

## Strategies for Excellence in Interesting Times

Presidential Convocation Address

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I am delighted to welcome you back for the 2000-2001 academic year. As you know, we are trying something different—a new format and schedule for the various opening exercises for the College year. If necessity is the mother of invention, changes in the class schedule have given birth, this year, to new customs and ceremonies. I hope that the new time for Convocation, the new welcoming picnic for faculty, staff, families, and new students, and the retention of the first-year student convocation as the culminating event in the Weekend of Welcome will help build and strengthen community. Beginnings are important for all of us, and I have long believed that the more we do to introduce our students to our academic community and its culture of liberal learning, the better we shall be as a college. It is a particular pleasure to welcome our new faculty and staff this year: they are an especially talented and diverse group of individuals. Our more leisurely opening has allowed me to meet almost all of them at orientation yesterday, to become acquainted with the new faculty in the Shear School of Education at a retreat on Wednesday, and to meet many other new faculty at a dinner at Provost Dixon's house that evening. In addition to all these events, Ruth and I hosted a reception for families of new students this noon on the lawn of the President's House. Some 450 parents and family members were there. I suppose we could be accused of using the new schedule as an excuse for holding parties, but, if we really value community, parties may not be a bad thing!

I have entitled my remarks today, "Strategies for Excellence in Interesting Times," and I take the second portion of my title, as you may have suspected, from the proverbial Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times." As I prepared this talk, I thought back to the first time I stood in this place, five years ago—August 28, 1995, five years ago to the day, if we had held to the old schedule of a Monday convocation. Although I shall review a few highlights of the past year, I want to take a longer-range view and assess the College's strategic situation today in light of the events of the past five years. We have indeed been living in interesting times, and we continue to, but we enter the new academic year with a number of exciting initiatives that will help us achieve our goals as a College. I shall share some of them in the latter portion of my remarks. We face a challenging environment, but the year is filled with opportunities to achieve excellence on many fronts—to take Geneseo to a new level as a public liberal arts college.

Five years ago, as I stood before you, the College had already been forced to cut almost a million dollars from the operating budget. Another \$250,000 in cuts were to follow at midyear. The financial position of the College has been more positive in the past two years. Thanks to the work of our new campus budget advisory committee, we have been able to allocate almost a million dollars in new base-budget funds for high-priority needs, including six new faculty lines. Our state budget for the 2000-2001 year—passed,

mercifully, almost on time, thanks to the gentle pressure of an election year-is essentially flat. It will provide the funds needed for contractual salary increases, but very little to cover inflation in supplies and services. Though we seem to have achieved a modicum of stability in the state budget, the sad fact is that we cannot expect significant increases in tax-dollar support over the long term, above and beyond inflation and contractually mandated salary costs.

Five years ago, we were at the midpoint in a ten-year planning cycle and in the process of reviewing the goals we had set in 1990. Today, we have a new streamlined planning process, and, thanks to the work of the former College Planning Council and the new Strategic Planning Group, we have a new mission and vision statement, a set of six general goals refined in campus-wide discussion, and an excellent statement of the values we share. You have the final versions of those documents in your hands today. The outcome of this careful work and consultation is, I trust, a clearer expression of our basic identity as a public liberal arts college and our shared purposes as a community. Our task, then as now, is to continue to explore and ever more fully embody what it means to be an outstanding public liberal arts college-to pursue excellence, which is at the top of the list among our institutional values. (As you may have noted, the first part of my title comes from the planning document before you.)

In the past five years, the State University has changed as well. In 1995 a new Chancellor had recently taken office. Although we did not know it at the time, he would resign eight months later, and, upon his appointment last December, Robert King became the third chancellor we have had in five years. With system mission review almost complete and some of the key ideas of the "Rethinking SUNY" document implemented (including, most notably, differential campus missions and retention of campus-generated revenues), we can look forward to a considerably more stable future. Early, vigorous advocacy for the University from Bob King and the appointment of Dick Miller, who comes with more than ten years of experience in a major university setting, as chief operating officer are reassuring signs for the future, as is the fact that both of them know Rochester and Geneseo well. I look forward to the conclusion of the mission review process, which will enable us to ratify our unique role as the outstanding public liberal arts college in the State University. Though we are constrained by limited funding from the state, the College, through the Geneseo Foundation, has raised more than \$8.3 million in the past five years for faculty development, student support, and other projects that provide a vital extra margin of excellence. Looking back on these interesting times, we can truthfully say: by almost every measure, we are better off as a college than we were five years ago.

## **I. Some Highlights of the Year**

In a year of relative stability, as in years of adversity, Geneseo has continued to thrive. We have, as I like to say, just gone on being Geneseo. That means, to begin with, that we have attended to our primary mission of teaching and learning. Our 1999 graduates continued to be successful. Thirty-one percent of them were admitted directly to graduate and professional programs. The preliminary word on graduate admissions is much the same this year, with some especially remarkable success stories among our women

students in the sciences. Another 58 percent of last year's graduates gained full-time employment related to their degree programs. Only 4 percent were still seeking employment in October—a 96 percent placement rate.

Our colleagues continued their strong record of scholarship and professional achievement. Several have been recognized with prestigious fellowships. Professor Karen Duffy, for example, has returned from a successful Fulbright year in Russia, at St. Petersburg, only to be replaced by our colleague in political science, Robert Goeckel, who will be at Moscow State University. Both of them also have been asked to represent the SUNY administration in matters related to our system-wide exchange with Moscow State. Professor Emily Crosby has been awarded an NEH fellowship for the coming year. Other colleagues have attained major grants from the NSF in such fields as computer science and biology; and Bill Cook and Ron Herzman have extended their remarkable record of grants for NEH seminars for high school teachers. Professor Olympia Nicodemi received the Elena Cornaro Award this June for her distinguished work as teacher and mentor. These are, as usual, merely a few scattered examples. I could list dozens more.

Although the major work of curriculum reform at Geneseo was completed in December 1998, the College has responded well to the complex logistical challenges presented by the Trustees' mandates on general education. We are, if you will, SUNY 2000 compliant: our general education curriculum received approval from the system-wide commission, in large measure because of excellent work under a very tight deadline by the General Education Committee, ably chaired by Dean Tom Greenfield—and thanks, as well, to Provost Dixon's intimate knowledge of the new and rapidly changing policies, gained by seemingly endless days of service on the state-wide Provost's Advisory Committee on General Education, which she has chaired this year.

In May, as you know, after extended discussion and debate the College Senate passed a three-semester foreign language requirement. I have accepted the recommendation of the Senate. However, I have instructed the Provost and Dean Greenfield to implement the requirement in stages, over a three-year period, beginning with a 102-level requirement for incoming students this fall. I have asked them to study the effects a three-semester requirement on various majors and curricula in the college and to recommend ways to phase in the requirement in order to cause minimum disruption to students' programs and to staffing patterns. This requirement strengthens our curriculum, but as we implement it we need to make sure that we retain balance and proportion in the curriculum as a whole.

Beyond the classroom, on the playing fields, on the track and in the pool, our student-athletes have continued to do us proud. In the past year, 16 of our 19 teams went on to play in SUNYAC championships—a record that put us in second place in the Commissioner's Cup for best overall performance in our conference. For the first time, our women's softball team won the East Coast Athletic Conference title; the women's and men's swim teams won SUNYAC titles, and the women's cross-country team won the NYSWAA championship. Speaking of women in sports, our athletic director, Marilyn Moore, will receive the Division III National Administrator of the Year Award from the

National Association of Collegiate Women Athletic Administrators. I congratulate her on this achievement in her first year as AD.

At Geneseo, as you know, we seek to integrate curricular and co-curricular programs. This is a major goal-number 3, in fact-and an essential element in building the academic community of an outstanding public liberal arts college. To this end, Student and Campus Life has created a new unit, headed by Dean Leonard Sancilio, the Center for Community, which brings together Multicultural Affairs, the Volunteer Center, Orientation, Greek Affairs, Off-Campus Students, and Student Leadership Development programs under the same administrative umbrella. Lauderdale Health Services was awarded full national accreditation in its first attempt from the Association for Ambulatory Health Care, and Counseling will be merged with Health Services to provide better student care.

1999-2000 was also an unusually active year in administration and facilities services. Geneseo's new GEN-1 program for custodial services won a major award from NACUBO, for improving the quality and reducing the cost of higher education services. In a competitive field of 43 applications (most from major Research I institutions), Geneseo came in second after Indiana and Purdue universities. After much hard work with the architects, we have signed the contract for building the new town-house style dormitories below B-lot and expect to break ground in the next month. Perhaps most important, the new integrated science building is on track. We have been assured adequate funding for the full project, and architects are working on schematic designs. We hope to break ground in the 2001-02 academic year.

As part of our advancement efforts, the College raised over \$1.6 million in private funds last year-the second highest total in history and the seventh year in a row when gifts from alumni, faculty, staff, parents, friends, and corporations have exceeded \$1 million. As we seek to build a culture of giving among alumni (most of whom attended Geneseo when tuition was minimal and the state provided full support), I have met with alumni groups throughout the country-from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, and from Florida to Boston-to build loyalty and explain the need for a new level of support for Geneseo. In the annual fund this year we have emphasized reunion giving. The 25th reunion class set a new record of \$54,000. As most of you know, we currently have six supported professorships. I am pleased to announce today that we shall add a seventh professorship, specifically intended to recognize outstanding researchers in the faculty.

## **II. Our Strategic Situation**

I have presented merely the briefest precis of some of the accomplishments of faculty, staff, and students in the past year. Thanks to the efforts of all of you, Geneseo has gone on being Geneseo. The remarkable teaching, learning, and service that takes place in our community-day in and day out-exemplifies a strong public liberal arts college; and we need to continue to recognize the achievements of so many people, as exemplified by our award winners today. But I want now to step back from the immediate past and take a longer view. As we look ahead to 2001, what is our strategic position as a College? If we

value excellence in everything we do, if we seek to become the premier public liberal arts college in the country, what challenges do we face? What is the environment in which we must work? What should our strategies be?

Our mission as a public liberal arts college is clear, and the goals we have set for ourselves provide us with a good general road map, but what will it take to reach our highest aspirations for Geneseo? This is a special place, a fine undergraduate college, but what will it take for Geneseo to reach a new level and achieve true national prominence as a unique public liberal arts college, to build the outstanding educational community we desire, to achieve the recognition we seek and deserve?

It would be tempting merely to stand still, to maintain the level we have achieved, but to do that in our current environment would be to fall backward, to regress. Even maintaining our current strategic position as a college will be difficult in the environment of higher education in New York State. Let me illustrate what I mean by looking at our second goal, "to recruit, support, and foster the development of a diverse community of outstanding students, faculty, and staff." Take student recruitment, for example. Although our ultimate goal is to develop excellent human beings, we are dependent upon the continued presence, year after year, of academically talented students. This has been an excellent year in admissions. We have recruited a very talented new class, with average SAT scores of 1221 (22 points higher than last year) and mean high school averages of 92.4 (the highest in college history); 48 percent of the new students graduated in the top ten percent of their classes. Freshman applications rose slightly, and selectivity rose dramatically—we admitted only 46.8 percent of those who applied, the lowest proportion since 1991. Despite these successes, we cannot be complacent. Simply put, we no longer have the playing field to ourselves, even within the SUNY system. The environment has become much more competitive. Geneseo raises and allocates over \$400,000 for merit scholarships, but other four-year campuses in the system spend as much as \$2 million, and one of the university centers, \$4 million. And the system has even allocated funds to certain campuses to permit them to offer more merit scholarships to increase the quality of their entering class. I am not sure about the wisdom of allocating state dollars to promote internecine strife, but my point is that the challenges we face within New York State, let alone recruiting out-of-state students as we seek to promote diversity and quality, have increased dramatically. Associate Vice President Caren recently polled 912 students who are coming to Geneseo. He found that 72 percent of them had been accepted at other campuses in the system. 47 percent of those students - over 300 students - had been offered merit scholarships. This year, we were able to offer only 65 merit scholarships to freshmen.

In this recruiting environment, we can no longer assume that, because we are the most popular and most selective college in SUNY, we will remain so. Not only must we prepare outstanding new recruitment materials (and we have done so in the past year, splendidly, but at significant cost), not only must we continue to develop and refine excellent academic programs, but we shall also be called upon to find the resources for additional scholarships, and we shall need to meet the rising expectations of students—students who are now comparing us to some the best (and wealthiest) private colleges as

well as other SUNY campuses. We shall need to meet rising expectations about dormitory design, computer facilities, campus appearance, meal plans, and student activities as well as academic programs. This too will require resources. Indeed, we have allocated year-end funds for landscaping and physical improvements, and we plan a major landscape and sidewalk renovation of all of the South Side, work on the Sturges Quad, and major work on Northside, even as we redesign and renovate seven residence halls and build the new town-house-style residence complex. And nowadays we must think not only about the physical appearance of the campus but the quality of our website-the electronic or virtual appearance of our campus. (Along with more scholarships, a better website was the item most frequently mentioned for improving our recruitment in the student survey.)

All of these facilities and programs support excellence through the continued recruitment and development of an outstanding, diverse student body - even though many of them seem far from traditional academic programs or student activities. Plainly, if we are to create the outstanding teaching and learning community we desire, we must be concerned with everything that fosters the total educational experience, and all parts of the college - physical plant, academic and student affairs, advancement, finance and administration - are partners in the effort. In this competitive environment, however, the financial realities remain the same. We cannot expect dramatic increases in state funding, so we must continue to work on two fronts to get more resources: vigorous private fundraising and at least a modicum of flexibility in tuition policies. On both fronts, the College will be very active in the coming year, and I will keep you informed of our progress.

### **III. Strategies for Excellence**

These are indeed interesting times. And in these interesting times, then, how do we reach our goals? In the remainder of my remarks let me sketch three major initiatives in the coming year, three strategies for excellence that will help Geneseo reach the next level as an outstanding public liberal arts college. I believe we are entering an exciting period in the history of the College, and I invite your active participation, advice, and support in the coming year.

#### **Planning:**

Any successful strategy for excellence must be based on sound and careful planning. As a first initiative, I invite your participation in the final stages of our campus planning process. The Strategic Planning Group identified the six major goals you see in the brochure. They discussed them with all members of the college community last spring and refined them on the basis of those discussions, and they have also identified some important values we share-again, on the basis of the public forums held last Spring and the suggestions they received from the campus community. Now the Strategic Planning Group seeks volunteers from all segments of the College community to form six working groups to develop strategies and action plans, for implementation in a three-to-five-year timeframe, to advance each of the six major goals we have defined. Rather than asking each unit to develop plans under each goal and then accumulating them in the vice-

presidential areas for further discussion and winnowing, the Planning Group seeks maximum input in developing a smaller number of well-focused action plans for the whole campus. Rather than taking all year, the six groups will work intensively in October and November, with a deadline of December 1 for reporting their results to the campus-wide group. In the next week, you will receive a letter from me explaining this final stage of planning process further and inviting you to indicate which goal you would be most interested in working on. Here is an opportunity to participate directly in making the plans that take Geneseo to a new level. On behalf of the Strategic Planning Group, I encourage you to let your voice and your ideas be heard.

### **Diversity and Community:**

Another key value we embrace at Geneseo is diversity, diversity on a variety of spectrums. As a College community, we believe diversity is an essential element in achieving the excellence we seek in the learning experience of every Geneseo student. That is why we seek to recruit and foster a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff, as the second planning goal states. On this score, I am very pleased to report significant progress in implementing the recommendations of our Commission on Diversity and Community, and to tell you about some initiatives for the coming year. Unlike many such reports, the first-year report of the Commission did not sit on a shelf. We haven't just talked about diversity; we have acted. Because of the efforts of admissions and our access opportunity programs and strong support from many other members of the campus community, the proportion of students from underrepresented groups (ALANA) in the freshman class has risen from 9.4 to 14.8 percent. Though far too modest, the numbers of ALANA faculty and staff reached an all-time high last year, and we are very pleased with the high quality and the diverse backgrounds our new colleagues bring this year. Today we welcome our first full-time coordinator of disability services, for whom the Provost has provided full-time secretarial support. Our international student recruitment efforts have borne fruit in an exciting way. In addition to our exchange students, there are now 26 international students registered, from countries as diverse as Taiwan, Malaysia, Venezuela, Russia, and Switzerland. 22 of them are new this fall. We expect international student enrollment to increase by 20 or 30 per year for the next four years. Geneseo was one of only twenty colleges nationwide selected for participation in the AAC&U workshop on institutional diversity at Brown University. Our campus team (Dean Greenfield and Professors Cleeton, Lima, and McCoy) represented us enthusiastically and returned in July with many ideas for infusing diversity into our curriculum and enhancing diversity on campus. These are but a few of the tangible results of a campus-wide initiative on diversity. In the coming year, the work of the Commission will focus on building community, fostering grass-roots involvement in diversity efforts, generating ideas for a center for community, sharing the insights of the Brown/AAC&U team, and drafting a statement on community. You will hear more from them and me as the term progresses. This is a major way in which we move Geneseo to a new level, not only by linking curricular and co-curricular activities but also by fostering the diverse and welcoming community that is one hallmark of an outstanding liberal arts college. If we believe in diversity, we cannot expect someone else to build a

richly diverse community. We cannot expect "them," whoever they are to do it; we all must be involved if we are to succeed.

### **Strategic Community Partnerships:**

The final major initiative I would like to share with you is our program for building Strategic Community Partnerships. Last year, Geneseo joined Franklin and Marshall College, Washington and Jefferson College, and Michigan State University as participants in a Knight Collaborative Engagement—a national consultation on college/community partnerships. Our team for the consultation included Vice President Art Hatton, Sarah Frisch, faculty members Mary Ellen Zuckerman and Dennis Showers, and me. Each of the four institutions involved brought interesting problems and ideas to the table in our intensive team discussions. Geneseo's focus was partnerships with Rochester and the Rochester metropolitan region. Initially we had hoped to heighten our profile in Rochester and explore new community partnerships, but as we talked with the other teams and with national leaders in community service and development, our concept of strategic community partnerships became more sophisticated, and our project ideas moved much closer to the heart of our liberal arts mission. We see community partnerships as strategic, in the sense of advancing Geneseo's goals to cultivate relationships with the wider community and expand support for the College, but we also see them as essential to the teaching and learning process on this campus. As a community of teachers, scholars, and students we all must become more engaged with the world beyond our campus, not only because a liberal education in the twenty-first century involves understanding the problems of urban and rural areas but also because we need to model civic engagement in its various forms if we are to develop the "socially responsible citizens with [the] skills and values" that will enrich their lives and the communities in which they will live (as our Mission Statement says). Strategic partnerships in this extended sense are integral to the liberal education we seek to foster; they are strategies for excellence. To be engaged, to look outward as well as inward as a college community, to link our students' classroom learning to service in the world, all these are strategies—and attitudes—we must adopt to reach that next level as a public liberal arts college.

The Strategic Community Partnerships team is pursuing a number of ideas for strengthening existing links and building new partnerships with schools, corporations, and community organizations in Rochester and throughout the region. I want to thank the many faculty and staff who shared their examples of involvement in the Rochester community in response to my memo about the Knight Project last spring. We plan a more formal inventory in September to give others a chance to respond. As you respond, I urge you to think not just in traditional terms of community partnerships but in the liberal arts terms I have suggested. Also this fall, Geneseo will play a leadership role in establishing a statewide chapter of the nation service-learning organization Campus Compact. Vice President Bonfiglio is coordinating this effort, which is very much a part of our strategic community partnership initiatives—and another strategy for excellence in our development as a truly outstanding public liberal arts college.

As we seek to reach out to Rochester through strategic partnerships of all kinds, we will not neglect our immediate community. As you may have heard, the Geneseo Foundation has purchased a historic home on Main Street to be renovated for use as an art gallery and offices for alumni relations. Again, this project advances our mission in multiple, interconnected ways. It serves the needs of the regional art community, it allows us to strengthen our partnerships with such organizations as the Genesee Valley Council on the Arts, it preserves the historic fabric of the Village, it will attract donations and gifts in kind to build our endowment and enrich our permanent collection, and it will provide vitally needed teaching and exhibition space for our art program. From a purely educational perspective, the gallery will provide opportunities for our students to link their formal study of art history with curatorial and museum work, and it may also provide exhibition space for other collections. This is a splendid example of the benefits of thinking strategically about community partnerships and relating our thinking, not to narrow development or community relations goals, but to the central goals of a public liberal arts college. This too is part of a strategy of excellence.

As you can see, the State University College at Geneseo faces a challenging environment in 2000-when have we not faced such an environment in public higher education in the Empire State?-but we also have real opportunities to build and foster true excellence and move to another level as we seek to become the truly outstanding public liberal arts college we are capable of being. Five years ago, I used a phrase we often repeat: Geneseo is a special place. For me that has always meant that we are a public liberal arts college of distinction, but even more it means that we are a wonderful academic community. I still believe that, and for me it is a privilege to be associated with our students and all of you as colleagues in my work as President and Professor of English. Geneseo is indeed a special place. If we think strategically, if we continue to build and perfect a diverse and inclusive community, and if we look outward to the world beyond us as well as inward to the reflective academic community that nurtures our learning and anchors our intellectual lives, Geneseo will thrive in the coming year and well into the new century.