Some people embrace change; others prefer the familiar. I stand firmly in both those camps—the progressive and the traditional. So, it seems, does OU President David Boren.

On the one hand, during the first two years of the Boren administration, the University has been no place for devotees of the status quo. This president brims over with ideas, and he wastes no time and brooks no opposition in implementing them. New programs. Old programs with a new twist. New people in new positions. Retooled people in different positions.

On the other hand, Boren has a great fondness for institutional history and tradition. He recalls his own student days with nostalgia and reveres the University giants who were his guides. Some of his current proposals are a forthright attempt to recapture the flavor of that past, updated for the '90s.

The obvious changes are apparent to the most casual observer. The presidential family has returned in grand style to the restored and expanded Boyd House on the corner of Boyd and University Boulevard. Across the street to the west, phase two of Catlett Music Center and its parking garage are well under way. And miracle of all miracles, construction has begun on the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, that decades-old dream that most of us had captioned “not in our lifetimes.”

The long-neglected health sciences students in Oklahoma City have a brand new student center. In Norman, the renovation of the Oklahoma Memorial Union is finally in its final phase, and its neighbor, lovely old Jacobson Hall (my personal architectural favorite), must look better than it did new.

Everything looks better. Flower gardens abound, and visitors can enjoy them from the comfort of 150 new benches donated by alumni and friends to honor special people in their lives. Historical markers are going up all over the campus, and literally hundreds of historical photographs now adorn the formerly bleak lobbies and hallways of campus buildings.

To be fair, some in the University community disdain bricks and mortar and regard garden settings and historical memorabilia as mere window dressing in the academic setting. If OU did not have enough National Merit Scholars to seat 5½ on each of those benches, I would agree. If OU were not attracting private funds at a record pace and legislative support at an unexpected level... if administrative costs were rising instead of falling... if academic programs and student welfare were not receiving the administration’s attention, there would be cause for concern. Fortunately that is not the case.

When The Reach for Excellence, a five-year, $200-million private funding campaign, reached $115 million in just 12 months, the goal was adjusted upward to $250 million. And that $115 million is not just good intentions; 80 percent came in cash. The campaign has many parts—endowed faculty positions, scholarships, capital improvements—one intriguing part being the Honors Program, already elevated to college status with help from more than $7 million in private gifts.

Boren’s conviction that this country and this university must be international players is evident throughout the institution—in the classroom and on the campus. With the creation of an international studies program and presidential study-abroad scholarships, OU now ranks first in the Big 12 in the number of exchange student agreements in place. And the University welcome for international students has taken on a personal warmth with the “OU Cousins” program matching them one-on-one with Sooner student hosts.

With the University short on faculty when he arrived from Washington, Boren talked a cadre of retired professors into returning to the classroom to teach a course or two. But he also saw 61 vacant positions filled and 25 new endowed chairs and professorships established.

New freshman enrollment is up; entering ACT and SAT scores are up; externally funded faculty research and training grants are up. What I like most, however, is that the excitement level is up. We got a taste of the possibilities with the blue-ribbon panelists who came for the “special day of learning” symposia accompanying Boren’s inauguration. I ruined a good pair of shoes sloshing through the rain in a vain attempt to hear them all. The man does know fascinating people, and they do accept his invitations.

Boren insists that the past two years have been the most rewarding of his life; certainly they have been the busiest—for him and for the University. Time to rest on his record? I doubt it. If you can spend an hour with Boren without hearing a new idea, I will buy you one of those benches—if we can find an empty space on the campus to put it.

—CJB