

“Some Achieve Greatness. . .”

Fall Convocation Address
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SUNY Geneseo

I take my title today from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene 5. The full sentence from which the quote comes reads: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.” Some of you may know the context in which this appears. The words are part of a forged letter found by Malvolio, the steward of Olivia, intended to trick him into believing that his noble lady—and employer—is madly in love with him, a mere commoner. I now think of these lines in a whole new context, however. Those of you who attended new student orientation this summer will probably know what I mean. At the beginning of each orientation session Associate Dean Celia Easton divided the audience into three groups and made each group recite one of the phrases. It was a splendid ice-breaker, even for those who weren’t recovering English majors. As Celia pointed out, few of us are born great, and even fewer have greatness thrust upon us. Most of us at Geneseo are in the middle category: we must work to achieve greatness. This dictum applies, I believe, to the College as well.

My topic today is how we might *achieve* greatness as a public liberal arts college—how we can take the good things we have accomplished in the past year and bring them together in realizing our vision of Geneseo as the premier public liberal arts college in the country. Before I consider that with you today, let me point out that the work of Celia and her colleagues in the Center for Community is definitely something that helps us achieve greatness as a college. Beginnings are vitally important for our students, and how well we induct them into the intellectual and social community that constitutes a liberal arts college like Geneseo is an indicator of our success as an institution. Celia’s appointment to the deanship from the ranks of the faculty reflects one of the College’s major goals—the integration of curricular and co-curricular life on campus—and I commend Vice President Bonfiglio for creating the rotating dean’s position that she holds. I’ve just been to Swarthmore College, where our son George is a first-year student, and I return to Geneseo with new appreciation for what we do in orientation. Indeed, each year our orientation programs seem to get better, and I am delighted that this year we are building intellectual community in a new way, through discussion groups on a common text. Eighty-two faculty and staff have volunteered to lead discussions. I am looking forward to leading one myself and talking about this year’s text, Deborah Larsen’s *The White*, with new students at dinner on Sunday.

Let me also take this opportunity to offer some congratulations and a welcome to the new members of our community here today. Special congratulations go to our two new Distinguished Teaching Professors, Bob Owens and Bob O’Donnell. They have achieved the highest rank that the State University offers because they are truly outstanding teachers. The excellence we recognize today, in teaching, advising,

professional service, and research and creative activities, helps us achieve greatness as a college. I am also pleased to welcome the new faculty and staff who have joined us in our quest for excellence as a public liberal arts college. We are happy you are here and look forward to working with you. I enjoyed meeting the new faculty and staff yesterday. Here on stage and assisting me in presenting the awards, of course, is a very important newcomer, Provost Kate Conway-Turner, who began her work on campus on July 21. Already she has made many friends and impressed us with her talent and commitment to Geneseo. She is here because she believes in our special mission and our potential as a nationally ranked public undergraduate college. In the next few weeks, I am hosting a series of receptions at my house so that all faculty and staff may get a chance to meet her personally. I look forward to seeing you on one of these occasions. Welcome, Kate!

I.

While one probably cannot say that Geneseo was “born great” (certainly in the sense of noble status and inherited wealth implied in Shakespeare’s phrase), one can say that 2003-04 was a year of significant achievement on many fronts. In the past year we accomplished many of the things we need to do to achieve greatness.

Geneseo’s academic reputation and the academic quality that validates that reputation were enhanced. The installation of the College’s new chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in January was a major highlight of the year. For me, however, it was almost more exciting to see just how talented and intellectually accomplished the students were who were inducted as new members of the chapter in the spring. Some of those students will be featured in the annual report of the College, scheduled to appear this Fall. All of them are not only very good students, but liberally educated men and women of intellectual substance who exemplify the educational outcomes we seek to achieve here. Many of them are now beginning impressive graduate programs. (This is hardly surprising, since some 40 percent of their predecessors in the Class of 2003 were admitted directly to graduate or professional programs, a new record.) In the spring, Daniel Welchons, a sophomore biochemistry major, became Geneseo’s eleventh Goldwater Scholar, maintaining our record as the leading undergraduate institution, except for Vassar, in New York in the number of students who have been awarded these prestigious fellowships since the inception of the program. The same mentoring and supervision that helps our students get fellowships and get into graduate school helped us compile a good record in securing grants. Thirty-six faculty members submitted 51 proposals totaling \$8.2 million, another College record. Some \$1.1 million in new grants were awarded; research expenditures for the year came to \$945,000, just short of \$1 million.

In reviewing the year in academic affairs, I would be remiss if I did not mention Dave Gordon’s outstanding work as Interim Provost. 2003-04 may have been a transitional year, but under his leadership (and that of Dean Bailey and associate provosts Padalino and Geiger) we accomplished great things. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning expanded its programs and sponsored a highly successful

conference on “Faculty-Student Partnerships in Teaching and Learning” that drew participants from as far away as Alaska. A new classroom for INTD 105 was created in Milne. With the help of Bob Bonfiglio, Dave directed the activities of the American Democracy Project. The Task Force on Faculty Roles, Rewards, and Evaluation moved forward in the major work of realigning our structure of roles and rewards. Nine excellent new tenure-track faculty were hired (three of them members of Phi Beta Kappa). These and other important achievements will continue to bear fruit for many years to come. Thank you, Dave, for your service to the College.

Similarly, the Office of Admissions had a very successful year in recruiting talented students in what has become a ferociously competitive environment. Our applicant pool was stronger than ever. Average SAT scores for the entering Class of 2008 are the highest in the history of the College: 1262 (25th-75th percentile, 1200-1340). The mean high school average rose to 93.0; fifty percent of the class come from the top ten percent of their high school classes. As we seek to promote the College to prospective students, we have also continued to do well in the various rankings. Once again Geneseo is the number 2 public college in the North in *US News* and number 12 in the general rankings. More important, the narratives about Geneseo in such publications as the Fiske Guide and the Princeton Review describe us accurately and invitingly as a public liberal arts college that takes academics seriously and provides a supportive environment for talented students.

Beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, our students also continued to excel. Our residence hall honorary society was named national chapter of the year. Geneseo First Response, our student-run emergency medical service, was reorganized and now provides highly professional service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Examples of successful student organizations could be multiplied many times. Our student athletes also did very well. Although we did not win the SUNY Commissioner’s Cup this year, we won seven conference championships and four regional championships. Our men’s lacrosse team not only won the SUNY championship but also went on to the NCAA tournament for the first time, and Jim Lyons was named NCAA Division III coach of the year. As an aside, I might also observe that Daniel Welchons, our newest Goldwater Scholar, is also a varsity athlete, in men’s track. That says a lot about our students and who we are as a College.

Outstanding students and faculty deserve excellent facilities, and here, especially, we have made great progress in the past year. We are now well embarked upon the greatest period of construction and renovations on campus since the 1960’s. Immediately following this convocation, we shall dedicate Putnam Hall, the residence structure that will link Allegany and Wyoming Halls, creating an integrated residential community on North Campus. This handsome new building provides amenities that will appeal to students, while at the same time advancing our mission as a liberal arts college. Construction of the new Center for Excellence in Science, the largest capital project in the history of the College, is very much under way and currently on schedule. The first phase should be completed by the end of next year. Over the summer, we have renovated the Red Jacket Dining Hall on Southside, and we have completed most of a renovation

project in the College Union that will provide a new location for the campus store and the G.U.S. convenience store and a new recreational space in what was the Union Station dining area. Mailboxes for students will go in the space on the ground floor formerly occupied by the campus store. These changes should ensure that the Union will once again be a gathering place for the entire student body.

Facilities must reflect our mission and goals, and here again we have made major progress. In the past year we have completed a landscape master plan and a master plan for athletic facilities. These will provide guidance for future development. In the coming year, the College will undertake a space programming study for our non-residential buildings that will provide guidance in determining the proper locations for departments and programs after the completion of the new science building. In the course of two bad years financially, the College has managed its resources well and improved efficiency and service in units like student accounts and telecommunications. Thanks to the work of Bill McDevitt and his crew, our landscaping and grounds look as good as they ever have. All of this is a reflection of careful work in finance and administration. Although we have been sorely constrained in our resources, we have maintained the quality of our programs without suffering great harm. This is in itself an important accomplishment.

In the environment of shrinking state resources for public higher education in which we find ourselves, advancement and fundraising are no longer appendages to our operations but central, vital elements in achieving our mission. Philanthropy at Geneseo enables us to do the special things that set us apart from other public colleges, and I am happy to report that we raised \$2.2 million in private funds, the second year in a row over \$2 million and an increase of nine percent from last year. To reach this total, more than 300 faculty and staff contributed \$121,000. These gifts have a significant impact. As you might expect, they support scholarships for students, but last year they also supported undergraduate research grants for 115 students and travel, research and fellowship grants totaling \$193,000 for faculty. In addition, we established the Robert MacVittie Society for planned giving. We also named two buildings for major donors and supporters of the College—the Irma Hamer Collins Alumni Center and the Myrtle Merritt Athletic Center. Both building dedications were joyful celebrations of philanthropy and recognitions of alumni or emeriti who have made a real difference in the life of the College. Irma and Myrt are exemplars who will inspire others, and I am delighted to recognize Myrt in the audience today.

Geneseo's successful initiatives in raising private funds during 2003-04 take on a certain poignancy, however, as we consider the state budget process in the same period—surely one of the strangest budget seasons in the decade I have been in New York. This year's state budget set a record as the latest in history, and we still do not have an official SUNY budget. The flat operating budget for SUNY as proposed by the governor was passed, as was the governor's five-year capital budget, which will give Geneseo \$36 million for deferred maintenance and renovations. But all the money added by the legislature for capital projects was vetoed, and the appropriation we requested for the second phase of the Science Building project was lost in the process. Curiously, the governor did not veto the \$50 million added by the legislature to the SUNY operating

budget. We are informed, however, that Division of the Budget will hold back two-thirds of the additional funds. Of the \$16.7 million remaining, Geneseo will probably receive \$567,000. This will be useful, but it is not clear whether these funds will be added to our permanent base for future years. When the College budget is complete, I shall report in detail. One thing is abundantly evident: if this College seeks to achieve greatness, it will not come from state funds. Greatness will not be “thrust upon [us]” in the form of money from Albany.

II.

Where does this all leave us as we seek to become a truly outstanding public liberal arts college? How do we pull together all the things I have mentioned, to achieve greatness as a college? Almost every achievement I have listed in the past year does, in fact, serve our goal of greatness, and surely we must continue our successful efforts in recruiting students, building academic quality and academic reputation, in developing student life, enhancing and expanding our facilities, and securing more private support. How well we integrate all these efforts and how firmly we link them to the College’s mission and goals will determine our success. In the year ahead, we need to pay attention to three major areas if we are to realize our vision of excellence as a public liberal arts college. They are: fostering and enhancing diversity, planning for Geneseo as a public honors college, and building philanthropy. In each of these areas we have made significant progress in the past several years, but now is the time to redouble our efforts and seize what I believe are good opportunities for success. You will be hearing a lot about these initiatives in the coming year. (I was tempted to engage in alliteration and call the three initiatives “pluralism, planning, and philanthropy,” the three P’s; but I shall spare you.) In the time remaining, let me simply lay out the three areas and the issues involved as a foretaste of the work we shall be doing in the months ahead—efforts that will surely help us achieve greatness.

First, diversity. This campus cares about diversity and has for some time. If we are to achieve our goals as a first-rate, nationally recognized public liberal arts college, it is essential that we create the kind of diverse and inclusive educational community that is the hallmark of excellence in undergraduate education. I am proud of the work of the Commission on Diversity and Community over the past six years in pointing out ways to realize our second major goal, to “recruit, support, and foster the development of a diverse community of outstanding students, faculty, and staff.” Our Statement on Diversity and Community, endorsed by the College Senate and the Student Association last year, provides the general philosophical rationale for our work in diversity, and it firmly situates that work in the context of our liberal arts mission. We know that we must strive to achieve both structural diversity (representation of people from a wide variety of backgrounds) and diversity in a more general sense. I am pleased to report that we are making progress on both fronts. In the past year, we have enhanced our efforts to recruit and retain a diverse faculty, staff, and student body. Under the leadership of Assistant Vice President Edna Chun, we have hired Charles Batey as affirmative action director and appointed an affirmative action advisory committee representing all segments of the college community. We now have in place a detailed, comprehensive affirmative action

plan meeting the standards of federal statutes. We also have a new on-line applicant tracking system that will not only facilitate the search approval and hiring process in all units of the College but also allow us to measure our progress in recruiting a diverse employee base. These efforts have already borne fruit in successful hires and a new awareness on the part of departments and other units that effective recruitment of a diverse pool is important to achieving excellence. Because we have a clear plan and a better way to assess our progress, we are now in a much better position to realize our goals as a College.

In the area of student recruitment, we have intensified our efforts in admissions and the Access Opportunity Programs, and I am pleased to report progress there as well. One hundred fifty-one members of the entering class are members of under-represented minority groups (ALANA students); that's 16.6 percent of enrollees who reported their ethnic code and 14.6 percent of all freshmen. One hundred eighty-three out of all new students, including transfers, (or 14.4 percent of those who reported and 12.4 percent of all new students) are ALANA students. This is an increase from 10.7 percent last year and the highest percentage recorded in the past decade.

Clearly we are making progress on structural diversity, but diversity involves much more than numbers. It includes the campus atmosphere experienced by students and employees of all backgrounds. It involves all aspects of building the kind of just and inclusive community where we can talk about differences and disagree without being torn apart. This is something that the Commission and I have been interested in for some time. I like to call it "continuing the conversation." Building this more general educational and cultural diversity is, if anything, more difficult than creating structural diversity. In the past year, members of the Commission have sought to assess campus atmosphere for diverse groups, and they have explored a promising way to "continue the conversation"—a process called "deliberative dialogue." Deliberative dialogue frames an issue to provide three or four choices or viewpoints that a trained facilitator provides to a group in the course of a two-hour session. The goal of deliberative dialogue is to find common ground on which people who hold different viewpoints can agree with others in the group. This is not compromise, but a way of enabling people to hold conflicting viewpoints within a single community. A ten-person team, led by Joe Van Remmen of the University Police, assisted by Becky Glass from the Teaching and Learning Center, traveled to Montgomery College in Maryland to learn more about this program in June. At their suggestion Provost Conway-Turner and I have invited several dozen members of the college community to engage in a deliberative dialogue on the topic "Engaging Diversity in the Classroom, What Should Educators Do?" on September 7. This is a promising approach to discussing some of the issues we face and something I have long been interested in doing since the events of September 11 and after the episode of the swastikas this past January. Great liberal arts colleges are ultimately communities of discourse with rich and multiple conversations and we need to build such a community at Geneseo. If you're interested in being invited, contact Laura Wrubel in my office.

Planning is the next major area with which we shall be concerned in the coming year. As you all know, Geneseo has long sought support for its special role in the SUNY

system as a public liberal arts college of the highest quality—a public honors college for New York State and the nation that will be fully competitive with many of the best private liberal arts colleges in the region. As we have become more selective and more focused on our liberal arts mission, we have come closer to becoming such an institution. We know how to get there, but we need further resources and support in order to get there. As I mentioned in my convocation speech last fall, following some general discussions of the issues over the years, I believed the time had come to present Geneseo's case for creating such a college in SUNY in a detailed and specific way to Chancellor King. I have done just that in the past year. Our discussions of an honors college proposal involving designation and targeted support for Geneseo were fruitful and are continuing.

At the same time, during the interim year in academic affairs, I reconstituted and convened the Strategic Planning Group to review the College's strategic plan and to assess the College's progress toward the goals and objectives we laid out in 2001-02. The SPG worked long and hard during the Spring Semester, revising some of the original objectives, drafting a seventh over-arching goal (relating to facilities), and determining which parts of the strategic plan had been completed, which needed to be modified, and which had been superseded in some way. After some final housekeeping work, the Strategic Planning Group is prepared to report fully on their work and to involve the entire college community in discussion of the new goal, our progress on the previous goals, and our future objectives. Stay tuned, both for a written report and for public forums and discussions this fall.

Even as we discuss the concept of an honors college and refresh and refurbish the College's planning process, the system Provost's Office is beginning a second round of mission reviews for all campuses. Working with former Dean Greenfield, Provost Conway-Turner and Associate Provost Gordon will be preparing materials for a new Memorandum of Understanding with the system administration. Our goal in this process, as in the planning process, will be to solidify support for Geneseo as a public liberal arts college of distinction and a center of excellence for the State University.

As the semester unfolds, you will hear more about all of these planning issues. As always, the question of resources is central. In order to achieve our goals—to achieve greatness as a public liberal arts college, if you will—we need to lower the student faculty ratio by adding new faculty and we need to provide further support for the highly intensive programs that ensure truly outstanding liberal learning for our students. As always, resource and budget issues in SUNY are murky. But if we are to move forward in a convincing fashion, the College will need a combination of additional base-budget support from the state, some sort of flexibility on tuition, and increased private funding. As we plan and discuss the possibilities in the coming year, these issues will remain in the foreground as we seek to realize our vision of Geneseo as the premier public liberal arts college in the nation. As always, the college community will be fully informed and fully involved as we seek to move forward.

All this talk of resources brings me to my final major area for the coming year, philanthropy. Even if we were not currently pressing our case for further resources from the system to support our role as New York's public honors college, the impact of private support from alumni and friends on the College—and the need for even greater private support—is clear. As I often say, no institution of higher education, public or private, ever became great without philanthropy. It provides the funding that supports so many of the programs that make this College unique—and that help us to achieve greatness.

One of our major strategic goals, as you know, is to expand our efforts to increase philanthropy over the next few years. We have built a strong base of support through annual giving—now running at \$2 million a year, as I mentioned—and we are experiencing increased success in attracting major gifts from alumni who value the education they have received and want to “give back” to Geneseo. But if we really want to achieve our goals, we must take fundraising to a new level at Geneseo. Planning for a new major capital campaign is well under way, and discussions with the College Foundation's Board of Directors and other key benefactors are now being held to assess our readiness for such a campaign, which will be only the second such campaign in the College's history. Last spring I appointed a new President's Advisory Council on Philanthropy. This group of faculty and staff will assist us in creating an even stronger culture for fundraising in the wider college community and a keener appreciation for the vital importance of philanthropy for the College. And they will also advise on the campaign.

We have moved from a culture at Geneseo in which the state supplied all our needs to a brave new world in which we are much more like a private college, and we have been gradually changing the culture and attitudes among alumni and friends of Geneseo. I spend a lot of time talking about this as I visit alumni all over the country. Taking Geneseo to the next level in terms of private support (as we must to achieve our goals) will require an additional investment of staff and resources in order to succeed in getting there. This is a key issue to be resolved in our planning process for a major capital campaign. It is evident to me that further investments in building philanthropy are not only necessary but well worth making. As we plan for a major campaign and as we put together the College budget for the coming year, I am convinced that a relatively modest investment of College resources will pay large dividends as we continue to seek greatness.

Welcome again to an exciting and important year in the life of the College. As a small, modestly funded (at best) public college in Western New York, Geneseo certainly was not born great. Nor can we expect to have greatness thrust upon us. But I am optimistic, in spite of the realities in New York public higher education of which we are all too keenly aware, that working together we can achieve the greatness we seek. Thank you and please join me in celebrating another harbinger of our bright future, the opening of Putnam Hall immediately following this convocation.