

Advancing Geneseo's Mission

Fall Convocation Address

Christopher C. Dahl
SUNY Geneseo
26 August 2005

As always it is a pleasure to welcome you back to another academic year at Geneseo. On behalf all of us who have been here awhile, I extend a special welcome to new faculty and staff. We are pleased that you have joined us, and look forward to your involvement in all aspects of this academic community. Since the beginning of this year, several senior administrators have joined us, and I would like to introduce them at this time. In April, Mr. Ed Johnson was hired as the new Associate Vice President for Finance and Administration and College Comptroller, succeeding Gary Root. He comes to us from the University at Buffalo, where he served as Chief Financial Officer for their Division I athletic program. Ed, who holds an M.B.A. from St. Bonaventure University and a Bachelor's degree from Niagara, has a background in public accounting and spent ten years as Controller at Medaille College before moving to UB in 1994. In July, we welcomed our new Dean of Education, Professor Osman Alawiye, who comes to us from Central Washington University, where he was Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Supervision. He holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in biology and a Ph.D., from New Mexico State, in curriculum and instruction. His varied background includes work as a high school science teacher and department chair in New Mexico, as well as experience as a social worker and psychiatric aide. While at Central Washington, he also earned a J.D. from Seattle University. Would all the new faculty and staff please stand? We are delighted to have you in our midst.

There are two other people I would like to mention—one who isn't here and one who isn't new.

Geneseo is honored to have its first American Council on Education Fellow. The ACE Fellows Program is a highly competitive internship program for individuals considering careers in higher education administration at senior levels. There are ten applications for every place in the program, and then each Fellow gets to choose among three institutions for his or her placement. Charles Wilson, our ACE Fellow, is an accomplished young scholar and a delightful person. The author of three books and numerous scholarly articles on American and African-American literature, he is Professor of English and former Department Chair and Associate Dean at Old Dominion University. He is not present here today because he is attending the required national seminar for ACE Fellows. I look forward to introducing him personally to the college community in the next few weeks.

Finally, I am delighted to re-introduce Dick Rosati, who was appointed Interim Vice President for College Advancement, effective July 1. Having already retired twice, once from the Diocese of Rochester and once from Geneseo, Dick believes the third time is the charm. I managed to persuade him to return again to his alma mater to serve as Vice President for Advancement as we continue the search for a successor to Art Hatton, who retired on June 30. As many of you know, Dick is an alumnus of the Class of 1971. He was Associate Vice President for Advancement and, then upon his return to Geneseo, Director of Planned Giving. He loves this College, deeply—yesterday, at the new faculty/staff orientation he almost broke down talking about Geneseo. He is doing a splendid job among us again, leading Advancement in a participatory strategic planning process, generating new ideas,

and providing enthusiastic leadership for the Advancement team. Advancement will be stronger when Dick turns the reins over to a new Vice President. I am pleased to welcome him back.

I

It is no accident that I saved Dick Rosati for last. My title today is “Advancing Geneseo’s Mission,” and I shall be talking about college advancement in several different senses. I begin with a story.

In 1997, during his second stint at Geneseo, Dick sent a batch of planned giving newsletters to selected alumni. Shortly thereafter, he received a phone call from Mr. Mark Scheiber, a 1970 alumnus of the Library School, asking how he might put Geneseo in his will. Dick gave him the proper phrasing for a bequest and asked if he wanted more information. Mr. Scheiber said he intended to name the College in his will, but couldn’t promise that he would keep us there. In addition, “he specifically asked that we not send him any more brochures,” as Dick told the reporter from *Newsday* who interviewed him about the story. I quote from her article: “Rosati honored the request, and Scheiber returned the favor, donating his life savings of nearly \$900,000 to the school. It is the largest alumni gift ever made to the college.”

Scheiber, who died in 2003 at the age of 75, was an alumnus of Swarthmore College, but he left his entire estate to Geneseo. He had had little contact with Geneseo over the years, however, and we knew little about him. When Mary McCrank in Communications prepared an article on his bequest, she uncovered a fascinating life. I am indebted to Mary’s excellent investigative reporting for much of the following account. After Geneseo, Scheiber returned to New York City, living quietly in Astoria, Queens, near the branch of the New York Public Library where he worked at the time of his retirement. Two days after he was born, his mother had died of complications from childbirth. For the first twelve years of his life, he was raised by his father’s sister, Ann Scheiber, a federal tax auditor who went on to become a millionaire and left her entire fortune of \$22 million to The Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University. After his father re-married, Scheiber lived with him and his new wife in Westchester County. They were very close (when his stepmother died, for example, it was found that Mark Scheiber had written her every day at the health-care facility in Peekskill where she spent the last years of her life). After graduation from Swarthmore, like many young men of comfortable means, Scheiber spent the next phase of his life in travel. His *Wanderjahre* included travels in Europe, going to Taos, New Mexico, to learn Navaho culture, and living an artist’s life in Greenwich Village, writing and painting. He was 41 when he came to Geneseo. As we can see now, his time at Geneseo was a turning point in his life and made a lasting impression.

What can we learn from Mark Scheiber’s story? For one thing, don’t bug potential donors! Dick was smart enough not to send him any more brochures. Obviously, too, traditions of giving and models of philanthropy in a person’s family make a difference. If Scheiber’s aunt Ann had not left her estate to Stern College, would he have done what he did for Geneseo? More important, this story reminds us of the enduring power of a good educational experience. We can never fully gauge the long-term effect of what we do as teachers and mentors to shape the lives of our graduates, especially at a public liberal arts college like Geneseo. When we talk, as Provost Conway-Turner did to the new faculty and staff yesterday, about the transforming power of education, we are really on to something.

Why Geneseo and not Swarthmore, his undergraduate alma mater? The *Newsday* reporter asked that question of a classmate who had played in the Swarthmore orchestra with Scheiber. “I wouldn’t say he was snubbing Swarthmore,” the friend said. “He just had warm feelings toward Geneseo.” The more I think about phi-

lanthropy and college advancement at Geneseo as the years go by, the more convinced I am that philanthropy is related to our search for meaning in life. Education gives meaning to our lives; it determines in large measure who we are and what we become; and so, too, can philanthropy. Giving back is a way of giving meaning to one's life. Betti Haft, a friend of Mark Scheiber and cousin by marriage, talked about this with Mary McCrank. "He was close to no one in particular. But the thing that meant most to him was the time he had spent at your college," she said. "He spent thirty years working in the library system of New York, leading a very modest life, and all [the] material means he had in his life he wanted to give to your college. This was his way of saying thank you for the life he had amongst the books in the library. This was everything he had. . . . Books were his world. That was very [much] alive in him." Mark Scheiber gave to Geneseo, not because he was aware of our needs as a struggling public institution, but because his gift gave meaning to the essential career decision of his lifetime and thereby he celebrated and preserved the life he had in books.

Scheiber's life story is a bit sad, but it is also inspiring. It suggests how closely related advancement is to the educational—and transformational—mission of this College. In this context, the search for a new Vice President for College Advancement is important, not merely because we can always use new resources, but also because advancement is an integral part of what we do here. As many of you know, advancement is more than fund raising. The activities of an integrated advancement division such as Geneseo's include development and fund raising, to be sure, but they also include building and strengthening relations with alumni, parents, and the wider community; and they include internal and external communications, press relations, and all we do to tell the College's story and enhance our reputation in regional and national terms. Finding the right leadership for these multiple activities is vital to the future success of SUNY Geneseo, and the vice-presidential search committee has been working quietly over the summer in identifying further candidates for on-campus interviews. You may expect to meet several of them in the next month.

II

Dick Rosati's work with his colleagues in advancement, doing strategic planning and working together to fine-tune all aspects of that operation, will also be vital in attracting the best candidates. But if you think of advancement in the broadest terms, all of us are involved in this important work. The standard line I hear at development seminars for college presidents is that the president is the chief advancement officer of the institution. That is true, of course, but as our mission statement puts it, here at Geneseo "the entire college community works together to develop socially responsible citizens with skills and values important to the pursuit of an enriched life and success in the world"—which is to say, we all work together to advance our mission as a public liberal arts college. Advancement is a unified effort toward common goals, and we are all advancement officers. In the time remaining I would like to review some of the ways in which we have advanced Geneseo's mission in the past year and look forward to some of the things we shall be doing to continue that advancement in the coming year.

Though development is only part of the picture, without a doubt garnering new resources advances the College's mission. Including the Scheiber bequest, alumni, friends and other supporters of Geneseo contributed \$2,669,577 to Geneseo in the past year. That's good news, the third year in a row in which total giving exceeded \$2 million. If one excludes the Scheiber bequest, however, unrestricted annual gifts by alumni and parents are down significantly from last year—not so good news. In our situation, soliciting private funds from alumni, friends, and corporations is absolutely essential, but we also engage in similar efforts to seek additional capital funds

from the state. With the assistance of Senator Dale Volker, we secured the \$14.5 million we need to complete Phase II of the Center for Excellence in Science. This facility is vital to Geneseo's academic mission. And speaking of scientific and other research, faculty and staff members submitted 53 external grant proposals during 2004–05. New grant awards totaled \$2.353 million; research expenditures were \$1.2 million—another fine record of advancement.

Because facilities are so important to our educational mission and to attracting the excellent students we seek, construction advances the mission of the College. Here, again, we made significant progress. The construction of Phase I of the Center for Excellence in Science is on track for substantial completion by March 2006, on schedule, with moves into the building to take place over the summer. The prospect of new facilities has already helped us recruit strong new faculty members in science. The opening of Putnam Hall last year similarly advanced our mission of attracting and retaining the best students and integrating residence life and academic activities. This summer, too, construction of a new North–South road on campus and new tennis courts near Court Street was completed. In total, the Facilities Planning Office managed nine State University Construction Fund projects, eleven Dormitory Authority projects, six local projects and five maintenance and repair projects. Because we are working with a carefully determined five-year capital plan and with master plans for athletic facilities and landscaping, all these projects directly advance the mission of the College.

So, too, does the recruitment of a diverse community of talented students, faculty, and staff. The past year has seen notable successes in this area. As we seek to secure funding and recognition as New York's public honors college—an advancement project for Geneseo if there ever were one—recruiting outstanding students is essential. This year's freshman class is the most highly qualified in the history of the College, with average SAT scores of 1281, mean high school averages of 93.3, and more than 50 percent in the top ten percent of their graduating classes. To place these statistics in context, we currently project that 98 percent of our new students will fall into Tier I of the SUNY selectivity matrix. Last year, 94 percent of our students were in this top tier. The second most selective campus last year was a university center with 82 percent, followed by the three other university centers at between 40 and 51 percent. The next highest undergraduate college had 27 percent. Students of color comprise 15.7 percent of the class of 2009 and 13.8 percent of all new students, and we now have 108 international students, 35 of them new this fall—clear signs of progress in recruitment of a more diverse student body, though I believe we can do even better in this regard in the coming year.

In the new faculty and staff who have joined us today, we see a talented and diverse group of colleagues. Our efforts to recruit and track strong applicants have been enhanced in the past year by the successful implementation of the new online employment and tracking system. Over the year 2,586 individuals applied on the system, and there were more than 50,000 hits on our employment website. We are the first SUNY campus with an online system, and now Stony Brook, Alfred, Cortland, and Brockport are following our lead. Aggressive outreach to the widest possible pool of applicants advances our mission and lets the world know about Geneseo as a place to work and learn.

Geneseo is not an NCAA Division I school—much to my relief, I must confess—but I am proud of our excellent Division III program because it reflects our values as a public liberal arts college and thereby advances our mission. Like a Division I program, it also serves the more traditional advancement purposes of enhancing an institution's reputation and attracting support from alumni and community members. In the past year, our students have been some of our best advancement officers, winning no fewer than eight SUNYAC championships and three

E CAC championships. In 2004-05 our student-athletes won 20 All-American certificates in ten sports. Both men's soccer and men's hockey went on to NCAA championship play, with the soccer team reaching the final four after defeating such teams as RIT, Wheaton College, and Williams. At the same time, our programs were also recognized for our commitment to the scholar-athlete ideal. In June, Geneseo was invited to join ten other schools for a special symposium on reform of Division III athletics, convened by the College Sports Project and funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation. Among such nationally recognized schools as Washington University of St. Louis, Carleton, Wesleyan, Pomona, and Washington & Lee, we were the only public college or university invited. In this instance, our successful record and careful attention to best practices in Division III athletics led, in turn, to national recognition of our quality as a public liberal arts college—clearly relevant as we seek to become the premier public liberal arts college in the country.

I could list dozens of other examples of how students and student affairs programs have advanced Geneseo's mission in the past year, but let me merely mention two. In the fall, the Center for Community sponsored a highly successful Cultural Harmony Week, which drew students and faculty, not only from Geneseo but from several area colleges, for panels and presentations by bell hooks and an exhibit of photography by Carrie Weems. Geneseo First Response, our student-run emergency medical service, was recognized as Outstanding Collegiate E.M.S. Organization of the Year by the leading national organization in that field.

As we reach more directly into the heart of our college mission—the common task and the privilege we share of teaching and learning in this community—it is readily apparent that faculty and staff have advanced Geneseo's mission in countless ways in the past year. Earlier in this convocation, we recognized this year's excellence award winners. I am pleased to recognize another colleague who has received a national award for excellence in teaching. This past spring, Bill Cook was named one of three finalists for the Robert Foster Cherry Award for distinguished teaching. This marks the tenth time in recent years that a Geneseo faculty member has received a national teaching award. Bill and the rest of his colleagues were honored for their efforts to advance our mission. Two of them, Debbie Hill and Roxanne Johnston, are officially designated advancement officers, but I would remind you that the process of selecting and recognizing all our award winners is itself college advancement in its most literal sense. Let me take this opportunity to thank all the people who nominated these honorees and the two committees who evaluated and recommended them. Your hard work is very important to your colleagues and the College.

Though they add to the reputation of the College as a whole, these honors represent local and relatively specific ways in which Geneseo's mission has been advanced. Taken together, all we do to transform the lives of our students and transform the world in which we live serves the larger mission of the College. In the past year, we have also advanced in global and more general ways through several major programs and initiatives. Allow me to mention a few of them.

First, Geneseo has become much more international in its outlook and is steadily becoming more global in its reach. Not only do we have a record number of international students on campus, but we have also bucked the national trend of fewer U.S. students studying abroad. During the 2004-05 academic year, 288 Geneseo students participated in study abroad, up from 246 the year before. In addition, we are actively exploring dual degree programs with Moscow State University, Hacettepe University in Turkey, and the University de las Americas in Mexico, and we have negotiated new exchange programs in Spain, Costa Rica, and The Netherlands. Last year, we hosted Elena Basukova from Moscow State, who worked with faculty in Communication to produce the first draft of a

new dual degree program in intercultural communication. This year, we are joined by Ms. Liu Zheng, visiting scholar in anthropology from the Shanghai Institute of Education, as part of our Chinese exchange program.

In April we formally established another major institute on campus, the Pamela York Klainer Center for Women and Business, with generous support from one of our graduate alumnae, Pam Klainer. Already the Klainer Center is advancing the distinctive mission of the Jones School as a center for inquiry on business and society in a liberal arts context and serving as a source of support for female students entering careers in business. With effective leadership by the Commission on Diversity and Community, we got off to an excellent start on the first round of deliberative dialogues on campus. And last fall, the Task Force on Faculty Roles, Rewards and Evaluation, co-chaired by Mary Ellen Zuckerman and Dave Geiger, submitted its final report, to be shared with the campus as a whole. I want to thank all the members of the Task Force for their outstanding work over a period of two-and-a-half years. The full report is available on the Web, and the conceptual framework for a teacher-scholar model for Geneseo proposed by the Task Force was formally endorsed by the College Senate in the Spring.

I think we can all agree that 2004-05 was a very successful year, as we advanced the mission of this College, on both the micro and the macro level. Our international initiatives and the three ongoing projects I have mentioned have great potential to enhance the way we carry out the transformational mission of teaching and learning at Geneseo. They exemplify the fruitful possibilities for advancement at the heart of this College and constructive change at the deepest level of liberal learning.

III

On the basis of this brief review of the year past, I must plead guilty to putting the various accomplishments of members of this community on the Procrustean bed of a single term. I have invited you to put seemingly disparate college activities under the category of advancement because I believe advancement is important for all of us, especially at this point in Geneseo's history. Not only are we seeking a new Vice President for College Advancement, but we are also poised for significant progress in our quest to become the premier public liberal arts college in the country. What, then, are we doing in the coming year to advance the College's mission in all the senses of the word?

First and foremost, our Honors College proposal—which is not so much a request for formal designation as an argument for the level of support and recognition that will enable us to realize our vision of Geneseo as the premier public liberal arts college in the country—continues to be under active consideration. Let me share with you a few comments from a position paper I prepared earlier this summer: “As much of the data suggests, Geneseo already serves as New York's public honors college on the basis of its demand-driven selectivity and the quality of its programs. With no special mission-related assistance under the budget allocation process and no additional funding, Geneseo has become the most selective public college or university in the state. As part of its strategic planning process (confirmed by Mission Review I and II), Geneseo seeks to become the premier public liberal arts college in the country. At the end of the 2004-05 academic year, we are close to achieving that status. With modest System support and authorization for an increased general fee or increased tuition, we believe that we can ‘deliver’ for the State University and the citizens of our state a truly remarkable, highly selective, liberal arts college of recognized national stature that will compare favorably with the very best private liberal arts colleges in the country. We are that close now.”

In thinking about our future, we are benchmarking ourselves, not against other SUNY campuses, but against

the very best public undergraduate institutions in the nation and the top national private liberal arts colleges in New York state. When one compares selectivity and student outcomes—the things we can shape through our own efforts—we look quite good by comparison with our aspirational peers. When we look at student-faculty ratios and resources per student, we lag far behind. In the coming year, we shall continue to seek to improve the things that we can control, while at the same time pressing the case for more appropriate resources. The nub of that case is that The State University of New York can have a nationally recognized undergraduate honors college at a relatively modest cost (a minimal cost when compared to the SUNY budget), through a combination of reasonable tuition increases, enhanced support from the state, and vigorous private fund raising on Geneseo's part. To make the case and to seek the resources is advancement in the classic sense, and we shall not be idle or bashful in this cause.

Advancement also involves all the efforts to position a campus, to enhance its reputation, through strategic marketing, public relations, and the media. In the coming year, we shall also be active on this front. To position the College even better in the national higher education scene, to communicate with both internal and external audiences, and to recruit a talented and diverse student body, we are making increasing use of the highly fluid, highly visible medium of the Internet and web applications. Though my own love for traditional print media makes me skeptical of web-based communication at times, I agree with my colleagues in the cabinet that the time has come to reconsider Geneseo's visual identity and to upgrade our website in major ways. This will require expert outside assistance, but I can assure you that all members of the College community will be consulted as we consider these issues in the coming months. Anything we decide to do will be fully integrated and involve all divisions of the College; it will grow out of our own sense of who we are as a College, and will reflect our fundamental values as a public liberal arts institution.

Advancement in that deeper, transformational sense remains—advancement in the sense of doing the ultimate work of the College, work that makes meaning in the lives of our students and in our common life as an educational community. Here, too, I expect us to be very active in the year ahead. And speaking of work, it is time to take the recommendations of the Task Force on Faculty Roles, Rewards and Evaluation and begin to adopt and implement them. Much of this task is the responsibility of the College Senate and its Committee on Faculty Affairs. Some of the work needs to be done by the college administration. I look forward to working with Senate on revision of the SOFI instrument and changes in evaluation and professional development. There is much to be done, and all of it is central to our mission.

Finally, I encourage you to accept the invitation of Becky Glass, the Teaching and Learning Center, and the Diversity Commission to participate in one of the deliberative dialogues this year. Structural diversity—the recruitment and retention of students and employees from a wide range of backgrounds—is vitally important to our future advancement. And in fact, Provost Conway-Turner has agreed to chair a senior working group on recruitment and retention of students of color at Geneseo charged specifically to address issues of structural diversity in the coming year. But how we handle difficult and divisive issues on campus, what kind of campus climate we create for people from all backgrounds, and how we fashion means to talk about differences without tearing our community apart are, if anything, even more important to a community like ours dedicated to liberal and liberating education. I hope that during the coming year we can do more to build a teaching and learning community that will embody justice and model the kind of discourse on difficult and complex topics that America and the world need in the twenty-first century. Honesty, openness, and something like deliberative dialogue are

some of the tools for building such a community in the coming year. They are also essential means of advancing our liberal arts mission at the deepest level.

I was moved by the story of Mark Scheiber, not just because I think advancement is very important and not just because I am always happy to encourage each and every one of you to support this College with your time, your talents, and your treasure, but because it reminded me of the transforming effect an educational community like Geneseo can have and it reminded me that our work in this place creates meaning in our lives and the lives of our students. Ten years ago, on August 28, 1995, I gave my first convocation address at Geneseo. Let me say that I look forward just as much to our common work in the year to come as I did then. For me, working with you in this community has some of the meaning that Mark Scheiber's Geneseo experience had for him. My contacts with you all, my connections with the traditions of this wonderful College, and our common dreams for Geneseo have brought great meaning and satisfaction to my life—the life of someone who, like many of you, has never left college and who has loved being there ever since I arrived as a freshman—and I hope that your experiences in the coming academic year partake of some of the same satisfaction, the same enthusiasm, and the same hope. I look forward to working with all of you, advancing Geneseo's mission together. ❖