

## **Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast**

Fall Convocation Address

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Welcome back to Geneseo and welcome to what I believe will be an exciting year in the history of this college! I am especially pleased to welcome new faculty and staff. After three years of hiring freezes, we have been able to accumulate enough recently hired colleagues so that we need a new faculty and staff orientation. Yesterday, I had the pleasure of resuming that tradition, this time for 26 individuals who have joined us in the past 12 months. I would also like to welcome two old friends of the College who are taking on the senior positions in their areas after national searches, both of which attracted strong pools of applicants: Jim Milroy, Geneseo Class of 1981, who succeeds Ken Levison as Vice President for Finance and Administration, and Mike Mooney, our new athletic director, succeeding Marilyn Moore. As the College's new CFO, Jim had to give a speech at his own orientation!

I

I take my title today from a conversation between Alice and the White Queen in Chapter 5 of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. In the episode, Alice must respond to all sorts of outrageous statements by the Queen. At one point the Queen asks her to believe that "I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day." Alice asserts, "One can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," replies the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why

sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." This is, perhaps, an apt metaphor for our existence in SUNY and in the world of New York public higher education. If we are not called upon to *believe* six impossible things before breakfast, we often feel as if we have been asked to *do* six impossible things before breakfast. And before I am done today, I will argue that there is a valid sense in which we, by our very nature as a public liberal arts college, do indeed *believe* in impossible things.

I didn't start out with my current title, however. Earlier this summer, as I was contemplating this talk, I thought I would call it "That Was the Year That Was." Then I saw what happened to the stock market after the ineffectual compromise on the debt limit and decided that was not a good idea. Prognostication is always a dangerous game. But I will tell you today that we have stabilized the College's budget, and we can look to the future with some confidence. For the first time in several years, we can talk about the year ahead and plan for Geneseo's future as a public liberal arts college, focusing on the ways we can make this a better place and move ever closer to realizing our vision as a premier public liberal arts college. I shall share some of the things we are already doing, and will be doing, to achieve this vision in the coming year and beyond. But first, a look at the year past.

## II

Without question 2010-11 was the most difficult in the recent history of the College. The losses we suffered were—and are—very real. The decision to deactivate three perfectly good academic programs was wrenching for all of us, and I want to thank the members of the three programs for their professionalism and dedication in continuing

to provide for the needs of their students as we move to implement the changes. The process of reaching the decisions we had to make to eliminate our \$7.2 million structural deficit was intensely painful for the entire College community, I believe, and it tended to crowd out in all of our minds other, more positive things we accomplished. To make progress at all in such difficult circumstances is a true example of our ability to do the seemingly impossible. In spite of the challenges we faced, there are many examples of real achievement and success in the year past.

Even though we closed applications to the three deactivated programs, we have continued to attract a diverse and talented student body. To make up for the shortfall in potential students, we admitted a slightly larger percentage of our applicants this year, but we remain highly selective: median SAT scores are 1330 (versus last year's historic high of 340); 51 percent in the top 10 percent of their graduating classes, 80 percent in the top fifth. But what I find most exciting is the increased diversity in the class: according to official registration data, students of color make up one-quarter of the class (24.7 percent). Among our student body as a whole, the numbers are approaching 19 percent. Add to this a record number of 70 new international students joining our community, and you can see that we have made significant progress in creating a diverse and inclusive college community that enhances teaching and learning. Our efforts to do this will continue in the coming year.

Our talented students continued to excel, thanks to outstanding teaching and mentoring. Almost half (49 percent) of the Class of 2010 went on directly to graduate or professional study—the highest proportion in our history. Though this record was affected somewhat by the weak economy, our students' continuing success is also driven

by our strong program of undergraduate research and mentoring. Last year's GREAT Day drew more than 850 student presenters and performers, for example.

Unquestionably, our support for high-impact educational practices like undergraduate research enhances our excellence as a public liberal arts college. Indeed, Geneseo is a powerhouse in national terms in producing Ph.D.'s. According to NSF data, Geneseo ranks number 16 among all primarily undergraduate institutions in the U.S. in the number of doctoral degrees in science and engineering—297—attained by graduates in the past decade. Only two other public universities make the top 20, and they have undergraduate enrollments of 16,500 and 17,500, respectively. I could cite similar examples from the humanities and social sciences, but plainly our record in what I sometimes call “high-end workforce development” is a tribute to the research and mentoring skills of our faculty in all fields during the past year as well as the talent and enthusiasm of our students. That's why even in a bad year we invested in further support--\$50,000 more in College and Foundation funds—for faculty research at Geneseo, with an enhanced program of travel and released time for grant-writing. Even in the midst of the six impossible things in teaching, research, and service we do every day, our faculty has continued to shine in research—bringing in \$1.75 million in new funds last year and sending out several proposals for large grants. We have again been invited to submit a major grant to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. A faculty team from the biological sciences is working on the proposal as I speak.

At the heart of Geneseo's liberal arts education are other transformational practices including service-learning and international studies. Here, again, we have much to be proud of. Some 1400 students participated in various service and service-learning

activities through the Volunteer Center. Geneseo was again named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, this time "with distinction"—we've been on the list every year since its inception. Geneseo was again among the top ten master's universities in the country in the annual *Washington Monthly* rankings, which are based on a college's performance as an engine of social mobility, facilitator of student research, and promoter of service to the community. Despite the budgetary constraints, more students than ever participated in study-abroad programs, some of which also involved service-learning. Let me share an interesting factoid: this year we passed the 1000 mark in students who have taken our Summer Humanities Abroad. In addition we offered Hum 2 on the shores of Walden Pond this summer, in connection with an exciting new Digital Thoreau Project headquartered in Milne library and carried out in cooperation with the Thoreau Institute and the Thoreau Society. More than six impossible things accomplished here, I would say!

In athletics, too, Geneseo scholar-athletes were notably successful, winning six conference championships, including our first-ever championship in field hockey and a return to our championship tradition in women's basketball, and adding 17 All-Americans to our roster. Five coaches were named SUNYAC coaches of the year, and Marilyn Moore was honored with a major lifetime achievement award by the Rochester Press-Radio Club. Again, let me put these achievements in national perspective: in this year's rankings for the Learfield Cup for the best Division III athletic record, Geneseo was thirty-ninth among the 425 schools in the division. Only two other schools in New York—both major physical education powers—were more highly ranked.

In building community, I am also proud of March's successful Teach-In on Sexual Assault, which will be followed up by further programming in the Fall Semester—a sign of fruitful partnership between faculty and student affairs staff and a clear message that, in good times and bad, Geneseo does not avoid the difficult issues. We also introduced the “Stand Up for Geneseo” website designed to help students report incidents of concern, and continued our bystander intervention training. All these programs build community and improve campus climate.

Finally, in a year of great stringency in the College's personnel and operating budget, we made good progress in the only area where we had any money: we are now well under way with the long-delayed Doty Building renovation project (funded by previously appropriated capital funds which, as you know, are restricted by state law to construction). Like all recent construction projects, this building will have geothermal heating and will be built to “green” standards as part of our sustainability efforts. Speaking of facilities, I would be remiss if I did not mention our grounds crew and cleaning and maintenance staff. In a year in which their units suffered the highest proportion of positions lost through retirement, they have managed to keep the College looking as good as it ever has.

### III

These are only a few examples of the great things we have accomplished in the year past, in spite of our various budget woes. What about the future? To set the course for the year ahead, we must return to the story of the budget. By the end of the Fall Semester, last year, as you all know, we had established a plan to bring the budget back into balance over a three-year period, through a combination of actions: eliminating lines

vacated through retirements, enhancing revenues, and program curtailments. The “final” state budget as passed on March 31, however, contained significant further cuts to the SUNY budget (for the fourth year in a row) and no restorations of funding for the state operated campuses in the system. For Geneseo, the additional cuts totaled \$2.2 million—or about 16 percent of our state tax dollar support. As we say in New York, however, with the State budget it’s never over until it’s over. Thanks to continuing advocacy by all of us and urging from the Governor, the Legislature returned to the tuition issue in May. After a roller-coaster ride in Albany, the legislature passed a rational tuition bill, NY SUNY 2020, in late June. I shall provide the details in my annual budget report next week, but in essence the bill permits SUNY to raise its tuition by \$300 per year for the next five years and requires campuses to fund additional TAP aid for qualified students from the new tuition revenue. This is not the differential tuition policy we had hoped for, but it is a major improvement. It establishes modest and predictable tuition increases for our students and their families. At the same time, it assures increased revenues for Geneseo, in this and the following four years; and it provides a loose guarantee of maintenance of effort (the legislature cannot reduce SUNY funding below this year’s level unless the Governor declares a financial exigency, and the Governor has promised not to sweep SUNY’s funds in the middle of the budget year).

The passage of the Rational Tuition Bill represents real progress in SUNY finances. We can now plan thoughtfully for the future and count on revenues to fill some of the vacancies in various departments. That is good news, but even with the tuition increase, which nets Geneseo \$1.2 million this year, our state operations budget for 2011-12 is \$1 million less than last year’s—and the sad fact remains that state tax dollar

support has been cut 40 percent in four years. To balance this year's budget, we will need to use \$4.37 million in reserves. Continuing use of limited reserves is obviously not sustainable, but we have worked out a plan to wean ourselves from dependence on reserves over the five-year period. For this to succeed, we must fully achieve the anticipated savings from last year's actions to eliminate the structural deficit, and we must be careful to manage spending. This will not be easy, but if we take care we will be able to count on the "new normal" in funding that we assumed in our budget actions last year. At this level of funding we will be able maintain the quality of the College without having to make further painful program cuts. In the real world of public higher education finances in New York, this is probably as good as it will get. We can live with it and maintain our commitment to excellence

What does this mean for the year ahead and the years beyond? For one thing, we will be able to fill some of the faculty lines we have held vacant for the past several years. Even after we permanently eliminated nine lines as part of our deficit-reduction plan, there were still 30 vacant faculty positions at the end of the 2010-11 year. As Provost Long pointed out, our student-faculty ratio had risen to an unacceptably high level of 20 to 1, with all that means for crowded classes and limited course availability. In May I authorized searches for ten temporary full-time appointments to relieve the pressure on the departments most heavily affected by retirements or large enrollments. These appointments were intended to meet our most pressing curricular needs and at the same time be strategic in advancing our goals. Eight of the searches were successful, and our new colleagues are here with us today. I am pleased to inform you that, in order to reduce the student-faculty ratio and to meet strategic curricular needs going forward, we

plan to conduct searches for seventeen tenure-track positions over the next two years. These will not be simply replacement appointments. They will help us maintain excellence; and they will also enable us to shape our curriculum in new and strategic ways.

Faculty appointments are the lifeblood of a great college. They keep us all from becoming stale and allow us to innovate. Support for all of us who are here on the faculty and the staff is also important if we are to achieve our goals—if we are able to make some of those six impossible things possible. Here again we are moving ahead in the coming year. Taking off from some of Geneseo's Six Big Ideas and making use of insights gained by the faculty team that attended the AAC&U General Education Seminar this summer, ten departments have been awarded \$200,000 in curriculum innovation grants for the coming year. Projects range from extensive efforts to reconfigure curriculum and course load in Mathematics, Psychology, English and History, to the development of individual courses or new interdisciplinary majors, such as neuroscience. Vital forward thinking of this sort is now possible because of greater certainty about the budget and because of our careful strategic actions in conserving college resources for the long term.

Our excellence as a public liberal arts college is, in a quite literal sense, undergirded and enabled by the equipment and infrastructure that support our teaching and learning mission. Even in times of financial stringency, it is important for us to invest in the things that allow us to maintain our quality and move us forward as a public liberal arts college. Last spring, I therefore asked the Strategic Planning Group to consider criteria for allocating some reserve funds for equipment needs that have gone

unmet because of four years of budget reductions. Based on the criteria they established, the Budget Priorities Committee evaluated 28 requests totaling over \$3.1 million. The requests were sufficiently urgent and compelling that we decided to go ahead with funding 13 projects totaling about \$2 million, even before the passage of the rational tuition plan. With tuition assured, we were able to fund two additional requests. New projects range from an imager microscope and cryostat for neuroscience research and optical characterization equipment in chemistry to 11 electronic pianos for a new piano lab in Brodie and a new sprung floor for the dance studio. They involve all areas of the College, including a new and more effective radio system for facilities services and the police, a major upgrade of the College's wireless infrastructure, and a new dasher board system for Wilson Ice Arena. All of these projects enhance our position as a premier public liberal arts college and meet the expectations of our students and faculty. I might add, too, that our purchasing department literally did accomplish six impossible things before breakfast in managing to get all of the equipment bid and ordered under state purchasing regulations before the beginning of classes.

In the area of capital facilities, we can also look ahead to significant progress in the next year. As I mentioned, the Doty renovation project, which represents a shared use facility with the state's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities and will provide opportunities for educational collaboration, is well under way and scheduled for completion at the end of 2012. The College Stadium project, now under design, is set to begin this February and will move quickly to completion as soon as the OPWDD programs can move into Doty. Design work for the Bailey Hall renovation project, which will provide new facilities for departments in the social sciences, is almost

complete, and we expect project construction to begin by the end of this calendar year. Renovation of Monroe Hall—another project with geothermal heat—has already begun. But the most exciting project of all is our new facilities master plan, which provides a truly inspiring vision of Geneseo’s buildings and facilities as the physical embodiment of excellence in liberal arts in our place. The Master Plan extends far into the future, from 2013 to 2023.

I have already mentioned our success in recruiting a diverse and talented student body. Building a diverse and inclusive community is essential to our mission as a public liberal arts college—and a key indicator of academic excellence. The Strategic Planning Group has discussed a campus-wide diversity plan developed by the Commission on Diversity and Community. In the coming months, we will share that plan, along with goals and benchmarks to be developed, with the entire College community. We expect to continue to create a more perfect community, in an open and intentional way.

These are some of the major initiatives for the future. I will mention only a few others: expansion of international programs, including a new Science and International Policy internship in Washington; exploration of technology in our public liberal arts college setting; enhanced community partnership’s including President Obama’s new interfaith service initiative; a comprehensive study of general education; and further expansion of our summer curriculum and programs. You get the picture: a remarkably rich and full agenda. All of these initiatives advance our goals as a public liberal arts college; many of them grow out of Geneseo’s Six Big Ideas.

As if this weren’t enough, we must also complete our self-study document and prepare for the Middle States accreditation team visit in March. Accreditation visits from

AACSB and NCATE are also scheduled in the next year or two. Our Middle States team will be chaired by President Joe Urgo of St. Mary's College of Maryland, one of our true peers in COPLAC. President Urgo will visit campus in October. Accreditation is a reminder that we must—and do—hold ourselves accountable for our success as a public liberal arts college. But this time around the Middle States self-study process is more than that. We have chosen to do a comprehensive self-study organized around the theme of transformational learning (and carried out on a wiki, to boot). This choice of theme has gives us a chance to bring together all we do as a public liberal arts college and assess ourselves in relation to our most vital and central activities.

If there is one basic idea I wish you to take away from today's remarks, it is this: the current fiscal situation of the college will allow us to plan thoughtfully; to support Geneseo's strategic goals, albeit not lavishly; to link our planning with suitable resources; and to come ever closer to our ideal of excellence as a public liberal arts college. Achieving our goals will require resources, far more resources than we will ever get from the State of New York, and that brings me to the biggest and perhaps most important initiative of the year.

#### IV

On September 15 in New York City and on October 13 in Rochester, we will launch the public and concluding phase of Geneseo's capital campaign, "Shaping Lives of Purpose: The Campaign for Geneseo". Though I hesitate to use the term, I believe this initiative will indeed be historic for the College. Already, in the so-called silent phase of the campaign, we have generated \$16 million in gifts and commitments. Our ultimate goal is \$25 million by the end of the campaign—a challenging task. But we are off to a

strong start. More than 300 alumni and friends of the College have already indicated that they will attend the New York City event. All costs of the event have been underwritten by members of the Geneseo Foundation Board. Already, through gifts and market appreciation, the College's endowment has grown from \$6 million a few years ago to more than \$16 million today. The campaign will help raise the endowment further, to a level that will generate more than \$1 million a year for College purposes—purposes determined by us and our donors and an income stream that will not be affected by fluctuations in state support. Endowment income and private support, if you think about it, are even better than the current tuition policy, since they are lasting and irrevocable.

The Campaign is important for another reason. It is part of a larger, multi-faceted effort. It is part of Geneseo's long-term maturation process as an institution of higher education. The campaign—and all of the work being done by our colleagues in Advancement—will provide a sound foundation (please pardon the pun!) for future initiatives that will bring even more private investment to the College. As I've been traveling around the country and meeting with alumni, I find that there is a great reservoir of good will among graduates from all eras of our history. Alumni remember and revere their professors and advisors; alumni feel connected with the friends (and sometimes life-partners) they found at Geneseo. But they often tell us they feel disconnected from the College. We need to rekindle their relationships to Geneseo and build and sustain them. With this goal in mind, the Foundation Board created a new alumni initiative in early 2010, building on and extending the long-standing work of our alumni association. Since then, Geneseo has held 110 alumni events engaging more than 6300 of our 50,000 alumni. We have created 18 regional committees throughout the country, from San

Francisco to Boston and from Chicago to Tampa. Over 70 of these alumni events have been sponsored and underwritten by alumni. You may have noticed that I have been doing more travel in the past year. Much of it was related to regional alumni events. As the Campaign gears up in its public phase, I expect to be on the road for Geneseo even more. You may also have noticed that our alumni reunions have grown five-fold in the past three years, bringing a record number of more than 900 alumni back to campus this July.

Our long-range goal in the Campaign is not merely to raise \$25 million, but also to build a sustainable advancement operation that will continue to engage alumni and donors in a variety of ways and will grow and build upon itself, so that total giving to Geneseo rises from the current \$2.3-2.8 million, to \$5 million and beyond, and so that the College's endowment grows to a level that will provide even more significant support for our faculty, students, and programs. In the coming months, we will be asking you as faculty and staff to participate in the campaign. You'll soon be hearing about the faculty-staff portion of the campaign, led by a committee of our colleagues chaired by Ron Herzman and Andrea Klein. Stay tuned.

How is the Campaign related to the work of the College I've been talking about this afternoon? Obviously, resources are important, but I would argue that the campaign is also important because, more than state funding and tuition, it will enable us to do many of the special things we do at Geneseo and do them better. Undergraduate research, leadership programs, international education, sophisticated integrated programs that build and foster, as Bringing Theory to Practice aims to do, student well-being, intellectual and personal development, and civic engagement in the great liberal arts

tradition, shaping lives of purpose, if you will—these things are not, and have never been, line items in the ever-shrinking State budget for SUNY.

The Campaign seeks support in five general areas. Each of them is closely related to the most important and exciting things we do as a public liberal arts college. The campaign seeks to support, through targeted endowments of all sorts, a new Center for Inquiry, Discovery, and Leadership, that brings together some of the unique things we do here. It is intended to support “defining experiences” of all sorts for our students, including an integrative research or service project for our most creative students, aided by a \$5000 grant: something that might well change their lives and perhaps the world. The Campaign also seeks gifts for Academic Innovation and Faculty Support—faculty-student research, endowed professorships (we already have one, funded through a \$2.5 million campaign commitment by Bud VanArsdale), and mentoring programs. The campaign also seeks targeted funding in the areas of Global Education and Athletics. Finally, as College expenses continue to rise nationwide, we need far more support to ensure that students of all means and from all backgrounds can continue to attend Geneseo and be transformed by experiences of the sort supported by the Center and the other initiatives of the Campaign. In an era of rising costs, scholarships are more important than ever.

You will be hearing more about the campaign goals, but I wanted to give you a taste of what we’re trying to accomplish. As I mentioned, the theme of our Middle States self-study, is transformational learning—the unique and powerful educational experience we offer at Geneseo. You may think of the Campaign, which we have called “Shaping Lives of Purpose”, as part of the educational process, as another way to support the

transformational learning that is our primary task as a public liberal arts college. Everything we have done in the past year and everything we seek to do in the next several years, we do in service of our mission and our vision of Geneseo as the premier public liberal arts college in the country.

As I contemplated the accomplishments of the past year and searched for a title for this address, I realized how difficult the year has been for all of us. I know I was right to abandon my original title. Now, however, when I've considered all we've accomplished and seen the rich possibilities before us as college community in the next several years, I am more convinced than ever that we will be able, meaningfully, to say that last year was the year that *was*, and that this is indeed a new year. As long as I have been at Geneseo, I have been keenly aware that every year all of us are asked to do six seemingly impossible things before breakfast. That's the nature of our existence as a public liberal arts college in SUNY, and at Geneseo we hold ourselves to high standards. I thank you all for doing those six—and more—seemingly impossible things in the past year. As we begin this new year, I also ask you to *believe* in the impossible but wonderfully life-enhancing things that we do as a public liberal arts college. I certainly believe, and I remain very much committed to our mission in this special place. I welcome you to join me and all of your colleagues in continuing the work of transformational learning in the coming year.