

Faculty and Staff Convocation Speech

Minot State University

August 16, 2006; 10:30 A.M.

Conference Center, Student Union.

David Fuller, President

WELCOME

Good morning and greetings to all of our friends and colleagues, to faculty and staff, and a hearty greeting and welcome to our new faculty and staff. We are pleased to have you join us and to contribute to our common interest in student success, learning, and growth.

This morning I would like to say a few words about what students are thinking, what I did on my summer vacation, the many faces of higher education, diploma mills, what our consumer-students seem to want, and where Minot State University seems to fit into the future. Of course I want to review the draft of the strategic plan that each of you has received and to discuss how I think it will help move us in a bold and dramatic way to our centennial celebration in 2013-2014 and beyond. I also want to seek your comments and suggestions before we complete the plan and use its strategies as ways to redefine ourselves and our direction. It's a good time to continue to think about our students and to continue to remind ourselves about the need to know and support them.

WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE STUDENTS THINKING?

Last year we shared with you a fascinating video produced by our own staff and students that gave us an insight into what our students thought about learning at Minot State University. We also were able to review and discuss the results of our students' responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement and what they thought about the level of engagement with our university.

Each year brings with it new perspectives. Our students, despite our best efforts to have them know the world as we know it, see the world differently, they see us differently, and they think of education in much different ways from the ways we knew. The "Beloit College's Mindset List ® for the Class of 2009" is developed by Beloit's Keefer Professor of the Humanities Tom McBride and Director of Public Affairs Ron Nief; and offers some fun and interesting insights into the perspectives of first-year incoming students.

McBride observes that "This year's entering students have grown up in a country where the main business has become business, and where terrorism, from obscure beginnings, has built up slowly but surely to become the threat it is today. Cable channels have become as mainstream as the 'Big 3' used to be, formality in dress has become more quaint than ever, and Aretha Franklin, Kermit the Frog and Jimmy Carter have become old-timers" (Beloit web page, 2005 Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin).

Most students entering college this fall were born in 1987. Here are a few items from the list of 75:

With little need to practice, most of them do not know how to tie a tie.

Al-Qaida has always existed with Osama bin Laden at its head.

"Whatever" is not part of a question but an expression of sullen rebuke.

They have grown up in a single superpower world.

Researchers have always been looking for stem cells.

They have always been challenged to distinguish between news and entertainment on cable TV.

America's Funniest Home Videos has always been on television

While we might be a bit surprised by their worlds, at Minot State University we pride ourselves in knowing our students and supporting them, whether we're professors in the classroom, maintenance staff, student affairs personnel, administrators, and any other valued faculty and staff member on our campus. Putting students first and supporting our students steadfastly isn't a job of a few and not others. It's the job of all of us. That's why we're here. And we all know that putting students first and supporting their growth and success depends on knowing them, of course, understanding their quirks, their perspectives, their ways of learning, their problems, and aspirations. Every one of us should go out of his or her way to help individual students, give them directions, ask if they need help, to mentor them, to teach them, to believe in their potential, and to nurture them as a horticulturalist nurtures young plants. To look each in the eye and say hello, and ask how things are going should continue to be a common experience on our campus.

WHAT I DID DURING SUMMER VACATION

First, a little story about the summer and my vacation (by the way this was one of my standard writing assignments when I taught freshman comp). A couple of weeks ago Nancy and I traveled to northern Minnesota and southern Ontario to stay in a remote cabin on an island in Lake of the Woods. We've been going there for more than 30 years. In fact, this year while we were on vacation, we celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary.

When we first went up there in the early 70s, there were virtually no pelicans, bald eagles, or osprey. Now, years later there are thousands of pelicans, swimming, standing tall on rookery rocks, and flying high in the air. What a dramatic sight it is to see a gliding pelican. One reason, as I understand, for the notable comeback of the pelicans is that in the early 70s, DDT was responsible for weakening the birds' eggs shells and consequently reducing the number of adult pelicans and other large birds to dangerously low levels. One day—on our anniversary coincidentally--when Nancy and I were driving our boat into a large bay, we saw an unusual sight, one we had never seen before. A large white pelican, flying and gliding not more than three feet above the water, was being followed by a straight line of dark birds of similar size, which we found out later were immature pelicans. There must have been more than 100 of

these young birds following the white pelican and remarkably doing the same thing the pelican was doing—flying and gliding above the water. When the pelican’s wings quit flapping and would straighten into a glide, so too would the long line of young pelicans straighten their wings and begin to glide.

We are blessed to see such things in our lives. It seemed clear to me and Nancy that the adult pelican was leading and educating the young birds, who no doubt were not all off-springs of the adult bird, or else that bird was pretty prolific this season! When I got back to Minot, I sent an email to an ornithologist friend of mine in South Dakota, whom I used to go with and take groups of students on field trips by canoe in the Boundary Waters. My friend and former colleague is a biologist, a skeptic, sharp as a tack, questioning, a scholar and published researcher, and an astute practitioner of the scientific method, as one would expect. I told him about what we saw and asked if there was any literature on this obvious demonstration of the pelican’s general and natural education of the young birds.

He responded almost immediately by email. Here’s what he wrote: “Birds are dumb. They come prepackaged with what little intelligence they need. So flight training is rare. I suspect, rather, that the older bird might have been returning to a roosting area and the young were just following, since flying in a line is energetically efficient.” Now while I have a great deal of respect for him and my other scientist friends and their critical tendencies to debunk those romantic interpretations of we English types, I am nevertheless respectfully skeptical of his interpretation and thus believe, without as much assurance as I held originally, that what Nancy and I witnessed was a form of education. The etymology of education is traced to the Latin *educere*, which means literally to lead away from, or as Webster’s has it, to develop and cultivate mentally and morally, to teach, to bring up a child. It seemed to me more than an “energetically efficient” coincidence or mistake, but an example of a bird leading young birds to know how to glide, to fly above the water, and to prepare for leaving the rookeries. Obviously the point is debatable.

I guess in the larger scheme of things that is what makes our jobs so interesting and worthwhile--that we observe closely, we study, we interpret, and we debate points of view. That’s the world we immerse our students in, and those are the experiences that will continue to help our students know how to make our world better. In so many respects, those experiences are what come from higher education. We certainly hope that higher education in its many manifestations, forms, functions, and intentions can continue to provide such moments for reflection, debate, study, cross-disciplinary considerations, and interpretations.

THE MANY FACES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What’s interesting about the world of higher education right now is that students can choose about anything they want, they can get a degree from their home, they can attend a college, they can travel, they can do it by correspondence, they can go to a diploma mill, they can go to an Ivy League school, or they can choose from a variety of other schools. Our students, whether we like it or not, are consumers of higher education. As Beloit’s McBride reminds us, these students have grown up in a country whose business is business, where selling, marketing, slick

advertising, ethical and unethical appeals, driving interests based on profits, and competitiveness are deeply ingrained in and expected by our students.

A key-note speaker at this year's Higher Learning Commission's annual meeting warned that higher education is rapidly drifting toward mediocrity, and he emphasized that our primary goal in higher education is to teach one student at a time how to avoid being "manipulated." He didn't mention anything about showing our students how not to manipulate others in unethical ways, nor did he say anything about showing students how to contribute in meaningful ways to the lives of others and to our place generally. But he did recognize the ubiquitous intention of selling and getting others to buy or act in a way that others would like them to buy or act.

Recently the New York Times ran an education supplement in its Sunday edition (July 30, 2006). Articles in that supplement covered a range of topics, from an examination of the attitudes by businesses of on-line graduates, diploma mills, demographic projections (most of them reporting on the huge influx of students in higher education in specific states), and an article highlighting quality institutions outside of the arena of the Ivy League schools. What was interesting about the articles in the supplement was the many faces of higher education and the obvious range of interests and topics about our profession.

DIPLOMA MILLS

Let me share with you one choice offered to students, and that was the diploma mill—a radical choice it would seem to us, but one that is being sought more commonly today. The article offered an actual transcript of a response from an admissions representative from Glendale University in London, England. Asked about the program, the representative from the diploma mill said, "We will base your degree on what you tell us."

In 7-10 days Glendale will send a bachelor's degree, an M.B.A., a master's degree or even a Ph.D. "If your past achievements support it, then you can graduate summa cum laude, the greatest distinction. If you feel your achievements deserve a more modest grade point average, then that can be reflected on your transcript. It looks very much like the degree of U.C.L.A.," the representative observed. The degree costs \$500. There are no classes or work, but each "class is listed, graded." Glendale will provide letters of recommendation, even custom-made letters for degrees, such as an English degree. The caller asked if they have not ever had a complaint "about being non-accredited," and the representative said, "Accreditation is only really an issue in the academic world" (NYT, Educational Life, July 30, 2006, p. 27)

This might sound unrealistic and absurd, but the pressures to hasten, or in this case eliminate, the academic requirements needed for a diploma are many. Diploma mills are radical examples of such practices, but there are other practices affecting higher education. Grade inflation, lowered standards, and fewer expectations for rigor and engagement reveal in other ways how our competitive market is responding to the increased pressures for a diploma and less interest in quality learning.

WHAT CONSUMER-STUDENTS SEEM TO WANT

We're also faced with another phenomenon and that is the pressure for distinctiveness and reputation. Our student consumers either want a brand name with a reputation or they want exceptional value and convenience. In this high-stake, competitive world where students now realize how important the college degree is for future salaries and success, the choices between an institution with a distinctive and quality reputation and those that can offer an "accredited" degree cheaply, quickly, and conveniently, like getting a hamburger at McDonalds, are becoming more pronounced and understood by our consumers.

Nannerl O. Keohane, a former president of Duke University, wonders what will happen to traditional, mass-market institutions who attempt to compete with convenience institutions. She pondered what will happen when they offer their courses with new information technologies at long distances or in, what she calls, "unconventional commercial settings?" (Higher Ground: Ethics and Leadership in the Modern University, 2006, Duke University Press, 2006, 135). She asks, "Isn't it inevitable that the campus will disappear?" Her answer to her own question is that for her it seems "likely that many traditional campuses will disappear." She also predicts that other schools "will find that the decades ahead offer some attractive new ways of building on their traditional advantages." "To do so," she claims, "we have to be quite clear about the mission and the advantages that we offer and prove very nimble and appropriately visionary in responding to these new opportunities" (135).

Referring to three types of institutions proposed by Bob Zemsky and William Massy ("brand-name, mass-provider, and convenience institutions"), Keohane predicts that the mass-provider institution, "which include many of our state universities, land-grant institutions, and four-year colleges, will be severely pressed by the new low-cost 'convenience institutions' if they attempt to offer, as the mass providers traditionally have done, a traditional education on traditional campuses in a traditional way" (135). What does that say for Minot State University?

COMPETITION AND CHOICE

The New York Times supplement explains the exceptional difficulty to get into the "top-tier" colleges and universities, and recommends that students and parents look elsewhere for educational quality and choices. In the article titled "Off the Beaten Track," Randall C. Archibold explains that "[a]s parents and counselors clamor for relief from the high-stakes admissions battles, a handful of guides have thrown the spotlight on lesser-known colleges" (23-25). The article includes brief summaries of distinctive colleges "off the beaten track," which emphasize undergraduate teaching, have rising programs in scholarship, and offer "alternatives to the usual suspects."

I want to share with you a few of these to illustrate the choices, but more important, to reveal what others inside and outside the institutions perceive as their distinctiveness:

- Pitzer College, Claremont, California: students enjoy broad academic freedom, and can build their own programs and partake in independent study.
- Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California: has highly regarded business and engineering programs.
- Mills College, Oakland, California: a third of undergraduates are from minority groups, more than 80 percent get financial aid and almost a quarter are over age 23.
- Southern Oregon University, Ashland, Oregon: the university has an exceptional English and liberal arts curriculum best known for Shakespeare; the summer program in teacher theater training draws educators from around the country.
- Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington: promises that they won't mind chatting outside of class time (or in class, with an average of just 15 students).
- Colorado College, Colorado Springs: students take one course at a time; to build community; students, most of whom come from outside Colorado, are required to live on campus for the first three years.
- Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota: twelve percent of enrollment—a lot for a campus this size—are international students representing 78 countries; offers an array of study-abroad programs and field trips within the United States.
- Carlton College, Northfield, Minnesota: a college brochure describes Carlton as “a place where able and intelligent students with a quirky sense of humor would go.” Note that our own Dan Ringrose hails from Carlton!
- Grinnell College, Grinnell Iowa: has a \$1.3 billion endowment due in large part to investor Warren E. Buffet who is a trustee; the college enjoys a reputation for strong academics.
- Cornell College, Mount Vernon, Iowa: students take one intensive month-long course at a time; professors involve students in their research.
- Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, Michigan: about 80 percent of Kalamazoo students choose to study overseas.
- Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana: nationally recognized Japanese studies program; a global perspective permeates the curriculum; does well in the National Survey of Student Engagement, which sets benchmarks to measure student involvement.
- Miami University, Oxford, Ohio: graduation rates are among the highest in public education.
- Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio: an excellent tradition in the humanities, creative writing and theater; the college puts a premium on good writing.
- College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio: the mantra of the liberal arts college: think hard and critically. To prove that students have developed that skill, each must complete an independent study project, with one-on-one guidance by a faculty member.
- Union College, Schenectady, New York: about 300 students and professors are assigned to one of seven “Minerva” houses, where they study, hold discussion groups and just hang out.
- Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts: seminar for new students, taught by a team of advisers made up of teachers, administrators, and older students. In a program called “Connections,” aimed at broadening perspectives, all students must take sets of courses on a single topic from different departments.

The “Off the Beaten Track” article cited a 1999 study that concluded that “students who were admitted to both selective and moderately selective colleges earned the same no matter which they attended. The study suggested that the motivation and drive of the student mattered more than the college.” The NYT article also quoted Lee S. Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: “My view is that there is a very modest to zero correlation between general academic prestige and the quality of undergraduate experience available to students” (23). Shulman claimed that “The difference in faculty quality between institutions is much smaller than ever” (23).

All of us in higher education know that. We also know that at Minot State. I am confident to say that the quality of our faculty at Minot State University compares favorably to the quality of faculty in the so-called “elite” institutions or even the distinctive institutions listed in the NYT article. So many of our faculty possess degrees from top-tier institutions, they publish in refereed journals, they present at international conferences, they write grants and oversee cutting-edge projects. And many also do something even better, and that is they are dedicated to their students, work closely with them in research, and support and mentor them, and keep student learning and success at the top of their lists.

WHAT ABOUT MINOT STATE UNIVERSITY?

Minot State University is not included in that list of colleges off the beaten track. If it were, what would be its distinctiveness, its quality that would warrant special recognition in the New York Times? What would the NYT say about Minot State University in next year’s “Off the Beaten Track” article? What distinctive quality would the article cite?

By the way, the only reference to North Dakota in the education supplement was in the article “Redrawing the College Map,” which showed the projected changes in high school graduate numbers by 2015. Montana, North Dakota, and Maine are the only three states with a projected decline of 15% or more in high school graduates. The article also pointed out that “North Dakota will give you a hell of a deal” (16).

If we are to remain as a “mass market” institution, we will, as Keohane reasonably predicts, be “severely pressed by the new low-cost” convenience institutions. It is up to us, as she advises, “to offer some attractive new ways of building on their traditional advantages” and “to be quite clear about the mission and the advantages that we offer and prove very nimble and appropriately visionary in responding to these new opportunities” (135). If we wish to wait and see what happens, then the outlook is not bright, as many higher education observers would suggest. If we decide as a campus to be proactive, visionary, and bold about our role in this competitive arena of higher education, then a strategic goal, a vision, and long-range strategies and initiatives will need to be supported and embraced by all of us.

MINOT STATE UNIVERSITY' S VISION 2013

What you have in front of you is a plan to help us figure out where we fall within that range (i.e., diploma mills to elite institutions), and where we should be going in the future. The draft we've handed out is a penultimate draft—a near final draft but one that provides the opportunity to comment, question, express concerns, offer alternative thoughts, and correct errors. For the past two years we have been asking questions of many people, studying information about our university and its external environment, discussing white papers, and holding open forums with all of you to consider possibilities for new directions, for a new vision and for new ways to build on our advantages, to clarify our mission, and to respond to new opportunities. This draft offers a summary of the background to this work, our core values, purpose, and mission, what we discovered, the rationale for the propositions, a statement of the goal and vision, and the list of seven strategic goals and initiatives that will guide our collective work to realize our vision. There is also a section describing suggestions for advancing and implementing the plan

This document offers the rationale and direction for Minot State University to achieve a national distinction as one of the premier public, regional universities in the “great” Great Plains. This vision is centered on the principle of engagement with people and place and the recognition of the power of our place in the Great Plains. It presupposes heightened standards, increased student engagement, and a distinctive focus on learning and student success. Much of it depends on the notion of engagement and place.

I'm reminded of a cartoon years ago that showed two students sitting in a class with their heads down and the professor at the head of the class talking. The professor looks at the bowed heads and starts making some bizarre comments to get the passive students' attention, like black is white, Christ is the anti-Christ, and so on. The last frame of the cartoon shows one student remarking to the other student in the seat next to him, “Hey, this is getting pretty interesting.” I suppose that challenging students with bizarre observations is a form of engagement. We know that challenging our students with new ideas, showing them contrary interpretations, like my experience with the pelicans, making them work hard, and exposing them to the relationships between knowledge and practice are proven ways to engage them in learning and place.

On page 32 of this draft there is a fuller explanation of what it is going to take.

To realize this vision and mission will depend on how well the university can take effective and appropriate actions to get there. Calls for a distinctive vision and mission, for engaged learning and a dynamic campus environment, and for the support of exceptional and dedicated faculty and staff within an engaged community are clearly heard and understood from many of the university's stakeholders.

The need for an engaged campus community that values and honors diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusiveness has been well established. A university must demonstrate its commitment to all people and cultures. Equally critical for the university is the need to make sure its students achieve success as individuals, as contributing members of society, and in their future careers or endeavors. Moreover, their future success must be built upon their philosophical and practical devotion to the welfare of

others and upon their continued interest in civic engagement and contribution.

To accomplish these goals, the university must remain strong, viable, competitive, and positioned for future growth. To get there, all of the university's personnel and its external stakeholders and friends must be dedicated to keeping the university strong, so that it can continue to dedicate itself to students' growth, welfare, and success.

SEVEN STRATEGIES

Each of the seven strategies has a governing theme, a definition and explanation of purpose, priority initiatives, and general objectives. A strategy, as defined in the glossary at the end of the draft, is a general description of the broad direction and steps an institution must take to reach its future goal or vision.

There are no specific action plans, because they have not yet been defined or developed. Our campus as a whole will begin the process of identifying and carrying out specific action plans for the strategies.

The seven strategies are to:

- 1) Create and promote a distinctive mission, vision and premier institutional character based on curricula and services known for high quality, engagement, relationship to place, and the integration of knowledge, theory and practice.
- 2) Raise academic standards and expectations exceptionally high for quality teaching and engaged learning; create and sustain a dynamic place and engaged campus atmosphere and design conducive to high-quality learning and student support.
- 3) Recruit, retain, and support well-qualified faculty and staff as valued members of an inclusive community, dedicated and devoted to the institutional mission, to engaged learning, and to student support and success.
- 4) Develop and support a diverse, multicultural, and inclusive campus community
- 5) Provide students with a strong and engaging academic experience for intellectual and personal growth, formation of sound character, and development of abilities and skills required for success in future careers and endeavors.
- 6) Enhance and strengthen the university's mission and purview to include civic engagement, experiential learning, and activities focused on collaboration, partnerships, community relations and involvement; complementing the institution's educational function through a concerted and deliberate effort to connect higher education and the common good.
- 7) Ensure the university's future viability, the vitality of its campus proper, and its success and competitiveness

The success of this vision and plan will succeed or fail based on the extent to which faculty, staff, and students, as well as departments, colleges, programs, projects, and other areas work to align their operations and planning with the direction set by the institutional plan. If the specific areas either on or off the campus, fail to align their own plans with this strategic plan, or worse yet do not plan and contribute to the future, the university will remain a loose collection of

disparate parts focused predominately on individual interests and representing generally a poorly defined regional, public, comprehensive university.

If the people and areas of the university are aligned with this plan, the university has a great chance to realize this vision and accomplish this critical goal. Successful implementation of this plan will depend on all faculty and staff and other stakeholders assuming responsibility and contributing to its advancement.

AN EXERCISE

In the next few minutes, I would ask that each of you think about action plans that the university can undertake to realize the 2013 goal, which is that Minot State University will achieve a national distinction as one of the premier public, regional universities in the “great” Great Plains. A goal is a “broad statement that describes ultimate ends and achievements for an organization and provides a general focus for organization action” (Joel Lapham, 1999).

Think about specific actions that we can take to help us reach that goal. Remember that an action plan describes specific and realistic actions that identify what outcome will be accomplished.” For this exercise, I’d ask that you write down three specific and realistic steps we could take to move us toward achieving this 2013 goal. .

NEXT STEPS

Please leave your suggested action plans on the table as you leave. I am also inviting you to provide now or within the next few weeks suggestions, comments, and corrections on the sheet provided in the draft.

On September 7, we will hold two open forums to allow faculty and staff to bring their drafts, to ask questions and to share their ideas and concerns. We will look closely at those comments and ideas, and then proceed to make the necessary changes and to publish the strategic plan in October.

A final version of the plan will be published and distributed to all faculty and staff and to student leaders. Once the plan is published, I will be arranging meetings with each of the administrative areas within the university to talk about how to align the plan and the strategic plans of each of our specific areas. Meetings with Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Student Association, the Alumni Board and the Board of Regents will be scheduled to discuss advancing and implementing the plan.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of each year, when students are returning and we are getting ready to welcome them in our classes and on our campus, I am reminded about what a terrific profession we are blessed to be a part of. It’s great to be here and to welcome all of you to the start of another exciting year at Minot State University.