

Why the Land Grant University?

“... to create a college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other classical and scientific studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life..”

Penned by Representative Justin Morrill of Vermont and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, the Morrill Act provided grants of land to states to be utilized for establishing a college to meet these goals. Today, there is an 1862 “Land Grant” university in each of the 50 states, as well as in the District of Columbia and a number of the Territories of the United States. North Dakota Agricultural College was founded under the authority of the 1862 Morrill Act in partnership with the United States in 1890. Today this institution is North Dakota State University.

In 1862, in addition to the Morrill Act, Congress also enacted the Intercontinental Railway Act, the Homestead Act, and the act that created the United States Department of Agriculture. Prior to that time most citizens of the United States and its territories were involved in subsistence living. The leaders of our nation were visiting in Europe and saw that to continue to grow and prosper, the United States needed to become more involved in activities that today we know as the “industrial revolution.”

Thus, the Morrill Act was not a singular initiative, but was an integral plank in a broad strategy for assuring a bright and prosperous future for the United States. As our nation’s Congressional leaders and President envisioned a bright economic future, several points were integral in their founding of Land Grant colleges:

1. Congress understood that having a food, feed, and fiber system which reliably and perpetually met the needs of the nation’s population was essential before progress in other economic enterprises could be made. They recognized that the agricultural systems would have to become efficient enough to “free up” people to become involved in development of new industries, and that a significant way to accomplish this was through higher education.
2. The “mechanic arts” included what we now recognize as engineering, along with strong emphasis in the sciences including mathematics, chemistry, physics, etc. These were the core disciplines for preparing people to become successful in manufacturing and other enterprises as the nation’s economy diversified. Today, most Land Grants have outstanding programs in engineering and sciences.
3. Additionally, Congress called on Land Grants to prepare students to be effective and contributing citizens throughout their lives. They expressed this in the Morrill Act by saying that the curricula at Land Grant colleges were to include classical and scientific studies to assure the *liberal* (providing students with a broad background about the many disciplines of human understanding), as well as *practical* (those things which people do to make a living), education of students.
4. Prior to the Morrill Act, higher education throughout the world’s history had, in most cases, been the exclusive province of the wealthy and socially elite. Congress, through passage of the Morrill Act, recognized that the nation would benefit from and prosper by having a broad cross section of society – *the industrial classes* – become well educated through participation in higher education.

The Morrill Act is cited as being the seminal event that gave rise to broad participation in higher education in the United States and now throughout the world.

Since their founding, each Land Grant university has had close relationships with the citizens of its respective state. These institutions have continuously engaged with their constituencies to meet contemporary and foreseeable needs and opportunities. Another phase of this evolution was the founding Agricultural Experiment Stations as important parts of Land Grants through Congress' enacting the Hatch Act in 1887. Extension Services were created through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914.

Other events that significantly influenced the development of Land Grants occurred as World War II was ending. One of these was passage of the GI Bill. Through this legislation, most Land Grants grew significantly as they educated large numbers of former soldiers. To assure that the nation would have the talent required to continue to be successful, while concurrently rebuilding much of the world, additional disciplines became more relevant and prominent at Land Grants. While Land Grants continue to assure excellence in agricultural and engineering endeavors, new thrusts led to significant strengthening of programs in business, application of the sciences in new ways, humanities and social sciences, and other pertinent areas of study.

Concurrent with the growth of student numbers through implementation of the GI Bill, Land Grants were called on to broaden the areas of research in which they were involved. Near the end of World War II, Vannevar Bush, Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, penned a report *Science-the Endless Frontier*. This document outlined a long-term strategy for significantly expanding the nation's civilian economy by drawing on the scientific capabilities in academia similar to the way the nation had drawn on these sources in the successful execution of the War. Congress implemented Bush's report through development of the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, expanded commercial research sponsored by the Department of Defense, etc. Much of the science was, and continues to be, supported through grant processes. Because of the engineering and broad scientific expertise at Land Grants, these institutions were particularly successful in serving state and national needs by securing support through these avenues. Land Grants have played prominent roles in many sectors of our economy and society, in addition to the pivotal roles they always assumed in leading very significant scientific developments in agriculture, agribusiness, and related areas.

No two Land Grants are identical. Each has developed in response to the needs and challenges of its respective state. Their agricultural research and extension programs are prominent, yet each is unique. Their engineering and science programs are prominent. Many have outstanding programs in education, business, the performing and visual arts, law, human medicine, veterinary medicine, and many other areas of human endeavor. Regardless of the mix of programs, each institution continues to provide students with the fundamental skills to be successful in their chosen professions, and also, as contributing citizens. They conduct cutting-edge research and scholarship in many disciplines. They serve the citizens of their states through innovative outreach efforts in many arenas. In the spirit of the Morrill Act as being the "peoples' universities," today's Land Grant universities continue to adapt and evolve as societal needs evolve. They are significant catalysts in pacing the way for the future success of the United States.