

Restless on Our Laurels

Opening Convocation Address by President Christopher C. Dahl

The State University of New York at Geneseo

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I am delighted to welcome everyone back to a new college year at Geneseo—and particularly to welcome those of you who are new to our academic community. It has been a great pleasure for me to meet so many of our new colleagues at the new faculty and staff meeting yesterday and at the Provost's house on Tuesday. And for those of you who have not yet met them, I can assure you they are a talented and dynamic set of individuals. For the second year in a row we have extended and enhanced our welcoming and orientation activities for new faculty and staff as well as students. Ruth and I again hosted a reception for about 600 family members of new students earlier today, and I hope as many of you as possible can join us for the picnic-reception for all faculty and staff to greet each other and to welcome the new students. Community is an important value at Geneseo, and we shall continue to seek to foster it in the coming year.

I

I begin my remarks today with a confession and a warning. My title is “Restless on our Laurels.” I confess that I have shamelessly plagiarized it from Dean of the College Tom Greenfield. It is the title he has given to the final section of the last chapter of our Middle States Self-Study document. And that, in turn, leads to my warning. This

talk is backwards; it begins with an ending. Rather than reviewing the previous year as I often do and then proceeding to the challenges or special issues that may concern us in the current academic year, I want to start at the end of a long process and a long document, Geneseo's Middle States Self-Study. As most of you know, in late October a nine-person team from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools will visit campus to examine all aspects of the College's operations and make recommendations on our reaccreditation. The Self-Study, which comprehensively addresses all of Middle State's standards for accreditation, will go out to the team members in the next few days and will be posted on the web as soon as it goes out. Its thirteen chapters, multiple appendices and full volume of supplemental material represent, if you will, the lab reports and self-analysis for a comprehensive examination the College's health.

As Tom and the committee co-chair, Professor David Geiger from Chemistry, have been preparing the final draft in the past several weeks, I have had occasion to read through the whole document with some care. Once again, I must make a confession. Accreditation documents are not my favorite reading. Although I have chaired several visiting teams, I have always felt I was doing a somewhat burdensome duty. I was therefore surprised at how interesting and illuminating our document is. Dave and Tom and the chairs of the eleven subcommittees who drafted the various chapters have done an outstanding job of seeing the College steadily and seeing it whole—assessing strengths, identifying areas for improvement, comparing our performance with that of peer institutions, and recommending possible courses of action. The final product is a great credit to the almost one hundred members of the College community who served on the steering committee or its subcommittees, and to all the other people who attended the

public hearings on the chapter drafts. We can all take pride in the process and people involved as well as the product that resulted.

Attempting to sum up the findings of the self-study, the brief final chapter on “institutional renewal” lays out some broad conclusions about Geneseo. The self-study confirms many of our strengths, such as our continuing appeal to academically talented students; high student satisfaction ratings for most academic and co-curricular programs; widespread integration of undergraduate research into the College’s educational program; the importance of general education in the intellectual life of the College; our students’ increasing interest in study abroad, directed research, and service and leadership opportunities in the community; and progress in integrating technology into the curriculum. At the same time, the self-study acknowledges areas we need to address. Some are obvious. Despite progress in the past ten years, for example, the report observes that “the College perceives itself as sorely lacking in diversity of community, campus culture, and intellectual life.” Academic Affairs and Student and Campus Life, moreover, “must find new ways of working together to achieve a [closer] integration of the curricular and co-curricular program.” As we explore the public service role of the College, we shall need to change “policies and practices pertaining to faculty/staff roles and rewards as well as educational program principles and goals.” And finally Geneseo must meet the dual challenges of explaining why an avowedly public institution must seek private resources and garnering the resources, public and private, required to provide the distinctive learning experiences we seek for our students and to lower the student-faculty ratio. These are the “bottom-line” conclusions for Geneseo’s future from the self-study.

The section from which I have stolen my title today begins by listing many of the things we have achieved in the past ten years as we have committed ourselves to excellence a public liberal arts college:

- our status as the most selective public undergraduate institution in New York,
- national recognition for programs in residence life,
- a shift from a faculty model of the teacher who does research to that of scholar/teacher,
- doubling of participation in directed studies and study abroad, and
- top ratings in no fewer than eight major categories for student or alumni satisfaction among all SUNY University Colleges.

All these successes have not caused us to rest on our laurels, the report suggests. Rather, if all goes well, they will prepare the way for the next phase of the College's planning process: the publication of the strategic objectives this fall. Here is the way the report puts it—in a sort of inspired vision of Geneseo ten years hence:

The publication of these objectives formally commences the College's work for the decade, which is to fulfill its vision as one of the nation's leading public liberal arts colleges even as it defines the characteristics of such colleges. In 2011 the country's finest public liberal arts colleges will boast campus cultures characterized by greater diversity than many now possess, including Geneseo. Technology applications in teaching, research, and learning will have long since outgrown their novelty status. Classical liberal learning will have embraced tenets of civic engagement and service learning in ways that re-cast the persistently vexing question of what students need to know to prosper as individuals, citizens, and leaders. The best public liberal arts colleges, including Geneseo, will also be considerably wealthier than they are now.

This is a stirring vision of our potential as a truly outstanding public liberal arts college—an inspiring and optimistic, but ultimately realistic, view of what Geneseo might become in ten years. The strategic objectives discussed and identified by the six subcommittees convened by the Strategic Planning Group last spring, then organized and

assigned priorities by the SPG as a whole, are indeed intended to move us down the path towards this vision over the next three to five years. I have reviewed the strategic objectives, and all that remains to be done before their publication is some minor revision and the assignment of responsibilities and timelines for each objective. The SPG will formally present the objectives to the College community in a series of public forums early in the semester.

As with the Middle States self-study, so, too with College-wide planning: we can take pride in the process as well as the product. More than 75 people from all segments of the College community served on the subcommittees that defined objectives for each of the six general planning goals. Now that those objectives are in place, the Strategic Planning Group will be able to give explicit guidance to the College Budget Advisory Committee, and we can say with some assurance that our mission will determine our budget in the coming decade. At Geneseo, annual budget decisions will be explicitly designed to realize our vision as an outstanding public liberal arts college. On behalf of the College community I express my thanks for all the work of the SPG and its subcommittees. They have put in place a strong framework for our work this fall and in coming years.

II

The vision of Geneseo as a premier public liberal arts college that has shaped our aspirations and our actions as we have defined the College's mission and now seek to carry it out even more purposefully through our planning process is worth dwelling on, for I believe that public liberal arts colleges can and will play a vital role in the changing

spectrum of American higher education, not just in the state but nationally as well. All the signs are there—not only that Geneseo is in a position to define the characteristics of such colleges, but also that we are already beginning to do so in important ways. Within the State University of New York as well as nationally, we have remained true to our liberal arts mission. This in itself is a distinction. In our curriculum and degree programs, we have held fast to classical liberal learning rather than questing after new or trendy vocational programs, and we have asked professional programs such as business to think carefully about their unique role as part of a public liberal arts college as they seek academic excellence. We also believe in the liberal—and liberating—concept of the education of the whole human being for civic participation and success in life rather than mere preparation for a particular career. To this end, we seek to draw ever closer connections between students’ lives outside the classroom and their more traditional academic work. We also seek to foster learning that is engaged and socially relevant, that involves students in action-based research, and that connects the scholarship of our faculty with the communities—urban, suburban, and rural—around us. In this way we explore and define the public nature of an outstanding public liberal arts college. Similarly, as we seek to exploit the educational potential of the primarily residential character of the College, we are trying to build a more inclusive and diverse community—to model in our residential settings and interactions as a campus community the respect for diverse backgrounds and viewpoints that makes for a truly rich educational experience. In all of this, as our College Values Statement puts it, we seek to achieve excellence in higher education “through a spirit of cooperation and collaboration among all members of the community.”

How successful are we in achieving our goals of excellence as a public liberal arts college? How successful are we in involving Geneseo in the national conversation? Rigorous answers, especially to the first question, will come only through careful assessment of the lasting effects of a Geneseo education on the lives of our students. Nevertheless, I think we are beginning to see signs of Geneseo's success in contributing to a national dialogue on the liberal arts in public settings and in achieving recognition for our contributions. Telling indicators of our success—some quite definite, some less tangible—are emerging each year as we seek every better to carry out Geneseo's mission.

At the heart of that mission is excellence in teaching, for example, and it is gratifying to note that student and alumni surveys give the College high ratings in such areas as quality of academic program and student intellectual growth. But I also believe the national recognition accorded the teaching of our faculty is a telling indicator. As you know, Steve Padalino (Physics) was named the 2000 CASE Professor of the Year for New York, but he is the second Geneseo professor to be so designated in the past decade, following in the footsteps of Bill Cook (History), who won the award in 1992. Margaret Matlin has won national awards for teaching from the American Psychological Association twice, and Gary Towsley won the Tepper Haimo Award of the American Mathematical Association in 1999 as one of the three top math professors in the nation. I single these four individuals out, not as the only stars among our faculty, but as representative in national terms of the quality of teaching at Geneseo.

In student-faculty research, another key indicator of excellence for a public liberal arts college, Geneseo is compiling an enviable record. As confirmed by the Middle States self-study, numbers of directed studies and undergraduate student research grants

have increased dramatically in the past ten years. This year, Katie Weiss, a senior biochemistry major, became the eighth Geneseo student to receive a prestigious Goldwater Scholarship in the sciences. Geneseo students have received Goldwaters in seven of the twelve years since the inception of the program—a record matched or exceeded by only one other undergraduate college in the state (Vassar). Doug Harke informs me that our success in undergraduate research is now being mentioned by external evaluators for NSF and NIH grants. Finally, last spring, Geneseo was asked by the Research Corporation and other foundations to participate in a major study on the role of research in the natural sciences at undergraduate institutions, a follow-up to the so-called Oberlin 50 study in the 1980s. Geneseo was one of only 32 public colleges out of a group of 136 institutions nationwide that included the top private liberal arts colleges in the country. The results of this study reveal a strong record in producing Ph.D.'s in the sciences and significant success in grant funding for Geneseo faculty. The data from the Research Corporation study is conclusive; some of the other facts are more impressionistic, but all of the data suggests that Geneseo is developing a national reputation for quality in undergraduate research in the sciences.

Institutions, like people, are known by the company they keep, and Geneseo's external involvement with other colleges also has helped establish us as a national voice in defining the vital role of the public liberal arts college. Since we were admitted in 1994, Geneseo has played a leadership role in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Our participation, with Franklin & Marshall and Washington & Jefferson Colleges and Michigan State University, in the Knight Collaborative Engagement on Strategic Community Partnerships has brought national attention to our efforts as a public

liberal arts college to build community partnerships in the Rochester region and to foster civic engagement. For the past two years, Geneseo faculty-administration teams have been selected from many applicants nationwide to participate in AAC&U colloquies on diversity and sustainable institutional change. Participation of this sort enriches our development as a public liberal arts college (and I shall have more to say about our AAC&U project later), but it also puts us at the center of national discussions as a public liberal arts college. In October, I shall represent us as one of four college presidents directing a national “summit” on undergraduate liberal education in connection with the meetings of the National Collegiate Honors Council, a day-long symposium that will draw representatives from major foundations and most of the national higher education associations. Our faculty and administrators who participate in these national forums and organizations help the Geneseo to enhance its national role as a public liberal arts college.

Finally, our role as a public liberal arts college and our reputation for excellence are enhanced by successful efforts to secure national accreditation for our programs. I am pleased to inform you that our program in Communicative Disorders and Sciences received very favorable evaluations and a sound ratings on virtually every accreditation standard this summer from the American Speech Language Hearing Association. After several years of hard work by Professor Mary Ellen Zuckerman and her colleagues, the Jones School of Business is prepared for the formal team visit for AACSB accreditation this Spring. And I am especially pleased to tell you that we learned in May that Geneseo is one of only ten or so schools nationwide accepted for final consideration for a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest and most prestigious academic honor society and a leading advocate for and guarantor of quality in liberal arts education. Congratulations go to

Professor Doug Baldwin and the Phi Beta Kappa members from a variety of departments who prepared our application for candidacy.

I commend everyone involved in seeking national recognition—and the validation it implies—through accreditation. We all hope the visits from the various evaluation teams, beginning in October with Middle States and extending through the Spring semester, will go well. If nothing else, they will introduce our campus to a significant group of scholars and administrators from across the country. I believe, however, that all the awards, our external involvement with other institutions, and our progress toward accreditation are strong indicators that Geneseo's programs and people are beginning to garner the national recognition they deserve.

III

In choosing to start at the end rather than the beginning, I have spent more time than usual on our emerging reputation on the national scene and the decade-long perspective that the reaccreditation process necessarily affords. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention a few highlights of the past year before presenting a brief overview of the major issues and important projects we are looking at in the year ahead.

At the very center of our mission and the heart of the College are students—the academically talented and personally engaged students that make Geneseo the wonderful place it is. As we all know, continued recruitment of excellent students from diverse backgrounds is vital to our aspirations. In a very difficult recruiting season, the admissions office has again brought in a very strong class, with average SATs of 1212 and a mean high school average of 92.6, almost half of whom graduated in the top ten

percent of their class. The percentage of ALANA students declined slightly, to 12.2 percent, from last year's high of 14.8 percent (in part because of the loss of our minority recruiter), but we have successfully recruited another fine group of international students. International student enrollment now totals fifty-one, up from six in 1999-2000. I have already mentioned our most recent Goldwater Scholar, Katie Weiss, but I should observe that she also represents the remarkable breadth of talents among our students. She is not only an outstanding researcher but also an active member of the campus community, the winner of a GOLD leadership mentor award. In the past year, too, the Division of Student and Campus Life has continued to work actively to collaborate with faculty and Academic Affairs to integrate the various aspects of student life into a unified experience worthy of the finest liberal arts colleges. The Center for Community also inaugurated "Knight's Work"—a day of service in the spring that involved more than 250 students. Lest anyone think that the intelligence and generosity of our students hamper them on the playing field, let me hasten to add that our athletic teams—under new coaches and seasoned veterans alike—captured five SUNYAC championships, the ECAC men's basketball title, and first place in the Chase basketball tournament, along with four All-American designations. In fact, we came within fourteen one-hundredths of a point of winning the Commissioner's Cup for the best record in our conference, against our perennial and friendly rival, Cortland, whose student body (as I always like to remind people) is well-stocked with some 1400 physical education majors.

The national awards received by our faculty are, as I pointed out, representative, but the individuals we honor today with Chancellor's and President's awards show how consistent and widespread excellent teaching and advising have been in the past year.

Total sponsored research revenues have risen to \$701,000, the highest total in ten years, and we are well on our way to our goal of \$1 million goal per year for sponsored research. In the past year, Geneseo faculty received new grants from NSF, NEH, and NIH (\$840,000 in awards) and published books with such major university presses as Columbia and Virginia.

All of the College's activities are supported by the work of the Division of Finance and Administration. As you can see when you walk around campus, we have made major progress in renovating Genesee Hall, repaving parking lots, and restoring sidewalks throughout campus; and the beautiful new student townhouse complex (to be called Saratoga Terrace) is nearing completion. One hundred of the 200 students planning to live there will be able to move in over this weekend, the rest by mid-October. In my seven years at Geneseo, I have learned never to make predictions about major capital projects, but the integrated sciences building seems still to be on track. The facilities services department has embarked on a major reorganization and redefinition project involving employees at every level of the organization, which should result in better maintenance, better appearance of grounds, and better service to all departments of the College.

Excellence requires resources. In the past year the College has continued its strong record in advancement. For the eighth year in a row, we have raised over \$1 million (\$1.45 million, to be specific), and private support has nearly doubled over the past five years, totaling \$8.5 million since 1996-97. Renovation of the McClellan House/Lockhart Gallery on Main Street, purchased last year by the Foundation, is nearing completion and a formal opening is scheduled for November. The capital campaign for

the gallery has raised approximately \$400,000 of its \$500,000 goal. College Advancement has also published a handsome book on alumni achievement, entitled *Proudly Geneseo*, which has been mailed to all alumni and new students and will be distributed to faculty and staff. Many of the brief biographies in the book highlight the faculty who taught and mentored our most successful alumni. We have set ambitious goals in private fundraising for next year and hope to reach \$2 million in annual gifts.

Geneseo's record of private support is made possible in large measure by the strong participation of the extended College community—faculty, staff, parents, and alumni. About 25 percent of our alumni contributed to the annual fund last year—well above national averages for public colleges—and support from faculty, staff, and emeriti continues to be very impressive. Thirty percent of all faculty and staff—some 250 individuals—made gifts totaling \$80,000 last year; and 43 percent of emeriti—72 individuals—contributed nearly \$63,000. These are gratifying numbers.

I wish I could say that this record of enthusiasm in private giving has been matched by the State of New York in the past year. The so-called bare-bones budget passed earlier this month will provide money to cover contracted salary increases, but not much else; and it is not clear whether Geneseo will receive any new funds beyond the cost of annualized salary increases. If this winter is no more severe than last and if energy prices don't rise further, increased energy costs alone will require \$300,000 more than budgeted at Geneseo (\$25 million, SUNY-wide). Neither the Governor's budget nor the bare-bones budget addresses this problem at all. Funding for the SUNY academic quality initiative (or legislative variants thereof) targeted at faculty lines and salaries is vitally important. Strong advocacy for SUNY is imperative as the two houses of the

legislature consider supplemental appropriation measures to put flesh on the bare-bones budget. There is a real possibility of further funding for SUNY if all of us make our passionate concern clear to each of the three players in the state budget process: the Governor, the Senate, and the Assembly. I encourage you to write and call. Ever since moving to New York in 1994, I have been—to put it mildly—bemused by the State budget process. Nothing I had seen in two other large industrialized states came close to it. I thought I had seen it all in 1999, when the legislature passed a budget on August 4 and we did not receive our campus budget until the end of September. But I was wrong. Who could have imagined this year's bare-bones budget?

IV

Having ventured into the *terra incognita* of the state budget, let me return to the Tom Greenfield phrase with which I began: “restless on our laurels.” I hope that we are indeed restless on our laurels; that is, proud of Geneseo's accomplishments but eager to do better. If I had to prophesy, I would say that we shall certainly be BUSY on our laurels in the coming year. Admittedly, at our end, the Middle States process has pretty much run its course. When the self-study document and supporting materials are mailed to the visiting team next week, our work on campus is done, except for hosting and making ourselves available to the visiting team. Similarly, three years after the new Strategic Planning Group was established, we have refashioned our College planning process and defined over-arching goals and a clear set of objectives that will drive planning and budget for the next three to five years. Both of these projects have reached fruition only because of the involvement of many individuals from every area of the

College. Again, we can be grateful for, and proud of, the service rendered by the Middle States committees, the SPG, and everyone who participated in the planning forums.

Now, however, as we enter a new academic year, there are other bodies at work and other projects to be accomplished. In the 2001-02 academic year, I especially look forward to four major initiatives that are commencing or continuing, and in the time remaining I would like to share with you some of things that will be happening on them. Each initiative is central to Geneseo's development as a truly outstanding public liberal arts college—an educational institution of national distinction. All four initiatives involve areas or major issues that are identified in one way or another in Middle States report as in need of further attention by the College.

Strategic Community Partnerships. Our continuing efforts to create and enhance strategic partnerships in Rochester and the region are plainly related to College Planning Goals 3 and 4, strengthening the integration between curricular and co-curricular programs and cultivating relationships between the College and community, in the name of creating a more engaged campus. This fall the Knight Collaborative team will be reporting to the College community on its work and discussing next steps for fostering community engagement with the department chairs. We received an excellent response to last spring's inventory of community participation, but the inventory itself revealed the need for better coordination of the wide range of community engagement and service-learning opportunities at Geneseo. And, all along, the team's conversations with colleagues at Geneseo and at the other colleges in the engagement have made it abundantly clear that providing logistical support for faculty and staff is essential if they are to be expected to develop successful strategic community partnerships.

As many of you know, Tom Greenfield has asked to step down after eleven years as Dean of the College and return to the faculty at the end of the spring semester. I am pleased to inform you that as he makes this move he has also agreed to serve as Special Assistant to the President for Strategic Community Partnerships. In that role he will be responsible for coordinating campus efforts to build strategic community partnerships as well as assisting in grant-writing and fundraising to support those efforts. Given the inevitable proliferation of faculty roles and responsibilities as we have grown as a high-quality public liberal arts college, I am convinced that we need to provide more support for engaged scholarship that extends the reach of the liberal education we offer. Developing and modeling civic engagement through community-based learning and scholarship (and here our involvement in founding the New York Campus Compact and our Volunteer Center play key roles) are vital ways in which we shall continue to explore, and further define, the public side of our identity as a public liberal arts college in the coming year.

Diversity and Community. One area where we have fewer laurels to rest on—or much more to be restless about—is diversity and community. I want to take this opportunity publicly to thank Professor Robert Owens (Communicative Disorders and Sciences) for his leadership as chair of the Commission on Diversity and Community over the past three years. For a good overview of the Commission’s efforts, I direct you to Bob’s final report, available on the president’s webpage. It offers a fine distillation of the campus’s progress so far, but it also reminds us that much remains to be done. I am pleased that Professor Beth McCoy (English) and Dean of Students Lenny Sancilio have agreed jointly to chair the Commission this year. With them and Bob, I shall be

fashioning a new charge for the year and making additional appointments to the Commission. In the past two years our discussions of diversity and community on campus have been enriched by the insights of Geneseo teams who attended the AAC&U seminars on “boundaries and borderlines” (2000) and sustainable change (2001). This year’s team—Provost Dixon, Vice President Bonfiglio, Senate Chair Jan Lovett, and Professors Becky Glass, Jeff Koch, and Maria Lima—have returned from AAC&U with a challenge to the College community. As they aptly note, Geneseo which otherwise does very well in student and alumni satisfaction with the college experience, ranks twelfth or thirteenth out of the thirteen SUNY university colleges in the “extent to which this campus helped you appreciate ethnic and cultural diversity” and prepared you “to get along with people from various cultures, races, and backgrounds.” In sixteen recommendations, they challenge us all to work through the Senate and shared governance mechanisms to enhance our diversity efforts. I plan to take account of the AAC&U team’s insights in fashioning an action agenda and preparing the charge for the Commission on Diversity and Community. You may expect to hear more about these efforts at the opening meeting of College Senate on September 18.

Faculty Roles and Faculty Evaluation. As Geneseo has developed as a public liberal arts college, as we have sought better to understand and carry out our unique mission, all of us have had to change. Our very success has led to changes in what our students expect, in the way we work, in the multiple roles that faculty play, and in the manner in which we evaluate faculty performance. Further progress in realizing our vision of being a premier public liberal arts college will almost inevitably call for further changes in faculty roles and rewards. That is one reason why I was pleased to accept the

recommendation of the Faculty Affairs Committee of Senate last spring that we create a task force on faculty evaluation and development. As the Faculty Affairs Committee realized, evaluation and faculty development are not isolated issues. They are related to almost everything we seek to do as a public liberal arts college, and they require a comprehensive, unified approach. The Task Force will be called upon to examine best practices in faculty evaluation nationwide and to consider the proper alignment of expectations, professional development, and evaluation in a comprehensive system. In consultation with Provost Dixon, the department chairs, and Senate, I expect to appoint the task force by the end of September.

Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Finally, there is one other important continuing project on which I expect the College will move forward during the coming year. For some time, various groups on campus have been talking about a center for excellence in teaching and learning. At the end of the spring semester, Provost Dixon convened representatives of all the groups for a very productive discussion of how such a center might be developed. Space in Milne Library has been identified and a director for the Center will be appointed this fall. With the guidance of the Faculty Teaching and Professional Development Committee, I am confident that the Center will become a reality. Like the issues of faculty development and evaluation, a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is directly related to almost every project I have mentioned today—diversity, service-learning, technology, building stronger teaching and learning communities, and support for excellence in teaching; in short, everything related to the excellence we seek to achieve as a public liberal arts college. Creation of such a Center

is another way in which we define who we are and share our endeavors with an audience beyond our own campus.

Yes, I do believe we are restless on our laurels at Geneseo. All four of the initiatives I have sketched for you today are related, and all four are important steps to achieving excellence as a public liberal arts college and at the same time defining the true nature of such excellence in the next decade. Even as we wait—restlessly, busily, or nervously—for the visitors from various regional and national organizations who will take the pulse of Geneseo in the coming year, let us continue to be bold in defining the characteristics of excellence for a truly great public liberal arts college and equally bold and creative in finding new and better ways of carrying out our mission. I look forward with pleasure and excitement to working with you all in the year ahead.