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INTRODUCTION



Drexel at 125 and 150

Celebrating History with an Eye to the Future

JOHN A. FRY

THE APPROACH of a significant anniversary invites us to look backward in time. But I think such milestones are more valuable for the chance to take stock of today, and especially to think about what tomorrow can and should hold. As Drexel University celebrates 125 years, I'm tempted to try a thought experiment about the future: What might this university and its environs look like at its next big anniversary in 2041?

Our founder, the financier and philanthropist Anthony J. Drexel, was a keen thinker and a prescient futurist. If he had engaged in such an experiment to imagine his Drexel Institute today, he might have hoped that his highest ideals would still animate it—and indeed they do. We who have custody of Mr. Drexel's legacy remain committed to showing our students where the world is headed, and preparing them accordingly, to leading society's efforts to meet its biggest challenges, and to weaving a strong, resilient urban fabric in our home city of Philadelphia. As Mr. Drexel once wished, a Drexel education is still “not only good, but good for something.”

As he built his father's currency-trading bank into the first modern financial institution, Anthony J. Drexel helped lay the foundation for a century in which new technologies would forge a new type of industrial city. He saw a future with plenty of modern jobs that demanded educated workers. What he didn't see was an institution prepared to educate those workers—so he created one. The Drexel Institute of Art, Science, and



*President John A. Fry, appointed in 2010, is the fourteenth president to serve Drexel.
(Office of University Communications. Photo by Jeff Fusco.)*

Industry was unique in 1891 for opening its doors to all, without regard to barriers such as wealth or gender, and for devoting itself to outstanding practical education.

Today, we again see a future in which prosperity relies on fostering a culture of innovation in urban environments. The difference this time is that comprehensive research universities like Drexel can't simply work to fill tomorrow's jobs—we must help create them. We are expected to educate the next generation of leaders, discoverers, and creators, while being engines of sustainable, equitable economic growth in our own right. And that growth must favor enterprises in which innovators work with entrepreneurs to address the critical problems facing us today, from energy to human health to the environment. These are the responsibilities that will shape the next quarter century at Drexel.

I believe that some aspects of this university will look very much the same to those of us lucky enough to compare 2041 with 2016. First and foremost, experiential learning will continue to be the core of a Drexel education, most clearly embodied by the Drexel Co-op. I hope that the norm for our students will eventually be a sequence of three co-op assignments placing them in greater Philadelphia, another region of the United States,

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and an international location. More students will be able to undertake co-ops in the nonprofit service sector thanks to increased funding, and some students will use the entrepreneurial co-op as a springboard to developing their own businesses. Beyond co-op, students will be deeply involved in research, clinical work and academically driven service. Drexel will serve as a global model for how to build a constant dialogue between classroom learning and the real-world demands that graduates face in their fields.

In a quarter century, an observer from today will recognize Drexel's world-class research enterprise, and in particular its excellence in translational research that turns new knowledge into important technologies. Drexel has the potential to move up through the ranks of the top one hundred American research universities as measured by sponsored research funding. And the university's expanding capacity for technology commercialization means that future generations of Drexel researchers will be among the highest-impact innovators in the world. They will save lives, help us live better, and grow the economy.

Drexel in 2041 will also be familiar for its trusted partnerships with business, government, and civic leaders in Philadelphia. Co-op, research, consulting, and technology commercialization will continue to connect the university to a thriving regional business community. Drexel will be a sought-after source of policy expertise in greater Philadelphia and beyond. Deep, generational relationships with community and neighborhood service organizations will be the hallmark of the university's core commitment to civic engagement, and will have clearly established Drexel as the most civically engaged university in the United States.

It is fairly straightforward to imagine these continuities between today's Drexel University and tomorrow's. Other aspects of the university's future require a larger leap of faith to envision. But they also grow from the seeds sowed by Anthony J. Drexel, and cultivated by every generation up to the present.

By 2041, I believe that Drexel will be the focal point of an urban innovation district that rivals any in the nation. A once-in-a-generation opportunity exists right now to leverage University City's academic ecosystem, entrepreneurial energy, and unsurpassed locational advantage into a new center of technology and job creation.

Planners, researchers, and public policy experts recognize the unique potential for cities to catalyze twenty-first-century prosperity. Urban innovation districts are arising because of the way city neighborhoods can foster human networks, which are the key to knowledge exchange and collaboration. Such districts integrate universities and hospitals,

research-oriented firms, entrepreneurs, and investors. They also meet the growing demand for places where professionals, academics, and artists can work and live in proximity to retail and open-space amenities, cultural venues, and mass transit.

“Anchor institutions” like Drexel have both the ability to create innovation districts and the responsibility to make sure that their impact goes far beyond real estate development. The world desperately needs solutions to problems that affect the quality of life for everyone. Climate change, the need for sustainable energy, new health crises such as the rising prevalence of autism—our best hope to meet these threats is at the intersection of academic excellence, groundbreaking research, and entrepreneurship. Drexel of 2041, and the innovation district it leads, will be where that intersection happens.

A time frame of twenty-five years is just about right to imagine Drexel and its neighbors as driving not just economic and social growth in greater Philadelphia, but also American competitiveness and global progress. We are committed to this vision. The traveler of 2041 will arrive at Amtrak’s Thirtieth Street Station via a high-speed rail trip of less than an hour from New York or Washington to find Drexel and the innovation district waiting outside the door, with Center City’s business center just across the Schuylkill River. In a Philadelphia famous for William Penn’s original five public squares, the gateway to our university at Thirtieth Street will be the sixth: Drexel Square.

Drexel is developing ten acres of land alongside Thirtieth Street Station—land that was underutilized for decades before Drexel’s acquisition—as a mixed-use academic and commercial neighborhood featuring all the building blocks of innovation. There, corporate and academic partners will work with Drexel faculty and students on entrepreneurial solutions to the problems I’ve described, and to other challenges we can only begin to imagine. The indicators of success for this undertaking will include businesses that move from the university lab to find funding and incubation help and eventually provide good jobs in their own thriving space in the neighborhood, opportunities for Drexel students to prove once again that they outpace their peers in real-world readiness, and technologies and ideas that change the world.

Drexel’s project dovetails with transformational new facilities by the University of Pennsylvania and Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. And by 2041, this groundswell of growth will hopefully be capped by another mixed-use, waterfront development above some eighty-five acres of rail yards north of Thirtieth Street Station. Drexel, Amtrak, the Southeastern

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Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, and the Brandywine Realty Trust are among the principals involved in crafting a comprehensive Philadelphia Thirtieth Street Station District Plan.

Drexel can drive Philadelphia's innovation future because of the university's experiential approach to education, its translational research expertise, and its focus on new-venture skills through the Charles D. Close School of Entrepreneurship. The groundwork for this role is being laid already: Drexel Ventures helps faculty commercialize their research through a variety of support and funding opportunities, and initiatives like the Baiada Institute for Entrepreneurship and the Innovation Center at 3401 Market Street are incubating and accelerating the growth of new businesses. The neighborhood that travelers see as they disembark twenty-five years from now will be the physical manifestation of an innovation culture that has taken root today. And Drexel is the connector that makes all of this possible.

The future Drexel that I've imagined here represents a bold and complex undertaking. Though it will require the commitment and talents of a generation of faculty, administrators, and students to come to fruition, I am confident that we will rise to the challenge. But perhaps the most important measure of Drexel's quest for educational excellence and economic leadership is whether this progress will be shared by all of our Philadelphia neighbors and colleagues.

The neighborhoods around Drexel's campus are beset today by generational poverty exacerbated by economic inequality. If we want to honor our founder's vision, Drexel cannot be an island of privilege surrounded by privation. We must build a better city alongside community partners with whom we share a love for Philadelphia and a commitment to vital streets where families thrive and opportunity abounds. Both education and economic development are roads to prosperity—we must travel those roads together with our neighbors, if we want to make University City a new center of gravity for innovation. That is how an anchor institution fulfills its purpose.

As the nation's experiential education leader, Drexel must ensure that each new student's experience includes joining a peer group that represents Philadelphia and America. We have provided more than three hundred full-tuition scholarships over the past seven years to Philadelphia residents with economic need through our Liberty Scholars program. This has been a great means of improving diversity and access at Drexel, but it's a stopgap measure. In the long run, we must bring the cost of an undergraduate education within the means of families from all economic strata, while keeping the

value of that education high for those families. This is a challenge for all of higher education, but it is especially acute for an urban university founded to facilitate educational and economic improvement for its city's residents.

As an economic engine, Drexel must wield its growing influence so that the developing innovation district leads to broad-based gains. The district cannot be self-contained, but rather must connect to neighborhoods like Mantua and Powelton Village both physically and psychologically. Its amenities should improve quality of life for workers and for residents, both new and long established. Drexel must be an active partner in providing a first-rate primary and secondary education to every child living in the area. And Drexel must also open jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities to West Philadelphians, and help them gain the skills and connections to benefit. That work has begun at our Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships and Lindy Center for Civic Engagement, where Drexel experts collaborate with neighbors on a wide range of solutions.

Drexel has been integral to Philadelphia's progress throughout our history. This university has always embraced its role as an anchor institution, and today more than ever, our vision for Drexel's future must serve Philadelphia's future as well. I am excited to help Drexel spark a new innovation district, tied to long-term solutions for both urban and global problems, because that is the highest purpose I can imagine for a university in America.

The celebration of Drexel's 125th anniversary reminds me how fortunate I am to be at an institution where my colleagues and I can envision an exciting future and begin to make it happen. It also reminds me that I am but a small part of a long legacy of educators and innovators, connected by the desire to shape future generations and build a stronger community. That knowledge is deeply humbling, and I am honored to accept the responsibility that comes with it.