As always, it is both a joy and a privilege to speak to you at the beginning of a new academic year. This year is different, however: this is my final Opening Convocation, and this will be my last formal address to you as President of Geneseo. That fact, if anything, makes it an even greater privilege to speak today, when I am, as it were, living on borrowed time during my last five weeks on the job. Next year at this time, Carol Long will be giving the Opening Convocation address. After October 1, when I formally step down, she will officiate at all College events as Geneseo’s Interim President. During the month of September, I shall be moving out of the President’s Office and handing off various duties to Carol, and by October 1 she will be completely in charge. She plans to call an All-College Meeting early in the semester, to present the College’s agenda for the year ahead. We are fortunate indeed to have an academic leader of her caliber to serve as president for the next year or more, as we prepare for, and conduct the search for my successor. As I’ve said before, Carol has liberal education in her bones, and she knows this campus intimately. And besides, she is a joy to work with.

With my retirement and the forthcoming transition in the president’s office, 2013-2014 will obviously be a year of changes. There is another major change on the horizon, however—perhaps even more significant than my departure. Associate Vice President William Caren has indicated his intention to retire at the end of this academic year, after
47 years of outstanding service to Geneseo. Bill let me know this when I told him about my own plans last spring. Now, it’s time to act on the reality of his decision.

As our marketing guru and chief strategist in admissions, more than any other individual Bill has been responsible for making Geneseo the highly selective, nationally ranked public liberal arts college we are today. To maintain our place in American higher education, it is absolutely essential that we continue to attract a talented and diverse student body, and Bill’s efforts for more than 30 years have been the key to our success in this regard. He will be extremely difficult to replace. We shall begin a search for a new chief enrollment officer this fall. Given the tight market for outstanding admissions officers, we plan to seek the services of a specialized search consultant. I shall have more to say about Bill on another occasion—I’ll even return from sabbatical to say it—but I am pleased that Bill has offered to stay on the job until his successor is named and, if needed, to work with that individual after he or she is appointed.

Change involves arrivals as well as departures, and there is good news on that front. It gives me great pleasure to introduce Judith Albers, the newly appointed Van Arsdale Professor of Entrepreneurship, who joins us formally on September 1. She is a living example of the benefits that have come from our recently completed capital campaign. A nationally recognized authority on entrepreneurial training, with specific expertise in the commercialization of university-based research, Judy holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from Brandeis and an undergraduate degree from Duke. She is best known as the co-founder and managing partner of Neworks LLC, a training company that offers the Pre-Seed Workshop, which she also developed. The Workshop is a two-and-a-half-day “build-a-company” event that rallies community talent and resources to investigate and
transform technologies with commercial potential into pre-seed-stage companies. Previously, Judy served as the chief operating officer of Excell Partners, a state-supported fund providing seed money to high-tech companies across Upstate New York. As we seek to increase Geneseo’s impact on economic development in the region, she will play a key role, while also developing curricula in entrepreneurship across the campus. Her contacts and experience will be invaluable as we explore the meaning of entrepreneurship as a liberal art. Along with Judy, we have appointed five new tenure-track faculty and ten fulltime visiting faculty. After four painful years of hiring freezes and vacant lines, it is good to be hiring new faculty. I welcome them and our new professional staff members warmly today. The rebuilding process will continue in the coming year, with national searches for 12 tenure-track faculty and two continuing lecturers.

I.

This is my nineteenth Fall Convocation speech. Rather than reporting in detail on the highlights of the past year and laying out an agenda for the coming year, I’d like to take a longer view and a somewhat more impressionistic approach. I remember chairing an accreditation visit to an institution that will remain nameless—but, suffice it to say, it had some serious problems. As we wrestled with the self-study and the Middle States requirements for assessment and evidence-based conclusions, one of the team members commented, “I’m afraid we have now entered a data-free zone.” You’ll get less data than usual from me today, but I trust that my remarks will be grounded in some slight knowledge of the facts.
As I prepared this speech, I read all eighteen of my previous convocation addresses, some 290 pages of material: a masochistic activity, no doubt, and a process that reminded me at times of what the medieval churchmen called morose delectation; that is, dwelling on evil or despairing thoughts. St. Thomas Aquinas defines morose delectation as a sin because someone “is deliberately holding onto and turning over what should have been cast aside as soon as it touched the mind.” Seriously, it really wasn’t that bad. In fact I was actually somewhat reassured when I started noticing recurring themes in my talks—some of them happy, others less happy. Here are a few examples.

I begin with an unhappy theme: funding for higher education in New York State. Of the past eighteen years, nine can be described as bad years: the Pataki cuts of 1995, 1996 and 1997; the follow-on effects of the World Trade Center destruction during fiscal years 2002 and 2003; and the four budget-crisis years of 2008 through 2011. During another five years Geneseo received essentially flat funding. In only four years out of the past eighteen, including 2012, did Geneseo receive modestly increased funding. There’s a pattern here: we sail merrily on for a few years, with flat or modestly increased funding, and then the New York state budget goes South. This has been the nature of funding for SUNY Geneseo for at least three decades. I recall that my predecessor, Carol Harter, used to complain about the same problem under the previous Governor Cuomo.

These are the budgetary realities we face—and will continue to face—at Geneseo, but I believe we can draw some positive conclusions from the way we have dealt with them. First, over the years, for as long as I have been here, under both Ken Levison and Jim Milroy, we have managed our budgets and expenditures prudently and well. If you think about it, our success as an outstanding public liberal arts college under the multiple
constraints we have experienced is nothing short of remarkable. In good times and bad, we have gone on being Geneseo, as we like to say. In the bad years of the 1990s we were able to use college reserves to cover our operations, and, because we were willing to make painful—and thoroughly undesirable—strategic program decisions in the horrendous budget years from 2008 to 2011, we have now entered a relatively stable budget phase, which seems likely to continue for the next several years. We can plan and rebuild (witness our faculty hires, for example). Our focus on the Six Big Ideas (ours, not the System’s) and our careful planning process in eliminating a $7.2 million structural deficit over a three-year period mean that we are in much better shape today than other campuses that avoided tough budget decisions during the same period. I want to thank you all for bearing with the College through the lean years as well as the good.

Another, obviously related theme in most of my talks is the need for private support to replace our rapidly diminishing state funding—according to Jim Milroy’s latest calculations, state tax dollars provide only 14.5 percent of our general operating budget. This is a less troubling topic today than ever before. One of the reasons I’m sticking around for another month is to celebrate the conclusion of the Shaping Lives of Purpose capital campaign. I’m delighted to inform you that, by the end of the campaign on June 30th, we exceeded our goal of $22 million with some room to spare. All the figures are still not in, but we will announce the final total at the Foundation Dinner on September 27 during Homecoming Weekend. This is the second, and by far the largest capital campaign in College history, raising three times the amount raised in our groundbreaking 125th Anniversary Campaign in the mid-1990s. I want to thank everyone who contributed to and worked on the campaign.
It goes without saying that private support is becoming more important every year, but one of the other things that has pleased me has been to see how all aspects of our advancement operation have grown and matured over the past two decades. It is no accident that Debbie Hill, who was there all along until her retirement this spring, has received the Art Hatton Award this year. Advancement isn’t just a matter of raising money. It involves all the ways we promote and advance the cause of SUNY Geneseo. (I devoted an entire Convocation speech to this topic in 2006 in fact. Does anyone remember?) Over the most recent campaign years we have strengthened our annual fund and major gift operations. Our alumni programs have grown five or six-fold since the start of the campaign, and as a happy by-product we now have a national network of alumni with volunteer committees in no fewer than 18 regions of the country, from Los Angeles to Boston and from Chicago to Tampa. The Geneseo Scene, our advancement publications, and our website are the best they’ve ever been. Under the leadership of Bill Brower, we’re poised to do even better in the future. As is true of most private universities, we are already laying the groundwork for a third campaign. It’s a pleasure to see the work of two previous vice-presidents and hundreds of volunteers come to fruition in today’s more mature advancement operation. During all the lean budget years, we continued to invest in advancement. We are now reaping the fruits. We have come a long way in building a sustainable advancement operation.

Another leit motiv in my annual talks is construction and facilities. And on this topic, following in the wake of Ron Herzman’s 2013 Commencement address, I’d like to do a bit of creative recycling myself. Let me quote the opening sentences of my 1995 Convocation address—if only to prove that the more things change, the more they remain
the same and to demonstrate how little I have learned from experience in the past 18 years. The past year, I say, was “filled with surprises and significant changes for us all.” And, I continue:

“I well remember sitting in the front row at this convocation one year ago. I would never have predicted then that I would be here on the other side of the lectern speaking to you now. Had you asked me last year at this time, I would have predicted—and most of you would have, too—that Mario Cuomo would be re-elected as Governor of New York and SUNY would experience a year or two more of budgetary stability—not opulence, mind you, but stability, however fleeting. As you may also recall, at this time last year most of us were wondering whether the Upper Quad would be finished by the first snowfall and whether the various departments slated to move into the new classroom building (South Hall) would do so at the beginning of the Spring semester or in June. Well, we’re still wondering.”

“Prophecy is a risky business, especially when it involves elections or capital projects in the great State of New York,” I conclude. There’s that pesky SUNY budget again (under George Pataki that year, $320 million was cut). And I note I have just now, 18 years later, once again predicted stable, predictable funding for the next several years. I guess I’ll never learn! I’m reasonably confident that I’m right, but who knows? The so-called Rational Tuition Plan has thus far provided a predictable base of funding, and there have been no reductions in state support this year—so far.

As I re-read my 2011 address, aptly entitled “Six Impossible Things before Breakfast,” I found myself once again in the prediction business: “In the area of capital facilities we can look ahead to significant progress in the next year. The Doty renovation
project . . . is well underway and scheduled for completion by the end of 2012. The Stadium project . . . is set to begin this February and will move quickly to completion as soon as the OPWDD clients can move into Doty.” How wrong I was. The original Doty contractor declared itself in default last fall, and now that Finger Lakes DDSO is happily lodged in Doty, the contractor for the Stadium has recently withdrawn from the project. College offices will indeed start moving into Doty on September 3, however, and the wonderful new recital hall, with a new Steinway concert grand, is almost ready for use. I am assured that the Stadium will get back on track, too.

Despite the multitude of problems associated with capital construction, I mention these projects today because the renovation and renewal of the campus is one of the great accomplishments of the past two decades. Geneseo deserves facilities as excellent as our programs—buildings, laboratories, classrooms, playing fields and grounds worthy of our intrinsic quality as a college. Since 1994, by my estimate, we have completed, or have in progress, some $300 million in capital projects. When Bailey Hall and the College Stadium are finished, Geneseo will be by far the most beautiful of all the SUNY campuses. Already, we are receiving lots of positive comments about our appearance from returning alumni and parents of new students. Excellent facilities attract excellent students and support outstanding programs, as we have seen in the cases of the Integrated Science Center and Putnam, Seneca, and Monroe Halls—and as we shall soon see in the case of the new recital hall. I look forward to returning for the dedications of Doty, the College Stadium, and Bailey Hall, whose construction is moving along rapidly. We have much to celebrate and enjoy.
II.

State funding, private support, buildings, even outstanding publications, in each one of which we can and should take justifiable pride—all of these are in the final analysis instrumentalities, means to an end. And that end, the great aim of this college, is the continuing creation and nourishment of a teaching and learning community that truly empowers its graduates, that speaks to the mind, body, and soul, a college that educates individuals for civic participation and true fulfillment in life. That’s what our mission statement says we are: a public liberal arts college. We have, I believe, never lost sight of that mission. As I look back on my two decades here, that’s what pleases me most: we have kept the faith; we have consistently sought to become an ever better and ever stronger public liberal arts college.

To be a great public liberal arts college, we need to build a diverse and inclusive community. This is another recurring theme, at least since 1997, in the various Convocation talks. Through the work of the Commission on Diversity and Community and through the efforts of hundreds of members of our community we have made progress, both in increasing structural (or compositional) diversity and in improving campus climate. Last year the College’s Strategic Planning Group approved a campus-wide diversity plan. Thanks to the work of the assessment and planning committee of the Commission, we now have goals and measurable objectives attached to the plan; and the committee has assigned responsibility for those goals to various campus groups. On Tuesday I was pleased to attend this year’s diversity planning retreat, which focused on the assigned responsibilities and which engaged more than fifty participants from all areas of the College. As I mentioned at the retreat, the creation of a comprehensive
diversity plan realizes one of our dreams when we established the Commission in 1998. Now it is time to get down to work in building an even stronger and more inclusive community. To inspire and help us in this work, we have invited Dr. Archie Ervin, Vice President for Institute Diversity at Georgia Tech, to give a Presidential Lecture on September 25.

Geneseo, as I’ve said all along, is a special place. It is a public liberal arts college, unique in SUNY, and one of the very finest colleges of its sort in the country—perhaps the finest. We specialize in liberal and liberating education—education for leadership and life—and we aspire to be the best college of our type in the country. The key word here is “aspire.” I believe we have come ever closer to achieving our aspirations in the past two decades. Let me list some of the marks of distinction that set us apart from most other public undergraduate colleges.

I have already mentioned diversity as a key value, but diversity can only achieve its work in community, and an important hallmark of a great public liberal arts college is a residential community that combines, in the words of our mission statement, “a rigorous curriculum and a rich co-curricular life” to create the most effective learning environment possible. I am delighted that we continue to be engaged in the Bringing Theory to Practice project of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and I note that, because of our institutional commitment and values, we have been awarded a special grant to continue this work, intended to re-envision liberal learning not only as intellectual learning but also as psycho-social development and civic engagement designed to promote personal well-being. With Real World Geneseo; with the stimulating intellectual and personal activities in our residential living program; with our
living-and-learning communities, Writer’s House, Eco-House, and Dante House; with our leadership programs; and with our deeply rooted commitment to Division III athletics as an integral part of our educational mission, we display the marks of a great public liberal arts college.

In our emphasis on high-impact practices as well, educational activities that have been found to be most effective in engaging students and changing students’ lives, we carry out the goals of Bringing Theory to Practice. High-impact practices—our mission statement calls them “transformational learning experiences”—are hallmarks of a great public liberal arts college and increasingly powerful marks of distinction for Geneseo. It has been a special joy for me to see the extraordinary growth of one such practice, undergraduate research, on my watch. I well remember our first annual summer research picnic in 1995—an event that has now grown to include more than a hundred faculty and student researchers. And now we also have GREAT Day, at which one in every six Geneseo student participates as presenter or performer. I rejoice in the growing number of our students who are admitted to the best graduate and professional schools. This is a high-impact practice that works.

Similarly, I celebrate our growing programs in service learning and leadership—other high impact practices that define us as an outstanding public liberal arts college. I celebrate the growth of the GOLD Leadership Program—learning undertaken, not for credit but for life-enhancement and therefore all the more impressive—and our long-standing tradition of service-learning embodied most notably in Livingston CARES and the work of the Xerox Center in the Rochester City School. These are further marks of distinction, to name just a few of my favorites, along with our summer programs for at-
risk students, the Young Scholars Academy and the new Soaring Stars program. To these outstanding programs, all of them points of personal pride for me, I would add our steadily growing study-abroad programs (35 percent of our students participate in at least one such experience before they graduate) and the dramatic increase in international students. This year we will welcome nearly 200 international to campus. In 1996-97 there were a total of six. Earlier today, in fact, I had the pleasure of meeting the parents of Cuckoo Gupta, a new student from India, who was featured on the Indian TV series College Search USA and who at the end of her visits chose Geneseo over the other two featured campuses. All of these international programs and more, fostered and developed over the past two decades by scores of faculty and staff members, are further evidence that we are accomplishing the work of a great public liberal arts college.

A great public liberal arts college, especially an honors college of the sort we represent, requires students worthy of the challenge of academic excellence and faculty and staff members who are eager to engage talented students in multiple ways. **We have** those students. **You are** that faculty and staff. For almost twenty years, it has been my privilege and continuing joy to work with you. As a professor and scholar, I have led a marginal existence during those years, gladly teaching on occasion, though pretty much, I fear, dead in the water in my research. During my sabbatical and retirement I am eager to return to several of my most pressing scholarly projects and to some of the writing I haven’t had the time to do in twenty-five years of heavy-duty administration. But before I do so, I want to say to you all how much vicarious pleasure and pride I have taken in what you and our students have accomplished and continue to do. One of my favorite events in recent college history is the installation of our chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, Alpha
Delta of New York. For me that was the most telling indicator of our academic excellence and the clearest sign that we had arrived as a public liberal arts college. Every time I read a new book or article by a Geneseo colleague, every time I see another instance of the truly extraordinary teaching that is part of our culture here (the four colleagues receiving SUNY teaching awards today are some of our superstars), every time I see the extraordinary research going on in the natural and social sciences, so often carried on with our talented undergraduates, I experience the greatest and keenest of vicarious pleasures. Thank you so much for all you have given me and meant to me over the years. I am deeply grateful.

III.

Nineteen years and one week. It’s been a great run. As I look back on these years, I have very few disappointments. I wish I had been able to teach more, rather than less. Our students are truly wonderful, and I’ve been fortunate indeed to be part of an excellent English department and to team-teach with a truly distinguished professor, scholar, and human being, my colleague Gene Stelzig. I wish that I could have participated in and attended more cultural activities on campus—and more athletic events as well. Most of all, I am disappointed that we have never managed to get the appropriate level of funding or a clearer designation from the system to carry out our special mission as a nationally recognized public liberal arts college and public honors college for the State of New York. It certainly has not been for want of trying, and we must continue to seek appropriate funding by all possible means in the coming years.
As I contemplate our future as a college, I am optimistic. I believe we can maintain our unique identity and continue to thrive as a public liberal arts college in the coming years. I would be less than candid, however, if I failed to recognize that we face some long-range challenges in the current environment in SUNY and American higher education in general. I shall quickly mention three of them, but won’t dwell on them.

First, in the past year or two we have encountered an increasingly difficult environment in admissions. High school graduating classes are shrinking everywhere in Upstate New York. Other colleges, public and private, are spending more and more money on non-need-based aid and scholarships. As we become more dependent on tuition revenue, we must take a look again at enrollment management—that is to say, how we get the talented and diverse student body we desire in the right quantities and in the right fields in a way that meets our financial plan. To maintain our quality as a selective public liberal arts college, we must continue to attract excellent students. This will not be easy. That’s why the search for Bill Caren’s successor is so important—and why I am pleased that Carol Long, at the request of Senate Executive Committee, plans to take a careful look at all the issues related to admissions and enrollment management as we begin the search this fall.

The second challenge is one that we have never succeeded in overcoming, during either Carol Harter’s presidency or mine. How do we manage to maintain a distinctive identity in a system that tends increasingly toward homogeneity and centralization and almost inevitably toward a depressing reversion to the mean? How do we secure appropriate funding for our distinctive mission? I talked about this last year, and it’s clear that we shall continue to face the tension between centralization and local control,
in an environment in SUNY in which residential liberal arts education of the sort we offer seems to be a low priority, if it even is on the list at all. We must continue to make the case for our species of liberal learning and use every possible means to acquire the resources we need to carry out our mission even more positively and fruitfully. We can do this, I believe, but we must be highly creative and highly strategic—and very persistent.

Finally, there is the current national—and global—environment facing U. S. higher education in general. President Obama’s visit to Western New York yesterday and today is a sharp reminder of the challenges. We can make the case for our efficiency, our return on investment, if you will—and make it convincingly. Indeed, we are among the most efficient colleges of our type in the nation according to *U.S. News*. We are a wonderful educational value. On the part of both political parties these days, however, there is a tendency to blame public colleges like Geneseo for problems not of their own making. Let’s be frank. Higher tuition costs in SUNY are almost entirely the product of the massive withdrawals of state support we have seen in the past twenty years. Even at its current modest level, Geneseo’s tuition is a tremendous bargain. We need to make the case aggressively and take advantage of some of the System’s initiatives to contain costs. At the same time, however, there is a very real danger that policy makers will lose sight the true goals and purposes of higher education in the debates on college costs. As a public liberal arts college, one of our jobs is to remind the world of those goals and how important they are—and, moreover, how they add value, not just economic but human and civic value, to U.S. society in a global, knowledge-based economy.
Enough about these challenges, important though they may be. In spite of them I remain confident. Based on what I know about this institution and above all what I know about you, my colleagues, I am certain that we can overcome them. We have the talent. We have the vision of what is best in higher education. And, above all, we have the ability to work together as a community to confront any challenge that faces us and not only endure, but prevail. I appreciated James McLean’s remarks on shared governance because they reminded me of what I am most grateful for: our sense of community at Geneseo. Like all good liberal arts colleges, we are a community of discourse. That’s what our intellectual enterprise is about. But we are also a unique human community with its own distinctive culture. I have been privileged to be member of this community. I shall remain part of it, even after I retire, and ultimately far beyond the confines of time and space. I thank each and every one of you for enriching my and Ruth’s lives in countless ways and for letting me share in our common work. I’m not going anywhere immediately, but I do want you to know how I feel. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being the wonderful community of colleagues and friends that you are.