and state.

Malcolm understood in an extraordinary way that in universities and education broadly, both the big picture and the individual matter, or in economic parlance, the macro and the micro. As a development economist, Malcolm was an adviser to governments who sought to better the lives of their people on a large scale by accelerating economic development. He played a leadership role in the establishment of at least three private universities in somewhat unlikely places: Germany, Vietnam and North Korea. He taught legions of students at Harvard, Duke and Rice. But he never lost sight of the importance of helping individuals along the way. One of those was Marie Lynn Miranda, whose career he nurtured and supported, and who now serves as the provost of Rice.

In the 11 years since he stepped down as president, Malcolm continued to serve the university as teacher, scholar, ambassador and adviser. At the time of his death, he was busy working to finalize a new digital textbook on development economics — with plans to donate it to OpenStax, Rice's digital textbook platform. Not knowing that his health was about to take a dramatic turn for the worse, I had asked Malcolm recently to help me on an internal university matter. In my last conversation with him, two days before he died, he wanted to assure me that he had taken care of it.

Rice has been fortunate in having only seven presidents since Edgar Odell Lovett was first appointed in 1909. Even taking into account President Lovett's 38 years, counting the more than three years before the Rice Institute opened its doors, that's an unusual record of stability. At Rice, each of us tries to live up to the standard that President Lovett set. We build on the work that has come before us, and it has been my great privilege and fortune to build on Malcolm's incredible contributions to the trajectory of Rice.

It is often said that the job of a university president is to leave the institution better than he or she found it. That's actually the minimum standard. The job is to leave it much better than you found it. Malcolm did that, and then some. And then did more. We miss him already.