

**Convocation Address to Faculty and Staff  
Minot State University  
August 15, 2007; 11:00 a.m.  
Conference Center; Student Union  
David Fuller, President**

**WELCOME**

Good morning. It's good to see all of you, to welcome our new faculty and staff, and to welcome a new academic year. We of course look forward to the arrival of our students as they move into the residence halls and prepare to start classes. I've said this before, and I'll continue to express it from the bottom of my heart, that there is no better place to be than here, in higher education, especially when new students are arriving, returning students are coming back, faculty are preparing to introduce and engage students in the life of knowledge, curiosity, and wonder, and our staff are working to prepare the campus and our services to welcome our students in a first-class way. You can't find a better profession with a more important role and responsibility than the one we're in.

Again this year is similar to the nearly 94 years preceding this one—students are coming to campus to learn. And our job simply and magnanimously is to make their learning the best we possibly can. That's what all of us do and do well.

**A BIT OF A DIVERSION --AGAIN**

Last year at this time I mentioned a sighting at Lake of the Woods, where a line of immature pelicans followed an adult pelican in a graceful and single-line flight, only a few feet above the water, at times gliding together, at other times flapping the wings almost in unison. I concluded, as someone trained in literature, attracted by metaphor, and intrigued by the wonders of education, that this adult pelican was teaching the young ones how to fly and glide. As you might remember from my remarks last year, my ornithologist friend--and later our biology faculty here-- politely and resolutely questioned my theory and respectfully informed me that the birds lacked the intelligence to partake in an intentional flight with a purpose, especially as some form of educational training. Perhaps the closest I could come to explaining what I saw was George Bernard Shaw's remark: "I am not a teacher; only a fellow traveler..." In the end and in the perspective of my colleagues, the flight of the pelicans was driven by happenstance, an instinct leading to coincidental impulses for a flight and journey, nothing more.

Please bear with me when I say that I trust that the same rationale explains another observation Nancy and I witnessed this year at the same location in Lake of the Woods while sitting on the porch of our cabin. This year we noticed seven vultures approaching, flying and circling in the wind currents, and then hovering above our cabin and circling in an odd and portentous way directly above us. If that scene would appear in a Faulkner novel, as it did ominously in his novel As I Lay Dying, the meaning would be obvious.

But I'm inclined this time to accept an anticipated scientific explanation from my science colleagues that this incident and the fact the birds' flight occurred directly above us held no special meaning and was, instead, coincidental and a moment of a journey, an impulse or instinct, one portending no particular fate, even though they were circling directly above us and appearing to eye us hungrily. I hope my science colleagues will confirm my own conclusions and not think about or suggest anything else. I'd prefer not to hear from my literature colleagues for their interpretation on that one, however.

One more thing about "what I did on my summer vacation," an assignment I regularly asked my first-year writing students to complete early in the fall semester, and one incidentally that I cannot seem to forget. This year, like all the rest, I make a point to take a new book of poems with me. Upon the recommendation of Professor Tangney, I took an anthology of the poet Robinson Jeffers, titled The Wild God of the World. For as long as I can remember I've been wildly interested in nature, and particularly keen on the way science and poetry intersect. That special interest leads me to pursue what we've learned about truth and the inner workings of natural things.

That interest, too, leads me to think about what the poets reveal to us about the wonders, the beauties, and mysteries of those natural things—both, I would say, are equally relevant and powerful. Jeffers tells us in one of his poems that the sole business of poetry is beauty. I'd go along with that. In a poem about pelicans, interestingly enough, Jeffers describes their ungainly bodies and flight, that which "magnifies the idea of strength," "as beautiful as the grace of horses. I'd prefer not to mention his poem about vultures, but in another poem that describes the mysteries and shadows of a boat in a fog, he writes:

A flight of pelicans  
Is nothing lovelier to look at;  
The light of the planets is nothing nobler; all the arts lose virtue  
Against the essential reality  
Of creatures going about their business among the equally  
Earnest elements of nature ("Boats in a Fog").

I think that captures pretty well the experience we had this summer.

### **ESSENTIAL REASONS**

You might wonder what all of this has to do with the start of another academic year. I contend that it has a lot to do with what we do in our profession. It is those questions, those answered by the sciences and by the arts: that create the wonder and excitement of the learning and experiences in our classrooms. That's what makes our profession so rewarding, introducing students to these questions, those mysteries, and those realities of our environment and place.

Our responsibility to nurture that learning and wonder is great and large, and I suggest to you that all of us, from professors in our classrooms and laboratories to staff who assist and support our students in so many ways, make it possible for that type of learning to happen. Rachel Carson, chemist and the author of Silent Spring, says, "If a child is to

keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he/[she] needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him/[her] the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in” (referenced in the copyrighted Jone Johnson Lewis’s web site and list of quotation). For me, Carson describes those special relationships each of us participate in that help us fulfill our mission.

We also have the immense need right now to model ethical behavior, demand hard work, challenge our students with rigorous and rewarding curricula and experiences, and expect effective writing and speaking. We also must, in a constructive and thoughtful way, identify errors, misunderstanding, faulty judgments, jargon, and confusion, and then model that same behavior in our actions. When we run across observations like these, that were actual assertions from science examinations papers I found on the internet, we should identify the error in a responsible and meaningful way (see R.J. Kizlik’s web page and list of quotations, July 21, 2007; : <http://www.adprima.com/quotes.htm>):

- Charles Darwin was a naturalist who wrote the organ of the species.
- The theory of evolution was greatly objected to because it made man think.
- Three kinds of blood vessels are arteries, vanes and caterpillars.
- The process of turning steam back into water again is called conversation.
- The Earth makes one resolution every 24 hours.
- Algebraical symbols are used when you do not know what you are talking about.
- The pistol of a flower is its only protection against insects.
- Dew is formed on leaves when the sun shines down on them and makes them perspire.
- A triangle which has an angle of 135 degrees is called an obscene triangle.
- When you smell an odorless gas, it is probably carbon monoxide.

Of course these are humorous mistakes (I’ve made my share of them as well as a student and adult) but they also present to us teachable moments that we should not avoid for fear of offending students. If those errors in fact and other errors are ignored, then we do our students a great disservice not to help them recognize the error and misunderstanding. We have an obligation for honest and direct criticism. We also have the obligation to help our students speak and write clearly and effectively. Right now, more than ever before, the need for sound and well-informed judgments and for effective writing skills is ever more critical for student success, and all of us have the obligation to engage students of all classes in sound judgment, and effective writing and speaking.

### **OUR CORE VALUES AND CORE PURPOSE**

And this brings me circuitously to our university’s core values and core purpose, which are important to keep well in mind right now as we pursue our new mission, vision, and our centennial year. All of my preceding comments, I believe, are reflected well in our published core values. Incidentally our values and purpose and mission will be framed and hanging in each class building, residence hall, and other buildings and major conference rooms to highlight our values and purposes. Most important, this will

emphasize to our students and visitors our values and purposes that guide our own actions and work. We honor and practice:

- Teaching and learning with excellence, integrity, and engagement
- Serving students and others respectfully and responsibly
- Following high ethical and moral principles
- Supporting the values of community and place, where all community members are valued and respected for their work, contributions, and freedom of expression.

Those values underlie well our mission, vision, our 2013 strategies, and our core purpose, which is:

*Minot State University helps people appreciate life and learning and contribute meaningfully to the lives of others.*

Those values and our core purpose and mission align with our Vision 2013 strategies that seek to:

1. Provide 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.
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 ability and skills required for success in future careers and endeavors.
6. Enhance and strengthen the university's mission...to include civic engagement, experiential learning, and activities focused on collaboration, partnerships, community relations and involvement.
7. Ensure MSU's future viability, vitality, and competitiveness.

## **PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING**

I thought you'd like to hear a letter I received recently from a parent whose daughter is transferring to Minot State University. You can see in this letter how well we are reflecting our core values, the core purpose, and our mission and vision:

Dear Dr. Fuller,

We just had the privilege of touring your campus and experiencing the student/parent orientation session on July 19, 20th. Our daughter is a transfer student from the University of Regina and after our two day visit to Minot State we have no hesitations in our choice for this academic year.

We are extremely impressed with the programs, services, staff and facilities at Minot State. Your staff is outstanding! We were treated very warmly and feel that we are leaving our daughter in the best hands!

Thank-you so much for providing such a top-notch, customer based university. We are impressed with all the support systems put in place from the writing support program to the tutoring services offered. You and your staff have certainly planned for success for our students.

Once again thank-you for the wonderful orientation and all the good work you and staff are doing to provide such a wonderful academic experience for our students!

Sincerely,

[Signed a parent of a student from Canada].

Here's a letter from a parent sent to two of our staff members yesterday:

Thank you to both of you. The information you gave to us as parents was very useful. I am glad the two of you decided to help parents adjust to sending our children off to college. Yet another reason Minot State is a wonderful place to send them. Thanks for the friendly words of advice and information. You answered questions I didn't even know I had yet.

I am reluctantly looking forward to move in day and am sure it will be a happy yet sad and scary day. Thanks for everything

I think it is always useful at this time of the year to celebrate what we do well, remind ourselves of what we do and why, and to keep our focus and make sure that learning is fostered, improved, and preserved in our culture. With all the pressures for economic development, societal pressures and goals, questions about accessibility, retention, affordability, and many inside and outside our profession who continue to second guess what we're doing and why, it is difficult at times to remember what we're here for. I found out a long time ago that everybody thinks of him or herself as an expert in education except those who work directly in education and in the classroom and know the challenges of it. Those in education know the complexities, the rewards, and the meaning of education. It is ever more important right now in our profession, with all

these various pressures, competitions, challenges for students and resources, that we keep our eye on excellence in our learning while at the same time recognizing that we can always work to do things better.

## **FINALLY, GETTING TO THE POINT**

I don't care who it is actually, we're all skeptical of change, we hope that the best of what we do will remain the same. We're dubious about educational fads, insubstantial explanations and rationale, and we are especially skeptical about those changes mandated and pushed on to us by others who think of themselves as experts on education and those who know how education should be adapted to respond to other needs. But we also understand the need to plan, study, criticize, analyze, and determine what our strengths are, what our weaknesses are, and what we can do to make meaningful changes and to improve what we do.

We've been hard at it thinking about improvement: our two-year plus processes in developing a strategic plan, vision, and action plans; our two-plus year effort to prepare for the Higher Learning Commission re-accreditation self study and team visit; our efforts to celebrate place on the Great Plains and globally through local and international partnerships; our three-year plus work on developing a master plan for the campus; and our concerted efforts to strengthen the experiences and support we provide to first-year students. There are other things going on as well, not to forget the legislative session and review, the State Board of Higher Education Roundtable Initiative and Cornerstone goals, and the myriad processes all of you are involved in your respective areas to improve and strengthen curricula and services on our campus. All of this depends on our abilities and willingness to participate actively in determining the future of the university.

## **CONDUNDRUM OF SHARED GOVERNANCE**

But before I mention those changes facing us, I want to address what might look like a new or foreign concept, a faulty process, a meaningless effort, an empowering and inclusive process, a Machiavellian strategy, an effective measure, an ineffective measure, something we don't have time for, an administrative charade, much ado about nothing, or a dynamic essential for dealing with a culture of rapid change and challenge. Whatever you think about it or how you define it or engage in it, it is absolutely critical that all of us come to a common understanding of the practice of what some refer to as shared governance.

Stanley Fish, a literary critic turned administrator at the University of Chicago, claimed, in an ACE [Change](#) article last year, that shared governance is actually a misnomer or a myth because governance per se cannot be fully shared in the literal and practicing sense of the term. To some extent, I disagree that it can't be shared but agree at the same time that it can't be fully shared in the complex communication and organizational structures of our profession. I was interested to see in recent survey results that faculty and staff members generally support changes and decisions on campus but they are not necessarily convinced that those decisions are transparent. I'm not exactly sure what a transparent

decision is, but if it means that the decision has been fully, deliberately, and inclusively considered by our campus and then communicated, then I am confident those processes are transparent. If it means that the decision is fully understood by everyone and endorsed, that's another thing altogether.. It is difficult in our system of many communications and demands for everyone to participate fully, although every effort is made to fully inform and provide ample opportunities for participation.

Perhaps we depend too much on our faculty, staff, and student senates to communicate with their constituencies or to seek their input. Perhaps we depend too much on others to communicate proposals and seek feedback on major decisions. I don't know. I do know that we have the processes in place to help "inclusive" decision making work well through open forums, monthly reports, a University Cabinet and process that debates and advises on major initiatives, and a plethora of other communiqués that describes proposals, actions, and seeks input. Perhaps some have a hard time keeping up with the "plethora" of communiqués and forums. But an environment of inclusive and shared governance depends on many communications, consultations with governance groups, reports, and solicitations for input on initiatives, but most of all on engaged participation and expression. There are some decisions that deal with routine issues; there are others that have a significant affect on all concerned and must depend on active participation and input..

Quite a few come to mind that input our entire campus: the smoke-free campus decision, the required first-year residency requirement, the various iterations and parts of our campus master plan, our Higher Learning Commission self study, and, for goodness sake, the many forums, white papers, drafts, and all-campus meetings devoted to Vision 2013. There are many other decisions of that ilk that have been communicated and deliberated on to the hilt and more. While not everyone might agree that we should turn our campus to a smoke-free one, at least each senate, council, and person on campus had the time and opportunity to have his/her voice heard. If you didn't participate or pay attention, then that is not the fault of a system that is intentionally shared.

If those processes didn't work, maybe we should design a new system of senate governance and participation whereby the senators communicate to their respective constituencies and call regular meetings to deliberate on special issues. I plan to have this discussion directly with the three senates. If you have ideas about shared governance and how it can be improved, let your senators know, let your administrators know, and let me know. The changes and challenges facing us in the next few years, as we anticipate a 30% decline in the number of high school graduates in North Dakota by the year 2017, will depend on a fully functioning, inclusive, and campus wide "shared governance" process to address these challenges and changes.

## **A FEW CHANGES THAT DEPEND ON OUR ENGAGED PARTICIPATION**

*Higher Learning Commission Self Study*

For three years we have been working together to examine our organization, its strengths, weaknesses, the challenges, threats, and opportunities. Our Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation self study has been doing just that under the outstanding leadership of Dr. Ron Royer, a dedicated steering committee, and our entire campus community. It is no surprise that we, as the Higher Learning Commission requires in their five criteria for accreditation, work to fulfill the purposes defined in our responsive mission, prepare and plan for the future, set learning outcomes in each program and assess student learning, remain focused on students' academic success, demonstrate a devotion to knowledge, learning, and scholarship, and reveal our dedication to engaged learning and a campus environment.

We've learned as well that there are opportunities for improving what we do with our general education program, what we do to align our on-line offerings with our conventional deliveries, what we do with the changes in our students and their penchant for other forms of education, how we deal with loads, how our salaries compare to national markets, how we engage and support our first-year students, and how we create a more engaging and dynamic on-campus environment. We are ever vigilant as we respond to the never-ending pressures to keep our enrollments strong and keep the revenues coming in to support our teaching and learning.

### *Vision 2013*

As you remember, focus groups with most of our constituencies, surveys, examinations of data of our region and higher education, and frequent open forums held to discuss the emerging ideas, issues, and directions, and to seek input from our campus led to our discoveries and judgments in Vision 2013. You received white papers, summaries of the results, copies of the drafts of the strategic plan, and requests for any and all to offer comments, concerns, and suggestions. Countless responses were received indicating special needs, some correcting errors in the document, and many voicing strong support for the organizations' proposed revised mission, values, core purpose, and our goal to aspire to be a premier public regional university in the great Great Plains. Throughout all of those discussions, forums, and solicitations, we received not one objection to our vision and to our mission of place and engagement. In fact, the Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Student Association, and Alumni Board voted to endorse strongly the vision and mission. The direction was clear, and that's where we're going as a result.

It was clear to the Planning and Budgeting Council, to Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, the Student Association, the Alumni Board and Board of Regents that it was time to take these strategic steps toward our centennial in 2013.

At last year's convocation I presented the final draft of our Vision 2013 plan, discussed its points, reminded everyone about the goal, and then asked all faculty and staff to participate in small groups and open conversations about specific actions that we should take to begin moving toward our strategic goal. Literally pages and pages of specific action steps were compiled and then reviewed by all faculty and staff in small groups.

Each group prioritized the top action steps, wrote those on large sheets taped on the walls of our conference center, and then reported on the priority actions. About that time, the final version of the strategic plan was completed and printed, distributed to all on campus and to most of our stakeholders in the community and state, including our governor, community leadership groups, the state board, and hand delivered and discussed with each member of our congressional delegation in Washington DC.

The salient point described in the plan was well received, and that was that MSU would become a premier university characterized by a mission of engagement and place, and marked by firm commitments to diversity, civic engagement, student success, and valuing faculty and staff, and students.

In the spring semester of last academic year, those lists were given to seven action teams, each of which was comprised of faculty, staff, and students. They were asked to review the action steps developed by all faculty and staff, to prioritize, clarify, and prepare a formal list of short-term and long-term action steps which, when completed, will move us forward in a significant way to meet the respective strategy. Those reports were completed, shared with the Planning and Budgeting Council, reviewed, discussed. The lists were also reviewed carefully by President's Staff and priority projects identified.

The process has been deliberate, complete, inclusive, and responsive. While we are certainly not in the position to respond to every suggested action plan, we will be able to move ahead to address the most significant ones, by assigning appropriated dollars, allocating local funds, continuing to seek grants, and moving ahead to use these lists and strategies as major initiatives for our upcoming capital campaign through our own private fundraising.

I want to draw your attention to the Vision 2013 action plans, which were distributed to each of you at this convocation. The action plans include lists of suggested tasks, and the Great Plains initiatives. As you see in those lists, we have accomplished a lot, but we also have much to accomplish if we are serious about meeting our goal to be one of the premier public regional universities in the Great Plains.

This coming October I will be holding my regular semester open forums. I would like to focus on these action plans, to listen to your comments about them, to seek other ideas, and to get your advice about these plans and our Vision 2013.

Vision 2013 depends on our ability and willingness to move forward intentionally, collaboratively, and effectively to become an institution of engagement and place. To help us define that direction, we are arranging to have George Kuh from Indiana State, the scholar and spokesperson for the values and power of engagement in higher education, visit our campus during the convocation day in January. We are also having, as a part of our assessment processes, Jillian Kinzie, the co-author with George Kuh and others of the book Student Success in College. She will be visiting us in the spring. In November we will be bringing another national scholar in to discuss the book Declining

by Degrees and the so-called Deep schools. This year will be marked by our own professional development in the terms of engagement and place.

I trust that these visits and forums will help all of us understand what it will take to become an institution of engagement and place. Describing the keys to student success, Kuh and others explain that “What students ‘do’ during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college” (Student Success in College, 2005, Jossey-Bass, p. 8). They summarize this notion of engagement this way: “Student engagement has two key components that contribute to student success. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies, and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the way the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (Student Success, p. 9).

This form of engagement will be enhanced and strengthened through our own commitment to civic engagement, experiential learning, service learning, internships, and field-based studies in our local place and in our global place. I will be forming soon a task force to identify the various dimensions of engagement and the resources we will need to fulfill that engagement and place mission.

#### *Internationalizing the campus and collaborating with our Native American partners*

Of all our work in the last couple of years, this one promises to expand the vision and experience of our students to our local place and to our global places. The opportunities for study abroad, study tours, and faculty and student exchanges are many. With our new international director and program, we are positioned to make this work for our students in many ways. With our strong relationships with the Native American colleges in our region, we have now the avenue through which we can cooperate in many distinctive ways with our Native American friends and partners.

#### *Campus Master Plan*

This master plan, which has been developed over a period of more than two years and involving frequent forums and drafts presented by an architectural firm, helps all of us envision possibilities and realities of our campus proper over the next 10-20 years. Place based themes, walkways, signage, campus accessibility, growth and expansion, visibility, aesthetics, distinctiveness are represented well in the final version of this plan that was adopted by the Master Plan Steering Committee, comprised of senate leaders, faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members, city representatives, administrators, and members of our Board of Regents. The plan is now only just beginning to unfold and impact our campus.

### *First-Year Students*

Spread throughout our action plans for Vision 2013, expressed by many faculty and staff, assessed through surveys and other accountability measures, understood through our National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results, and represented by a number of initial steps to improve our admittedly poor attention to first-year students is one of the clearest and most strategic needs identified by our campus, and that is the need for us to work to achieve excellence in the way we engage our first-year students, and the steps we can take to develop a comprehensive first-year program of excellence. To get there, a team of faculty and staff just returned from participating in a special workshop in North Carolina, extended to only a few schools nationally to participate by the Policy Center to be a member of the Foundations of Excellence for First-Year Students, a cohort of 13 four-year universities from all across the nation.

One of our major tasks this year, in addition to finishing our HLC self-study report and prepare for the visit in late March, will be to complete a study and examination of our current practices and processes in support of first-year students. This is a critical need for us, and I ask for your utmost support of its rationale and its work during this coming year. Dr. Rabe and Dr. Jenkins will be serving as the primary liaisons for this study.

### **CONCLUSION**

An often-quoted African Proverb says that it takes a village to educate a child, and that proverb applies as well to our university community as it does to an African community. To educate our students and to work together to improve and advance our university will depend on all of us to work together cooperatively. In your view and mine, as represented in our strategic planning process, we need to raise our academic standards exceptionally high, strengthen our diversity, value our faculty and staff, pursue civic engagement initiatives, focus intentionally on our students' success, and ensure that Minot State University will remain vital, vibrant, and competitive.

In so doing, I am convinced that we can reach our Vision 2013 goal, but all of us need your support, your active participation and input, and your belief in our mission and vision. If we do that we will be heard and seen in a big way, but most important we'll be engaging our students powerfully in the wonder of learning.

Thanks for your kind attention. And, thanks to each and every one of you for the outstanding jobs you do for the good of our students and our university. Let's have a great year. And I promise, next year at this time, no stories about birds.

David Fuller  
President  
August 15, 2007