Ohio State University celebrates 150 years of public education

Like many others, I was disappointed with Ohio State’s loss to Clemson and that they would not have the opportunity to play for the national title in 2020. However, Buckeye fans and alumni do have something to celebrate in 2020: Ohio State University’s sesquicentennial.

Ohio State University has been serving the state for 150 years. Throughout 2020, the public will see articles on the history of the university, but for now I would like to share how a university started from a congressional act passed during the Civil War and its location began on nothing more than a cow pasture.

In the mid-1800s, higher education relied heavily on private colleges that stressed liberal arts training. Leaders at the time wanted a more public education system, a system that would provide education in practical subjects and allow opportunities for the general population and not only the social elite.

To make this change, Congress passed the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant universities across the country. It is named for Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, who introduced the bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

This bill established or designated an existing public university in each state, to be funded by an endowment from sales of federal land, that would teach agricultural and mechanical (engineering) arts and military tactics (Reserve Officer Training Corps).

The amount of land allocated for sale to a state depended upon the number of congressmen in the U.S. Congress. Ohio was a large recipient since it had 23 congressmen at the time. State universities that were funded or started by the sale of this federal land were collectively called land-grant universities.

Ohio’s land-grant university started in 1870 after the state used the funds to purchase the Neil Farm just north of Columbus. The rural setting was selected to discourage students from becoming distracted by the city nightlife and the central location would allow easier access for all Ohio residents.

The institution was first called Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College. Its first students enrolled in 1873 and it had its first graduate in 1878. Since the school was more than just agriculture, the name was changed to the Ohio State University in 1878.

Later in 1914, Ohio State University and the other land-grant universities established the Cooperative Extension Service for their respective state with the passage of the federal Smith-Lever Act. Two factors drove the creation of the extension system:

- Policymakers believed that the scientific research being completed by the land-grant universities was not being shared with the general public but “locked up in the ivory towers” of the institutions.
- Belief that the general population would benefit more if an individual was positioned in the community who was involved with the process, understood the applications of the university research and knew the local needs of that community.

Extension offices were established in each county of Ohio, including Hancock County, for these individuals positioned in the community. Most of these offices included individuals in agriculture, family consumer sciences and youth development (4-H).

Federal, state and county governments fund the Extension Service, thus the original name of the Cooperative Extension Service. The Smith-Lever Act provided federal funds to the state, which the state had to match. Counties received these matching funds when they provided their financial part.

County funding for Extension can be seen in the non-mandated portion of each county’s annual budget. If a county does not provide these funds, they lose the federal and state match — which is considerably more than the county’s portion — and they lose the information communication link with the land-grant university.

Besides losing their connection with their given state’s land-grant university, they lose the connection with land-grant universities in the other 49 states. In the Big Ten Conference, 10 of the 14 schools are land-grant universities. Only Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and Northwestern are not land-grant universities.

Today, land-grant universities have three major themes: education, research and service to the community. They produce most of the graduate degrees in the country, provide much of the academic research and provide the most diverse areas of undergraduate programs.

None of this would have happened if it were not for the Morrill Act of 1862. Many land-grant universities have at least one building named for Congressman Justin Morrill. On the Ohio State University campus, Morrill Tower, a residence hall, is named for him.

Even though Justin Morrill gets the credit for introducing the land-grant university bill into the house, Ohio has a connection — Sen. Benjamin Wade of Ohio introduced the bill in the U.S. Senate. Sen. Wade would be proud to see Ohio State University as a product of the Morrill Act.

Ohio State University has created a website to celebrate its sesquicentennial year. It may be found at https://150.osu.edu/. Also, free to the public, an online noncredit course on the history of Ohio State may be found at https://odee.osu.edu/news/2019/07/02/free-course-offers-deep-insights-150-years-ohio-state-history

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