Former Fed vice chair delivers 2017 R.W. Freeman Lecture

November 10, 2017



Roger W. Ferguson Jr., left, former vice chair of the Federal Reserve and current president and CEO of TIAA, discussed the changing economy as the Freeman School's 2017 R.W. Freeman Distinguished Lecturer.

The 2016 presidential election exposed deep fissures within U.S. society, but in an appearance at Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business on Nov. 8, economist Roger W. Ferguson Jr. said today's economic and cultural divide has historical precedents.

"This is not at all dissimilar to the U.S. transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy," said Ferguson, former vice chair of the Federal Reserve and current president and CEO of TIAA, one of the nation's leading retirement services providers. "There's great uncertainty about jobs and great uncertainty about the skills that one needs."

Ferguson attributed the current unease to the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial or technology economy. It took the U.S. a generation to move from an agricultural to an industrial economy, Ferguson said, and he expects the current transition to take about as long.

"At the end of the day, I'm highly optimistic about our ability to move because we've done it in the past," Ferguson added. "But that's not to say it's going to be quick or easy or can be done without some rough patches."

The changing economy was just one of the topics Ferguson addressed as the Freeman School's 2017 R. W. Freeman Distinguished Lecturer. In a wide-ranging Q&A session with students in the Kendall Cram Lecture Hall, Ferguson discussed Fed policy, emerging cryptocurrencies, U.S. competitiveness, the benefits of globalization and the student-debt crisis.

"Those that get in the most trouble with [student debt] are not those with the largest amounts," Ferguson noted. "Ironically, the ones who default are the ones who have the smallest debt burden but who went to trade schools or other schools that didn't give them entree into a really high-paying job."

While graduates of traditional universities and professional schools may amass significant debt, Ferguson said those graduates typically emerge with the skills they need to land good jobs and service their debt.

"Let's focus on where the challenge is," Ferguson said. "I think it's a question of educating people and creating a high degree of awareness that when you go to one of those trade schools or for-profit schools, that may not set you up as well as you were hoping."

“We were truly fortunate to have Roger serve as the 2017 R.W. Freeman Distinguished Lecturer,” said Freeman School Dean Ira Solomon, who served as moderator. “The breadth and depth of his experiences and knowledge are truly amazing, and his ability to cogently communicate what he has learned along the way is even more amazing.”

The R.W. Freeman Distinguished Lecture series is named in honor of Richard W. Freeman Sr. (BBA ’34), who served as president and chairman of the Louisiana Coca-Cola Bottling Co. and chairman of the board of Delta Air Lines. Freeman served on the Board of Tulane for 13 years and led the effort to name Tulane’s business school in honor of his father, A. B. Freeman. In attendance at this year’s lecture were several members of the Freeman family, including Richard Jr. (BBA ’60) and Sarah Freeman, Louis Sr. (’63) and Judith (’63) Freeman, Tina Freeman, Louis Jr. (BSM ’86) and Courtney (NC ’87) Freeman, and West (UC ’03) and Aimee (MBA ’95) Freeman.