



Office of the President

## **The Paradoxes and Perils of Excellence**

Fall Convocation Address

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As always it is a pleasure to welcome you all to another academic year at Geneseo. Earlier today, I spent several hours in the reception Ruth and I hold for the parents of new students—and, as always, a few new students who come along for the refreshments. In every case, the parents were delighted that their sons or daughters were here, and they were almost universally impressed with our moving-in day. Even in a bad economy (or perhaps because Geneseo is such a value in a bad economy), the parents' enthusiasm was palpable, and many of the parents compared Geneseo favorably with other schools attended by siblings. What sometimes feels to me like an added burden on one of the busiest days of the year turned out to be inspiring and invigorating—and once again reminded me of the perpetual sense of renewal a new academic season brings to us all at Geneseo.

In this season of renewal, I want to extend a special welcome to three new members of our College community. Last year, as you may recall, despite the hiring freeze we authorized searches for five new faculty. I am pleased to introduce two new colleagues who have joined us today: Professor Kodjo Adabra (French) and Professor Vincent Markowski, III (Psychology). Both these colleagues bring new insights and diverse experiences to our faculty. We shall continue to do all we can to keep renewing our faculty as well as our student body, for faculty are the life-blood of Geneseo. I am also pleased to introduce our new Chief of University Police,

Mr. Sal Simonetti, who comes to us from a leadership position in the Webster police department. Sal, who holds a master's degree in public administration from Brockport, succeeds Jim Stenger who retired last year. I am grateful to Scott Kenney, who served as interim chief while we conducted the search.

## I.

My title today is “The Paradoxes and Perils of Excellence.” The second term, “perils” got left off of the program today, probably because it didn't fit on the line. As I looked over the titles of previous addresses, I noticed that last year's talk was entitled “Promise and Peril.” I guess I have a pronounced proclivity for alliteration of the letter p. Be that as it may, the perils of the state budget have not gone away in the past year, and we certainly live in a realm of paradox. In fact, the word paradox sums up Geneseo's situation in 2010. Even as we weather the worst financial crisis in SUNY in more than a generation, with \$210 million in cuts at the system level this year alone and no relief through the Higher Education Empowerment Act, our faculty and students have continued to do excellent work, succeeding in ways too numerous to detail; the College has grown in reputation and stature; and students, faculty, and staff have reached out to serve the community beyond our campus. I was keenly reminded of this in the past few days, and the reminder came from an unlikely source—*Parade* magazine, that humble supplement to so many Sunday newspapers around the country. Let me tell you the story.

As we all know, there is seemingly no end to college surveys and rankings of all sorts. They vary in quality and depth; none of them can convey the ultimate truth about a college or university. We are well advised to take them with a grain of salt, but most of us look at them anyway. Starting last month the results began coming in; and, as they did, increasingly it seemed that we were doing even better than we usually do in such things. Once again, we were the

number two public regional university in the North in *US News*. But in the same survey we were also ranked number one on a short list of colleges and universities with a strong commitment to teaching. We were the only SUNY campus listed among 45 “best buys” in higher education public and private in *The Fiske Guide*. In a new guide published by *Washington Monthly* we were ranked seventh among master’s universities nationwide. This was particularly interesting because *Washington Monthly* uses data like the proportion of students on Pell Grants, the number of peace-corps volunteers, number of graduates who complete the Ph.D., and extent of service learning on campus.

All of these rankings were gratifying, but what brought the paradox home to me was Geneseo’s appearance in *Parade Magazine*’s “College A-List.” I hadn’t seen the issue, but over the weekend I received an email from an alumnus in Nevada who congratulated us on it—then in the next two days, an email from Professor Steve Derne telling of a friend in Bellingham, Washington, who had sent him a copy, and a letter from a former colleague of mine in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, sending me the article. On Tuesday, Ruth and I had dinner with friends whom I hadn’t seen in forty years, and their daughter-in-law from Massachusetts and her friends from Canandaigua had seen it. At the parents’ reception, a dozen or more people mentioned the *Parade* article.

In fashioning their recommendations, the *Parade* editors asked 43 top high school counselors across the country to “recommend outstanding schools that often fly under the radar.” Here is what some of the counselors said about Geneseo: “This may be one of the very best public institutions for teaching and learning in the nation. Geneseo kids are plenty smart and want to learn.” And: “The school’s idyllic location, strong sense of community, and laudable commitment from the faculty allows Geneseo to compete favorably with its peer institutions that

cost twice as much. After visiting, many of my students are pleasantly surprised that Geneseo feels more like a private college than its public counterparts.” These same ideas were echoed in the remarks of parents today.

## II.

Rankings and comments like these are only outward signs, but I think they reflect an inward reality and suggest some of the essence of Geneseo as a public liberal arts college. If we look back at some of the accomplishments of the year, we can see much the same picture.

Our students are indeed “plenty smart;” almost all of them want to learn. In the Class of 2014, we have continued to attract excellent students. This year’s numbers are virtually identical to last year’s. The mean high school average of the first-year class is 94, the mean SAT, 1340; more than 52 percent of them come from the top ten percent of their graduating class. As the article on SUNY last month in the *New York Times* Higher Education Supplement points out, Geneseo is the most selective school in the system. At the same time, our student body is also becoming more diverse. Almost 20 percent of the entering class are students of color, and 46 percent of the class comes from New York City, Long Island, or Westchester.

Our students have continued to excel, inside and outside of the classroom. Geneseo student athletes captured nine SUNYAC championships last season—a new record, and many of these same students also participated in GREAT Day, which also set new records, with 879 students engaged in 490 presentations, performances, and poster sessions. As we remember the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina this week, we can say that our student and community members in Livingston CARES have been to the Gulf Coast Mississippi nineteen times since then to continue the work of restoration and revival. Geneseo’s service programs have been

recognized on the President's Honor Roll for Community Service every year since the award was established, when we received the Katrina Compassion Award.

We can take similar pride in the achievements of our faculty and staff. Three colleagues—Denise Scott, Steve Derne, and Linda Steet—have been awarded Fulbright grants or fellowships. Faculty and staff have been recognized with awards in a wide variety of fields—for innovative programs for students with special needs, for civic engagement, and for residence life. In total, Geneseo faculty received external grant awards totaling over \$1 million in the past year. As always, last year saw continued productivity in research and publication in all fields. I recall with particular pleasure celebrating the extraordinary 2009-10 year in History, during which members of that department published no fewer than four books, all with major scholarly presses. These are only tokens of the multiple achievements of our faculty and staff.

I am pleased to report that the College also moved forward in building a diverse and inclusive community in the past year—one of our key *values*. Not only did we recruit a diverse and talented entering class, but we also made tangible progress in creating an inclusive, aware campus through the Real World Geneseo program, which has received a second grant to support its innovative work in bringing theory to practice this fall. Geneseo was also selected to become the first public college to join the Consortium for High Achievement and Success, a group of highly selective private liberal arts colleges working to promote success among students of color. In addition, a subcommittee of the Commission on Diversity and Community completed the draft of a campus diversity plan, which is now ready for discussion by the campus community and will move to the Strategic Planning Group to be integrated into the College's strategic plan.

Even in the midst of great budgetary constraints our sustainability efforts continued with noticeable success, thanks to the work of the Sustainability Task Force. Geneseo was

recognized, for example, in the newly released “Princeton Review’s Guide to 286 Green Colleges” for several of our sustainability programs, including our public bus service and “Geneseo Gives Back,” a waste diversion program that keeps 15 tons of materials from landfills in the year. The College also received a *Rochester Business Journal* sustainability award for these efforts.

In all these efforts, the Division of Administration and Finance is a full partner, along with student affairs and academic affairs, in supporting sustainability and other College goals, with added professional staff and assistance from Campus Auxiliary Services. In a very bad budget year, we have been able to maintain the excellent physical appearance of the campus (mentioned frequently by parents and alumni) and provide new facilities such as the final portion of the Integrated Science Center, which opened last fall and has already served the Departments of Chemistry and Physics well, enabling them to continue and expand teaching and undergraduate research.

In a year when it would be tempting to avoid difficult issues, a committee of faculty, staff, and students, co-chaired by Melinda Dubois, Administrative Director of the Lauderdale Health and Counseling Center and Jennifer Katz, Associate Professor of Psychology is organizing a teach-in on Sexual Assault at Geneseo, scheduled for March 6<sup>th</sup>, designed to engage members of our community with difficult questions about sexual assault—what it is, what it isn’t, why it is controversial, why it occurs, who is affected, and how we might address this problem in our own campus community. The teach-in will be based on careful survey research conducted here at Geneseo, and is intended to foster productive conversations, led by members of our community, who will themselves “serve as role models for openness to new ideas, acknowledgement of multiple points of view, a focus on evidence, critical thinking, and self-

reflection”—an enterprise very much in keeping with our ideals of liberal learning. As New York’s premier public liberal arts college, Jenny and Melinda point out, “Geneseo can provide national leadership by being honest and proactive on this topic [in ways] consonant with its own mission and values.” I agree and commend their efforts. Initiatives like this are yet another indicator of Geneseo’s commitment to excellence in the education of the whole person.

### III.

All these achievements—and many, many more I could mention—bespeak an institution that is carrying out its mission as a public liberal arts college at a very high level, a college that is achieving distinction in many areas, a college that lives up to the description in *Parade* magazine. But here we see the paradox I mentioned at the beginning in its starkest form. Even as we continue to succeed, we are faced with a fiscal situation as dire as any Geneseo has encountered in fifty years. To turn from the picture of Geneseo in 2009-10 that I have sketched, to the current state budget situation is to enter a parallel universe. New York State is in the midst of a major fiscal crisis, which in all likelihood will last for several more years. 2010 has been a very bad budget year for the State, and every state-related entity has suffered, but SUNY has fared worse than most others. We must not, and cannot avoid the fundamental reality of our situation. We face serious challenges – perils, if you will. As you know, the Governor’s budget proposal was linked to the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act. Results on both fronts were disappointing.

In the executive budget the Governor proposed cuts to SUNY and did not provide funds to cover the cost of contractual salary increases for SUNY employees. The Governor’s budget assumed a modest (two percent) increase in tuition, as recommended by the SUNY Trustees, but even that was disallowed in the Assembly version of the budget, which was ultimately passed by

both houses. In fact, both the Assembly and Senate versions of the budget included additional cuts to SUNY beyond those proposed by the Governor. In the end, the reductions in the final version of the budget totaled \$210 million. Including both mid-year and regular budget cuts, state support for SUNY has been reduced by \$634 million since the 2007-08 academic year—a total of 30 percent.

The history of the Empowerment Act is, if anything, more frustrating and disappointing. As you know, the Act in its original form would have provided the flexibility SUNY needs to set its own tuition, within limits, to charge differential tuition by campus, and to enter into public-private partnerships, as well as eliminating a lot of cumbersome and duplicative regulations in purchasing and construction. The Act represented the most important reform in the past twenty-five years and would have allowed SUNY to achieve its full potential to serve New York State and take its place among the truly great systems of public higher education. Geneseo would have benefited greatly from its passage. The Act would have allowed us to provide the extra margin of excellence for our students that a great liberal arts college offers, reduce the student-faculty ratio on campus, and more fully realize our distinctive role in American public higher education. All of this would have been achieved without raising taxes and with safeguards for affordability for students of limited means.

The Act encountered resistance, especially in the Assembly, and ultimately the Senate passed as a one-house bill a watered-down version of the Act that limited the flexibility provisions to two campuses, Buffalo and Stony Brook. Even that version, however, would have had some benefits for Geneseo. As you may recall, in the last stages of the budget process, two Senators held out for consideration of the bill, refusing to vote for the general appropriation bill until SUNY's needs could be addressed. Ultimately, they relented and the final appropriation

bill was passed without any provisions for SUNY. There is talk of a three-way agreement on some sort of legislation that might be presented when the legislature convenes again after the primaries, but the shape of such a bill and even the existence of such an agreement remain unclear.

I remain strongly committed to the reforms laid out in the original version of the Act, and want to thank all the faculty, students and staff who advocated so powerfully on behalf of the bill, including our College Senate Executive Committee and our Student Association. In my view, the misinformation and misunderstanding displayed in some of the discussions of the Act was deplorable. The Empowerment Act would simply have brought budget and tuition practices and other elements of governance in SUNY and CUNY into line with those of public higher education systems in most states. It would have enabled Geneseo fully to support the level of excellence to which we aspire. In the coming months, the Chancellor will continue to advocate for reform during the current legislative session, and I trust that the issue will not go away under the new governor. I intend to raise my voice on behalf of Geneseo in support of reform.

### III

But where does all this leave Geneseo in the coming year? Plainly, we cannot peg our future on the expectation of higher education empowerment, and we must deal with the further round of budget cuts in the current year. This year's college budget, like last year's, will be balanced by a series of one-time actions, including the use of campus reserves, as I pointed out in my recent communication on our financial situation. The deficit we face in the College budget—a deficit of \$3.4 million—is structural, however. We cannot continue to resort to short-term expedients or continue an indefinite series of across-the-board cuts that weaken all areas of College operations, if we hope to retain the excellence we have achieved. Such a course of

action in perilous times exposes us to the very real danger of losing the things that define the essence of the Geneseo experience and relinquishing our position as a premier public liberal arts college, an institution that stands out in SUNY and, as we have been reminded in the past few weeks, is increasingly recognized on the national scene for excellence in undergraduate education. These are the *perils* facing excellence at Geneseo. And, beyond that fact, I would add, there is a further paradox in our situation. Precisely because Geneseo is committed to such a high level of quality in undergraduate education, we can't use the expedients an average institution might use—hunkering down and not addressing the problem, continuing to water down the quality of a Geneseo education, or staying perpetually on the defensive and avoiding tough decisions. In the coming year, our financial situation will require careful planning and decisive action.

Fortunately, we have a number of tools in place to address the structural deficit, and as you know we have been moving ahead with our own Six Big Ideas, since well before the phrase was applied to the system-wide strategic plan.

In addressing the structural deficit last year, we eliminated seventeen non-instructional positions College-wide. Without the permanent savings thus achieved, the structural deficit would be about \$500,000 greater. Because of our local retirement options and the various SUNY early retirement programs, there will be another opportunity to realize permanent savings. Sixty-six individuals have expressed an interest in the various options: 40 classified staff and 26 faculty, administrators, and professional staff. There are two windows for early retirement, with different closing dates (September 30 for classified staff, December 31 for faculty and professionals). To the extent that we can eliminate a portion of these positions, through consolidation of duties, reorganization of departments, or elimination of some services, we can

begin to make permanent reductions in our base-budget and reduce the structural deficit. In order to maximize savings, all vacant lines will revert to the College and the decision to fill each one of them will be made centrally, at the cabinet level. Needless to say, we will have to be very strategic and very careful in filling these positions. We will not be able to eliminate all of them, however, because many of them are essential to the operation of the College.

Even in the most optimistic scenario, the early retirements will not yield the savings required to close a \$3.4 million structural deficit. As I pointed out at the special All-College Meeting in May, we must keep all options on the table—and those options include program curtailment and layoffs. The current budget crisis is real, and it imperils our ability to maintain our excellence as a public liberal arts college. The expedients of one-time, across-the board cuts or continued use of reserves are not sustainable. We must carefully consider everything we do. We will need to invest in those things that are at the core of our mission and exemplify our shared values, but we must also decide what things we might do differently or can no longer afford to do. The perils are great if we fail to act now.

The College's Budget Advisory Committee met at the end of the spring semester to consider criteria for program curtailment, and generated a list that has been accepted by the Strategic Planning Group. The central criterion that we must not lose sight of is the College's mission—how we retain Geneseo's fundamental quality as a public liberal arts college. Over the summer, I asked the Office of Institutional Research and the Budget Office, along with the Provost's Office, to gather data about program costs, quality and efficiency, to assist in considering programs throughout the College. They have done so. Early in the semester, the Budget Priorities Committee will meet to consider the data, and to see what it might mean in

terms of program curtailment. Again, we must consider difficult actions in the coming months. As the semester advances, I shall keep the College community informed of any decisions.

Because of the severity of the budget crisis, our Six Big Ideas initiatives become all the more important in the coming year, for two reasons. First, any savings or new revenue they will generate will reduce the need for cuts in programs and reductions in staffing. Second, all six of the initiatives are designed to support Geneseo's unique quality as a public liberal arts college. They are intended to be strategic and to allow us to be proactive rather than passive as we consider how to maintain the excellence we have achieved at Geneseo. Each initiative involves actions we can take to maintain or enhance our quality as a public liberal arts college—actions that will serve us over the long term as well as help in the current crisis.

I am pleased to report progress on several of the Six Big Ideas initiatives over the summer. Four departments have developed curriculum templates for their majors that show how they might be reconfigured, assuming a four-course load for students. Our summer session was successful and employed various modes of instructional delivery. In collaborative research, we have created a new pilot program of reassigned time for grant writing with additional funds from the Geneseo Foundation. Our work in strategic community partnerships in Mt. Morris has rapidly expanded over the summer. The design of four of the innovative five-year programs in secondary education has been completed, and enrollments in Master's degrees in accounting and literacy education have increased.

Above all, the Bringing Theory to Practice initiative provides a framework for our development as a public liberal arts college over the next several years. It will help us to maintain our distinctive position in SUNY and among our peers nationwide. The idea of transformational learning will organize our Middle States self-study, and the plan based on it was

enthusiastically endorsed by our liaison from the Commission. Here, again, Bringing Theory to Practice will help not only in the Middle States process, but also in the planning decisions we must make in the next year.

In addition to the Six Big Ideas, we have another major tool in the crisis—our fundraising and advancement activities. Like the Big Ideas, they have short-term as well as long-term benefits. I am pleased to report that total gifts to Geneseo rose by half-a-million dollars in 2009-10, to \$2,885,744. Attendance at reunions exceeded 650, more than double last year's number. Already this year, unrestricted private gifts have provided more funds for faculty travel and research, thanks to the success of our efforts. As you may know, we are in the so-called "quiet" phase of a major capital campaign. The public phase is currently scheduled to begin in 2011, but by June 30, the end of the Fund's fiscal year, we had already raised \$12.2 million in campaign commitments--\$7.6 million of them in endowment funds that will continue to support Geneseo's programs far into the future. Building a sustainable advancement program not only yields immediate benefits; it is absolutely essential to the long-term health of the College.

As you can see, we face both paradox and peril in the year before us. Paradoxically, we must make a series of short-term decisions about the College budget in a period of crisis at the same time as we keep our eyes on the long-range future of the institution. This will not be easy to do, but the quality of our College demands that we do both things at once. We will need to change. We will probably need to abandon some of the things we do now in order to preserve essential programs in the College. We will need to reshape, reform, or curtail some programs in order to maintain the distinctive quality of a Geneseo education in the years to come.

Paradoxically, again, this will be harder to do because we have already achieved so many good

things and we have set ourselves high standards as a public liberal arts college. This, too, is a paradox of excellence.

The 2010-11 academic year will be very challenging. We will need to work together to solve the financial problems we—along with every SUNY campus—face. We will need to make a variety of difficult decisions, but I will make two promises to you. First, we shall be as careful and open as possible in making decisions about the budget and in keeping all of the College informed. Second, we shall always keep the mission and the long-term interests of the College in mind and measure our decisions against Geneseo's fundamental values.

On the first score, I promise an enhanced communication program in the coming year. The stakes are high. There are many important things going on simultaneously—the College budget, the Middle States self-study, strategic planning, Bringing Theory to Practice, Geneseo's own Six Big Ideas. We need to address all of these, together, as a college community. I plan to hold regular president's forums on a monthly basis, either in conjunction with the College Senate meetings or as special All-College meetings, make greater use of the College's website to report on the work of the Strategic Planning Group and other key bodies such as the Middle States Steering Committee, and create a special web page to track our deliberations on the budget.

On the second score, we shall do our best to manage the paradoxes and perils of our situation—again, together, as a College community. I shall do my best, as president in partnership with campus leaders, to keep our eyes focused on the long-range good of Geneseo, even as we respond to the immediate financial crisis. Of one thing I am certain: Geneseo, as a strong public liberal arts college, must not only endure, but prevail. That means to me that we must not only maintain our essential identity and quality, but also grow and improve over the years, so the institution we are in five years will be even better. In a rapidly changing world,

simply to maintain our current state would be to slip back. In looking forward to a challenging year, I have great faith in the power of Geneseo—our commitment to excellence in liberal learning, our commitment to community, the creativity and dedication of our faculty and staff, the quality of our students, our strong ties to alumni and the communities around us. I am daunted by the challenges, but I look forward to working with you to overcome them—and I am optimistic that many good things will come to us, even in the midst of adversity, this year. Thank you all, for everything you continue to do to make Geneseo a special place.