

The Inaugural Address of Christopher C. Dahl Lessons from the Past and Questions for the Future

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State University of New York
College at Geneseo

Chancellor Ryan, Chairman Egan, Trustee Nelson, members of the College Council, Senator Volker, Assemblyman Johnson, President Emeritus MacVittie, other distinguished members of the platform party, current and emeritus faculty and staff, students, College and University delegates, friends, colleagues, and family, I am deeply grateful for your presence here today. When Dick Rosati, chair of the 125th Anniversary Committee, proposed that my inauguration take place on the College's observance of Founders Day, I was initially somewhat reluctant. Would the inaugural ceremonies detract from the Founders Day events? Would the Inauguration get lost in the hoopla and excitement connected with the 125th Anniversary of the College and Homecoming Weekend? On reflection, I decided Dick's proposal was a good idea. Inaugurations, as my predecessor Carol Harter observed at hers, are academic rites of passage. They are a bit like Commencement ceremonies. In the words of an old Harvard song, they are "festival rites, from the age that is past/To the age that is waiting before." What could be more appropriate than to join the celebration of the College's past with the recognition of new leadership, to combine a backward glance at our history with views of the College's future? For all of us connected with Geneseo are indebted to those who have gone before, and our own concepts of who we are as an academic community are inevitably shaped, whether we recognize it or not, by the events of our history. Geneseo was a very different institution in 1871, but many of the seeds of the college we are today are present in our early history.

Accordingly, let me begin by sketching some important themes from the history of the State University of New York College at Geneseo. First, however, two personal confessions are in order. As some of you know, one of my primary interests as a scholar and teacher has been Victorian studies. The Victorian era in Britain and America saw some of the first attempts at "scientific" documentary history, but the Victorians were also great adapters and exploiters of history, using it to draw lessons from the past and to define their own positions in contemporary debates. So, you see, the temptations of an historic anniversary like this are practically irresistible to me!

Let me also confess that the history of American higher education — and education in general — is of more than passing personal significance to me. In this regard, there are two special people here today whom I would like to recognize. Both of them are teachers: my mother, Anna Kurko Dahl, who taught modern European history for a number of years before she married my father and who also served as a class dean and high school guidance counselor, and my uncle, Curtis Dahl, Professor Emeritus of English and American Literature at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. Both have been important influences on my life, as was my late father, whose example shaped my character as a writer, teacher, and person. But they are only a few of many individuals in six generations of my family who have been involved in education as teachers, professors, or administrators. If heredity has anything to do with it, I can assure you I come by my

interest in education honestly. Growing up in this family, I have always known that teaching is one of the most exciting and satisfying careers one can pursue, and I have always believed that there is nothing more important we can devote our lives to than education.

Quite apart from these personal prejudices and inherited proclivities, I believe that there is much to be learned from the early history of Geneseo — and much that it can tell us about our present situation. The first thing that strikes anyone who reads our history is that the founding of this College was very much a civic project. We are here today because of public-spirited citizens who believed deeply in education, were proud of their community, and were convinced of the cultural and economic benefits of a state normal school in Geneseo. In the midst of difficult times immediately after the Civil War, these civic leaders persuaded the Village Trustees to raise \$45,000 in taxes for the construction of a normal school building. They also managed to persuade the Livingston County Board to contribute \$20,000, and the Wadsworth family offered an additional \$10,000. This combination of civic pride, idealism, and a keen understanding of the benefits the College brings to Geneseo and Livingston County continues today in the strong support we receive from the surrounding community, and members of the Wadsworth family are still involved in the life of the College through their support of the Wadsworth Lecture Series.

Our founding was the product of bold actions by visionary men of affairs. We are also here today because a small band of citizens were willing to act on their convictions and refused to give up hope when they encountered difficulties. As Colonel John Rorbach, one of the leading proponents of the school, commented at the time of our twenty-fifth anniversary, “it really required considerable nerve, in 1866 and 67, to go at it to convince this town and village that it would be a downright prudent and sensible scheme to attempt to raise, upon our own bonds, a sufficiently large sum of money to induce the State Commissioners at Albany to set down one of these contemplated Normals in our midst.” (Rorbach, “History of the Geneseo State Normal School,” p. 43, quoted in Fisher, *Stone Strength of the Past*, p. 10). Even after they had put together the resources needed for a successful proposal, the Geneseo delegation’s hopes were dashed on the first round, and Brockport was authorized as the site of the new normal school instead. When they tried again in 1867, Geneseo’s proponents also had to contend with a “disagreeable warfare” in which, according to Colonel Rorbach, the farmers in surrounding areas “had their ears filled with the grossest misrepresentations of the motives of us villagers, as if we had all been concocting a scheme to rob them.” (Rorbach, pp. 50-51, quoted in Fisher, p. 31). Rorbach records epic struggles with one local citizen, B. F. Angell, who traveled to Albany and used all manner of misleading arguments to defeat the project. But Rorbach and his allies did not give up, and when provision was made for two additional schools in 1867, Geneseo was one of them. Neither then nor now has the College been exempt from painful struggle for its due share of resources from Albany!

In spite of strong support at the local level, the fledgling school was soon forced to fight for its existence. Within five years of its founding, Geneseo, along with the other normal schools, was threatened with closure. In his address to the legislature in 1877, Governor Robinson, a supporter of the privately funded academies that had hitherto trained teachers, called into question free public education, asserting that it was “a clear violation of personal rights for the State to levy taxes to support free academies, high

schools and colleges, in which the higher branches of literature and science are taught and young men prepared for the learned professions” (Livingston County Republican, 11 January 1877, quoted in Fisher, p. 112). On the same grounds, he also called for an inquiry to determine whether the normal schools should continue. Robinson’s attack on the free school system of the state was ultimately unsuccessful, but it typified a long-running debate about state support for various systems of higher education — a debate whose terms would be repeated in some of the controversy surrounding the establishment of a State University of New York seventy years later and whose themes are echoed even now by some critics of SUNY who attack the system as inefficient or over-funded or superfluous.

Strong local support, repeated difficulties in securing funding, and continuing arguments over the value of public higher education in a state with a long tradition of support for private institutions — these are a few of the major — and persistent — themes in our early history. But another equally important theme in the first seventy-five years is continuing pride over Geneseo’s position as one of the best institutions of its kind. By 1896, the Normal School had graduated 1,267 students in teacher training programs and another 92 in the so-called academic department. With a population of 1,300 students, Geneseo was the largest such school in the state, and by 1900 it had become so popular that enrollment had to be limited — the only normal school to do so at the time (Fisher, p. 144). Speaking at the fiftieth anniversary commencement in 1921, George N. Wiley, the assistant State Commissioner of Education, paid tribute to Geneseo’s 5,045 graduates, a greater number than had graduated from any other normal school, and he went on to state that “this large number of graduates would not suffer by qualitative comparison either” (Fisher, p. 182). I am pleased to note that this tradition of quality and popularity has persisted to this day.

In its public service mission, its civic beginnings, its early stress on high quality in faculty and students, the normal school in its first seventy-five years anticipates the Geneseo we know today, but of course our present identity has largely been forged in the rapid changes of the past four decades, in our transformation from normal school to teachers college, to state university college. In this we are not unlike many public colleges and universities throughout the country, though the transformation from normal school to teachers college occurred somewhat later in New York than elsewhere, as did the development of SUNY as a major state university.

From 1953-54 to 1963-64, Geneseo’s enrollment tripled, from 800 to 2,400, and in the decade following the arrival of President MacVittie our enrollment more than doubled, reaching a peak of 6,500 in 1974-75. As many of you know, this was also the period of rapid physical growth in the campus. During the MacVittie years, no fewer than twenty buildings were added. Indeed, as the man who presided over much of Geneseo’s growth as an institution and its transition to liberal arts programs, Bob MacVittie may fairly be called the master-builder of the College as we know it today.

Although enrollment declined from its peak in the mid-1970s and stabilized in the 1980s at approximately 5500 students, Geneseo has continued to grow in quality and national stature in the past 30 years under all three of my predecessors. I want to recognize not only Bob MacVittie, who is behind me on the platform, but also Dean Michael Harter, husband of my immediate predecessor, Carol Harter, whose leadership and spirit I deeply admire. I am the beneficiary of their and President Jakubauskas’

efforts and the hard work and dedication of so many of you faculty and staff here today who have built the excellent college Geneseo is today. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

As I have said on many occasions, Geneseo is a special place. But what do we mean when we say that? Through the efforts of faculty and staff and through their unwavering commitment to the education of our students, through the hard work of the classified staff who assist in our mission, and through the support of the alumni and the wider community, Geneseo has become a public liberal arts college of very high quality serving the entire State of New York. We now take our place among a dozen or so similar schools nationwide who form the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. In seeking to define the special nature of our educational enterprise last fall, I pointed to a shared set of values embodied in the following attributes:

- Geneseo is highly selective. We make no apologies for providing only the highest quality education to some of the most talented students in the state.
- Our definition of the liberal arts is broad and inclusive. Science, of course, has always been a “liberal” art, but our conception of the liberal arts also includes outstanding professional programs that leverage the liberal arts education of the College to prepare their graduates for full participation in their careers.
- We are student-centered. Therefore, we place primary emphasis on excellent teaching. And when we assess our curriculum we ask about its results, about what we want our students to do and become when they leave Geneseo.
- We also value scholarship and creative activity among our faculty because they foster excellent teaching and because research in one’s chosen field is a vital part of an undergraduate education.
- We are primarily a residential college because we seek to educate the whole student. We subscribe to an ideal of student learning that creates a seamless connection between experiences in the classroom and life in the residence halls and the community.
- We are a community that values diversity and mutual respect because an understanding of other people’s cultures and experiences is needed for successful life in an increasingly diverse and complex world. And, our College community includes successful loyal alumni and supporters and professors emeriti, as well as students, faculty, and staff.

Today, a year later, as I look back on these remarks, they still strike me as a fair statement of our working assumptions as a College and a reasonable picture of the public liberal arts college we have become and aspire to become. As we look to the future, however, we need to be true to our own values as an intellectual community and ask the sorts of skeptical questions that we would expect our best students to ask in their courses. We need to be true to our own liberal arts ideals by recognizing the possible dangers as well as the potential benefits in a course of action, by celebrating our very real accomplishments as an institution while continually asking how we might become even better, and by recognizing the wider context in which we exist while trying to achieve as

much as we can as a distinctive college within the State University and the educational community of New York.

As I look to the future of this College, I am optimistic, but I know, as you do, that merely continuing to do what we already do well is not enough. In order to move forward, we need to ask the positive questions that lead us to still higher levels of quality as an institution, that will make an already fine college truly outstanding. As we think about Geneseo's future on this occasion, I believe we can frame the vital questions we need to ask under three broad categories: excellence, community, and civic purpose.

The first set of questions involves excellence. Most of us here would agree that this College is committed to academic excellence. Geneseo, as I mentioned, makes no apologies for being a selective institution, for seeking to provide undergraduate education of the highest quality to some of the most talented students in the state. And I, for one, have always been puzzled by the suggestion that selectivity and an overriding concern for quality are "elitist" or somehow antithetical to the purposes of public higher education. There is nothing inherent in the concept of a public college or university that implies its students must settle for mediocrity or a second-rate education. Indeed, to argue for a sort of levelling mediocrity in public higher education seems to me an elitist position. Nonetheless, there are real dangers in stressing academic excellence in traditional terms and ignoring the question of access. By carefully focussing its mission on the liberal arts, by becoming progressively more selective, Geneseo has evolved into a particular kind of institution. Our distinct mission is to serve students with strong academic records, students who are for the most part of traditional college age, and to offer these students an excellent liberal education. This mission is different, not more valuable or less valuable, than other missions we might undertake, and we carry out this mission as part of the diverse system of colleges and universities that comprises the State University of New York. Together we serve the state, and together we provide access to students throughout the state. And the great strength of SUNY, it seems to me, is its diversity. Because of the unique and varied missions of our campuses, we better serve the State of New York. Each institution in the State University of New York strives for excellence in its own way. Geneseo has become something that might be described as a state-wide public honors college, and it strives for excellence with that role in mind.

The other danger inherent in our situation as a selective college is that we may define excellence merely in external terms, that we may, as the New England Puritans might have put it, become too concerned with visible signs of election. It is gratifying to be ranked highly on the various lists of "best colleges" and "best college values" — and I for one have no intention of hiding Geneseo's consistent presence over the years on most of the major lists under a bushel — but such rankings are at best imperfect indicators of quality. Such "objective" data as the class rank or SAT scores of entering students tells us nothing about what they have done and become — how they have been changed — in their four years at Geneseo. If we are to achieve true excellence as a college, we must shun superficial analysis and ask the tough questions about how a Geneseo education has improved the lives of our students. At the same time we must be prepared to document these changes persuasively to outsiders. We must challenge our students to go beyond the superficiality of external measures of personal worth — grades, test scores, rank in class — and understand the intrinsic value of their education.

Here again we must measure ourselves by the standards we seek to inculcate in the liberal education we offer our students. Indeed, a liberal education is itself the most powerful corrective to the dangers of elitism and superficiality. I was forcibly reminded of this fact when I read James Freedman's recent book *Idealism and Liberal Education*. Freedman, President of Dartmouth and former president of the University of Iowa, was diagnosed with cancer several years ago. Confronting that experience reminded him anew of the value of liberal education. "I have been struck by two realizations," he writes, "first that life is a learning process for which there is no wholly adequate preparation; second, that although liberal education is not perfect, it is the best preparation there is for life and its exigencies. With it, we are better able to make sense of the events that either break over us, like a wave, or quietly envelop us before we know it, like a fog" (Freedman, p. 51). It is by subjecting our quest for excellence to these highest of standards that we will achieve our goals. Far from being elitist, these standards are universal and humane.

My second cluster of questions involves community. Colleges are above all communities, fragile communities that must be nurtured and maintained but also enduring communities that persist over time. It is important that we recognize that all of us — students, faculty, professional staff, support staff, alumni, and friends of the College — contribute to a common educational enterprise; and it is important that each person's contributions be recognized and appreciated. Today we celebrate the accomplishments and contributions of literally thousands of people who have been part of the Geneseo College community over the past 125 years. In this anniversary year, we celebrate a community that stretches to include everyone who has worked and studied at Geneseo, past or present, but also reaches forward to include all who will study or work here in future years.

At the same time, however, we need to strengthen and enhance the immediate educational community — the teaching and learning community that our students experience now at Geneseo. Liberal education at its best is dependent upon exposure to the greatest possible diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds. Students learn in community with other students and faculty. The major reason why we must continue to build a diverse community on campus, then, is fundamentally educational and directly related to our mission as a public liberal arts college. If we are to prepare Geneseo students for the complex and diverse society they will encounter in the America of the twenty-first century, if Geneseo is to become the truly distinguished college we are capable of being, we need to create a diverse, sophisticated, and open community that reflects human variety on a number of spectrums and scales.

The question of community is also important from another perspective. In an era when the percentage of post-secondary students of traditional age in residential college settings in the total college population is declining, Geneseo has chosen to go against the trend. Our residential setting and particular type of student population offer us untapped opportunities to build intellectual community on this campus. If we believe that liberal — and therefore truly liberating — education affects the whole person, we need to do even more to join traditional academic life with residential life at Geneseo so that the myriad activities of our students beyond the classroom enrich their academic work, and their academic work brings perspective to their lives. This is another way in which we might realize the ideal of a public liberal arts college.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French visitor to America in the 1830s, observed that a key element in the success of American democracy was our national propensity for voluntary civic associations. Until recently we have been a nation of joiners, and our voluntary associations with our fellow citizens in a wide variety of organizations has, according to more recent political theorists such as Robert Putnam, built up a store of “social capital” that has kept our society strong and cohesive. In the past twenty years, however, Americans’ civic participation has declined in a troubling fashion (Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” pp. 65-70). This situation suggests to me a final sense in which the community we seek to build at Geneseo is important. As a public residential liberal arts college, we are in a particularly good position to foster the revival of American civic life. As President Claire Gaudiani of Connecticut College points out, insofar as they build community, liberal arts colleges can be laboratories for civic involvement. In addition to “talking about democratic society in citizen groups, Americans also need living models of how [an] inclusive democratic civil society can work. Liberal arts colleges” — and I would add, especially public liberal arts colleges — “have the potential to be these models, while also educating a diverse body of students who will be the leaders of the first real democratic civil society” (The Liberal Arts and Civil Society, p. 9).

Gaudiani’s remarks bring me to the final cluster of questions defining our role as a public liberal arts college. This cluster I have categorized with the phrase civic purpose. In thinking of Geneseo’s role as a public liberal arts college, I keep returning to a point first made by Peter Ewell, who will be speaking at the symposium on liberal arts later today. Ewell argues that public liberal arts colleges often define themselves either in reference to private liberal arts institutions or in contrast to other sorts of public institutions, rather than asking what is distinctive or important about their mission as public colleges. This is certainly a fair question to ask in Geneseo’s case, and some of the answers we might give define our unique strengths as an institution. First of all, as a public college in the SUNY system Geneseo provides access to an outstanding liberal arts education to students from all economic backgrounds and all regions of the state. As a public college serving some of the brightest and best students in the state, we also seek to be exemplary not only in the sense of community we create but also in the ways we carry out the public trust. This means that we are accountable for the way we serve the State of New York, but it also means that we constantly strive not for the comfortable middle ground but for the best possible practices we can achieve, whether in curriculum or student life, whether in student government or athletics. Ultimately, we provide an excellent liberal arts education in a public setting to talented students from throughout the state in order to provide the next generation of leaders for the civic and cultural life of our communities. In a democracy that depends upon the participation of all its citizens as Benjamin Barber and others have reminded us, the liberal arts are the arts befitting free citizens. They are essential arts for the exercise of freedom, not luxuries for the rich or well-born. In this respect, then, Geneseo looks back to the ideals of the founders of this country. The education we offer is essential to the state and nation. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1820, “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education” (Letter to William Jarvis, September 28, 1820). Regarded from

the loftiest perspective, then, public liberal arts colleges like Geneseo ultimately serve the highest purposes of American democracy.

Geneseo has come a long way from its beginnings as the Geneseo Normal and Training School in 1871. Like some intricate, sometimes threatened, but essentially hardy organism, we have survived and prevailed for a century-and-a-quarter by a series of metamorphoses, from normal and training school to normal school to state normal school to state teachers college, to State University Teachers College, to State University College of Arts and Science, to public liberal arts college. But in the role to which we now aspire, we carry on the same civic purposes that motivated those early supporters of a state college in this place — the same characteristically American purposes in a century of our history that led to the founding of hundreds of colleges throughout the United States. It required courage and foresight 125 years ago to imagine and propose a college in Geneseo — boldness or “nerve” as Colonel Rorbach called it. As we look to our future as a public liberal arts college, as a college that is capable of truly national distinction in its special endeavor, I hope and I trust that we will continue this tradition of boldness and imagination, this tradition of excellence, community and civic purpose. Thank you all for being here today.