Getting It Right...

Fall Convocation Address

Christopher C. Dahl SUNY Geneseo 24 August 2007

I am delighted to welcome you all to a new academic year at SUNY Geneseo. If you are like me, it is a good thing to return from the somewhat slower pace of the summer and encounter the new faces and new energy of a whole class of entering students. This ever-renewing, evergreen aspect of higher education is one of the reasons, I suspect, that many of us in this room have never left college. This year, however, I was somewhat taken aback to read the annual Beloit College "Mindset List" for our new students in the Class of 2011. In 1989, the year in which most of them were born, I was shocked to realize that I had already become a dean. Our colleague's at Beloit remind us that, for these students, Alvin Ailey, Andrei Sakharov, Huey Newton, Emperor Hirohito, Ted Bundy, Abbie Hoffman, and Don the Beachcomber have always been dead. Here are some of the top items on the list: "1) What Berlin Wall? 2) Humvees, minus the artillery, have always been available to the public; 3) Rush Limbaugh and the "Dittoheads" have always been lambasting liberals; 4) They never "rolled down" a car window; 6) They may confuse the Keating Five with a rock group; 7) They have grown up with bottled water" (AP release, USA Today, 21 August 2007). Now that I think of it, I'm a bit hazy on the Keating Five.

In this context of renewal and change, it is especially good to welcome our new colleagues—some of them closer to the Class of 2011, others closer to those of us who

have been hanging around colleges and universities for somewhat longer. Meeting the new faculty and staff is another joy of this season of the academic year, and this year's new colleagues are a particularly talented and appealing group. Among them are three members of the College administration who have joined us in the course of the year whom I would like to introduce personally (since they will be working with so many of you). First, our new Assistant Vice President for Human Resources, Julie Briggs. Julie has actually been here since last October. She comes to us from a similar position at Alfred State, and she is also a Geneseo graduate. As many of you have found out, she has brought expert knowledge of SUNY employment policies and a spirit of helpfulness and service to her position. Gloria Lopez, our new Director of Affirmative Action, joined us in May. An attorney who has practiced in both public and private settings, Gloria comes to us from the Urban League of Rochester, where she served as In-House counsel, Chief Human Resources officer and Affirmative Action and Privacy Officer. She is a mediator as well as an attorney. I am also very pleased to welcome Michael Catillaz who has joined us over the summer, and will take up full-time duties on September 1. Mike served as Vice President for Advancement at Hobart & William Smith Colleges for six years, where he led all aspects of development and fundraising and successfully launched a major capital campaign. Before that he was chief advancement officer for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at RIT. Mike understands our liberal arts mission, but he also understands SUNY. A first-generation college student with two degrees from the University at Albany, he began his career at Genesee Community College, I like to say that Mike is a SUNY success story. Now he can say he has held

vice-presidencies at two highly regarded liberal arts colleges, one private and one public!
Welcome to SUNY Geneseo, Mike!

2006-07 saw major transitions in Advancement, and I would be remiss if I did not recognize the outstanding leadership of Debbie Hill, who served as Interim Vice President for most of the year. Debbie led her division with great skill and impressed us all with her dedication to Geneseo, her collaborative style, and her ability to keep the division moving forward in the midst of rapid change. Thanks to her leadership, the Division of Advancement is stronger than before, with improved results in key areas such as the Annual Fund, and major gifts and continuing progress in planning for a comprehensive capital campaign. Thank you, Debbie.

Ι

In considering the theme for this talk, I toyed with using the title of our summer reading book, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. With a new governor, new leadership on SUNY Trustees (not yet confirmed), and the departure of Chancellor Ryan and appointment of an interim chancellor, and the presence of a Governor's Commission on Higher Education, this may be a wild year, both in state government and in the System. But I shied away from the title—and the general topic. My topic today is, getting it right. (I don't know when that will happen in Albany.) In thinking about the past year I have been struck with how often we manage to get things right at Geneseo, and I would like to look at some of the many occasions on which we have gotten it right at Geneseo, ask how we can keep getting it right, and when we haven't gotten it quite right, how we can do more to get it right in the coming year. The quest to become the premier public liberal

arts college in the country has always been a matter of realizing an ideal—of striving for ever closer approximations to true excellence in undergraduate education and excellence in all that we do. I believe we take pride in our mission and accomplishments as a campus, but I also know that Geneseo is a place where we always ask how we might do better. That's who we are; that's why we're Geneseo. (Stacy Edgar anecdote?)

In reviewing the past year, let me begin with accreditation. This is an area where we have obviously gotten it right recently. In April, after an extended process of self-study and review and a three-day visit from an evaluation team, the Shear School of Education was granted accreditation by the National Council for the Accreditation Teacher Education (NCATE). This is a significant achievement—and all the more remarkable because the School was endorsed on all six standards with no exceptions or conditions whatsoever. As someone who has chaired several accreditation teams and made his way through various accreditation processes at three different institutions, I have never seen such a positive conclusion.

At the end of May, Geneseo submitted its Periodic Review Report, the mid-term report required by the Middle States Association as part of the ongoing accreditation process. Here, again, I am pleased to say, we got it right. According to the two external reviewers, Geneseo "is to be commended for the quality, clarity, and conciseness of the PRR." The reviewers' conclusion is highly favorable, both in general and in regard to the sole requirement stated at the time of our re-accreditation in 2002; namely, that Geneseo have in place a strong, pro-active plan to enrich the diversity of the College, with demonstrated results. I quote: "The institution has made significant progress in several areas over the last five years. This is true, as well, in terms of implementing its plan to

enrich the diversity of the College. . . . Progress has been made in its organizational approach to enhancing diversity, in its recruitment and retention of faculty and professional staff, and in monitoring, assessing and improving the campus academic climate. The institution has maintained and begun to increase the recruitment and retention rates of underrepresented students." The reviewers go on to comment: "A significant challenge to the College's vision of becoming the nation's premier public liberal arts college is that significant funding will be required. The institution does an excellent job of effectively and efficiently using its resources to very successfully compete with its peers. In fact, some of those peers would do well to use Geneseo as a benchmark in regard to doing more with less." On behalf of the College, I am delighted to accept this praise, but frankly I would prefer to be doing more with *more*. In any event, the PRR committee, chaired by Associate Provost Dave Gordon and Professor Kurt Fletcher, are to be commended for getting it right in the report. Not only did our report reply effectively and in detail to the Middle States Commission's major requirement; it also responded to every one of the optional suggestions made by the visiting team in 2001. Thank you, Dave, Kurt and all your colleagues on the committee. We got it right in our response to Middle States, but I shall return to two of the report's major topics, diversity and resources, at the end of my remarks today.

II.

As we all know, Geneseo's progress is built on the foundation of attracting a talented and diverse student body. In 2006-07, things went very well in this area too. Most notably, the College's decision to join the Common Application system last year led to significantly increased applications. We received more than 10,500 applications

for 1000 places in the entering class, 2735 of them through the Common Application. We admitted fewer than 36 percent of all applicants, and the quality of the entering class of 2011 is the most outstanding in the history of the College. Their mean SAT scores are 1313 (25th to 75th percentile, 1250 and 1390); mean high school average is 93.3; 57 percent graduated in the top ten percent of their class; 14.4 percent are students of color; and there are 37 new international students. Plainly we are getting a lot of things right here in the past year. And even with such highly qualified students, our yield rate—the percentage of students who accept our offer—stayed roughly the same.

In athletics, as well, it was a very good year. Our teams captured four conference championships, 11 students earned 16 All-American rankings, and three of our coaches (Mike Woods, Mike Mooney, and Paul Dotterwich) were named coach of the year. We did not win as many championships as last year, but more than ever I believe that we get it right as a public liberal arts college in Division III Athletics. Let me share some other statistics. For the third consecutive year, the number of Geneseo student-athletes on the SUNYAC Commissioner's List (3.3 or higher GPA for at least three semesters) increased, reaching an all-time high of 116. At the conference level, 10 of the 25 Chancellor's Scholar-Athlete Awards (given to the student with the highest grade-point average on the all-conference teams) went to Geneseo students. The next place school had only three. When you consider that there are eleven teams in the conference and that Geneseo also had the second-best overall athletic record (only 18/100 behind Cortland), we are getting it right in fostering the ideal of the scholar-athlete.

With such an outstanding record in things that really matter, our teams deserve facilities worthy of a strong Division III program at an institution that aspires to be the

premier public liberal arts college in the country. As you may recall from my remarks last year, we are seeking to raise funds for a stadium and two all-weather fields. We already have plans and drawings. I am pleased to report that in a year of great transition in Advancement, we have moved forward with private fund-raising for the stadium project. Indeed, we have already received a commitment for a \$300,000 lead gift from an alumnus, and the stadium project is a top priority on our capital funds request to the State. Our continuing progress here is another tribute to Debbie Hill's effective leadership as Interim Vice President in the past year.

Our student-athletes are not only successful on the field and accomplished in the classroom; they also win national service awards. At the NCAA Convention in January, Geneseo was one of only two schools nationwide to be awarded the NCAA Division III Athletic Administrators/Jostens Community Service Award, for the ongoing community service programs of our teams. In receiving recognition for service, our athletes were not alone among their fellow students in receiving national awards. Our remarkable college-community partnership for relief and restoration work in Mississippi, Livingston CARES, involved some 100 students, faculty and staff in three service trips during the year. For this work, Geneseo was selected for the Katrina Compassion Award by the Corporation for National and community Service at the twentieth anniversary of the Campus Compact—one of only nine campuses nationwide to be so honored. Geneseo's Relay for Life received the annual ACT award from SUNY trustees and college councils and was recognized as one of the top-five such programs in the nation by the American Cancer Society. Service and service-learning are essential facets of an outstanding public liberal

arts college. These and other accomplishments show that our students get it right by doing the right thing.

Robust undergraduate research and strong international programs are further key indicators of excellence in a public liberal arts college. In the former field, Geneseo has a long tradition of leadership, extending back to the pioneering work of the late Distinguished Teaching of Chemistry, Dick Smith—but last year was special. Three elements go into getting it right in undergraduate research: faculty with a passion to mentor students in research and creative activity and strong research records of their own; a rich culture of undergraduate research; and excellent facilities for research. All three came together last year. First, our faculty had a highly successful year in research. Research expenditures reached an all-time high of \$1.5 million, and major new grants included highly competitive ones from NIH and the Department of Energy. Almost every faculty member on these grants involves his or her undergraduate students. We have always had a rich culture of undergraduate research, but our first consolidated undergraduate research symposium, G.R.E.A.T. Day, brought it all together in one big occasion: 306 presentations and performances by 441 students, total attendance throughout the day of over 2000 people. I admit I was skeptical about consolidating all the presentations into one day, but I am pleased with the results. Finally, with the completion of Phase I of the Integrated Science Center and the arrival of the new particle accelerator the Physics Department we have made a quantum leap in facilities. Literally scores of undergraduates made use of these facilities over the summer. We have gotten it right.

International programs has been a growth area for the College for the past several years. Last year was no exception. Since last fall, we have signed agreements for dualdiploma degree programs with Moscow State University, a unique partnership with Yang Chung High School in Seoul, Korea, an expanded exchange program with the University of Groningen, and a new exchange with the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Students or faculty from all these institutions are here now or on their way during the coming year. In fact, a student from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Moscow State, Katya Mokshina, is here with us today. An undergraduate interested in the dual-diploma degree in intercultural communication, Katya is learning about Geneseo so that she can share information with prospective students. During our visit to Moscow in October, Assistant Provost Stephen Burwood and I made presentations in one of Dean Ter-Minasova's classes in which Katya was a student. Both of us were very much impressed with the quality of the students, their intellectual engagement, their fluency in English, and their enthusiasm for the dual-degree program. We look forward to welcoming them to the dual-degree program. We have a long way to go in reaching our goal that every Geneseo student have the opportunity to participate in study abroad, but we are certainly on our way to getting it right.

Getting it right in construction involves the successful and timely completion of construction projects, and I am pleased to note that we have completed Phase I of the Integrated Science Center, the Bank Street entrance, the North-South Road and tennis courts. The dedication of the science center was a high-point in the 2006-07 year, as was the installation of the new Pelletron particle accelerator in Greene. Now are moving on to Phase II, the renovation of Greene Hall. The departments of physics and chemistry are

temporarily housed in partially renovated swing space in Bailey, as the construction in Greene begins. We have completed half of the new \$1.2 million renovation of the courtyard area between Mary Jemison and the MacVittie Union. We have broken ground for Seneca Hall, the new residence hall connector building on North Side that will create a second quadrangle like the Putnam-Allegheny-Wyoming complex. Most significantly, we have secured capital funding for the renovation of Doty Hall, which will provide wonderful performance space and classroom and office space for shared use by the College and OMRDD. This is an exciting time on campus. Hold on as we seek funding for a new five-year capital plan from the state and as we await the recommendations of the academic space planning study. Our goal, especially in the latter project, is to get it right—a handsome campus worthy of the premier public liberal arts college in the country and a rational plan for allocating space and using buildings on campus. We're on our way.

III.

As we look back on the past year, Geneseo can take great pride in the many things we have gotten right and continue to get right. Geneseo can take justifiable pride in its growing reputation as an outstanding public liberal arts college. We have retained our high place in the various college guides and rankings. Among the top 100 public colleges and universities in the February issue of *Kiplinger's*, for example, we were the number 2 best value for out-of-state students in the nation and the number 7 best value for in-state students. We are the number two public master's university in the North in *U.S. News* and number 11 among all schools public and private. While it is possible to make too

much of the ratings game, Geneseo's consistent high rankings in virtually all the surveys point to genuine quality and a growing reputation for excellence. (This was evident at parents' reception.) They reflect real data and real accomplishments. As an institution and as an academic community, we have always been focused on getting it right, on doing it better, and on coming ever closer to our ideal of the premier public liberal arts college. As we assess ourselves, we value the outcomes we achieve for our students as well as our "inputs" in the terms of the art—the high quality of the students attracted to this college. In Tom Greenfield's wonderful phrase from our Middle States Self-Study of 1997, we are "restless on our laurels." We want to get it right and we want to do the right thing.

In the brief time remaining to us, I would like to look forward to the year ahead and share with you major initiatives in three important areas where we have made progress in the past few years, but where much remains to be done before we get it completely right: sustainability, resources and faculty salaries, and diversity. These are major issues faced by almost all institutions of higher education. On each of them it is important that we get it right and do the right thing if we are to become the premier public liberal arts college in the country, if we are to fulfill the promise of our potential.

Sustainability. We all share a concern for the environment, and over the years the College has sought in various ways to be a good steward of the environment; but perhaps we have not paid enough attention to this issue as a campus community in recent years. Along with many members of the College community, I am deeply concerned about the unprecedented scale and speed of global warming and its potential for large-scale, adverse health, social, economic and ecological effects. Last year, Vice President

Levison established a College Task Force on Campus Sustainability. Many of you may also recall the highly successful energy-saving competition sponsored by GEO (the student environmental organization) in the residence halls. The Task Force identified the competition as one of several efforts reflecting good environmental habits on campus, including recycling at year-end in the residence halls through Geneseo Gives Back, the NYSERTA energy-use audits, use of china and silverware in place of disposable dishes and cutlery in campus dining halls, and the planned use of geothermal technology for heating the new Seneca residence hall. In the past year, too, Geneseo passed an extensive EPA/DEC environmental audit with minimal violations.

In spite of all these good efforts, the Task Force report concludes that we to do more to get it right in campus sustainability. I concur, and in keeping with their recommendations I have recently signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. In signing the commitment, Geneseo joins more than 300 other colleges and universities in focusing on higher education's leadership role in addressing the pressing issue of global climate change. Under the commitment, we pledge to eliminate the campus's greenhouse gas emissions over time. This will involve: completing an emissions inventory; within two years, setting a target date and interim milestones for becoming climate neutral; taking immediate steps to reduce greenhouse gases through some of the short-term actions outlined in the text; developing a comprehensive plan to achieve climate neutrality; highlighting sustainability and climate neutrality in the curriculum; and making our action plan, inventory, and progress reports available for posting and dissemination. I was pleased to find that our own Task Force had already accomplished several of these goals, and I call upon the campus community

to join in this effort. As a public liberal arts college, we have the opportunity to model the values of civic engagement and thoughtful environmental stewardship that we espouse. This is a great opportunity for us all, and you'll hear more about it as the year goes on.

Resources and Faculty Salaries. As you all know, Geneseo has persistently sought targeted funding and tangible support from the SUNY system and legislature in order to achieve our goal of becoming the premier public liberal arts college in the country and in order to bring our student-faculty ratio more closely in line with peer institutions both public and private. It was when I considered this topic in light of the past year and especially the year ahead, that I contemplated the title of Krakauer's book, "Into the Wild." Let me briefly summarize what has happened on this front and the complex and murky picture of what is now going on. With the support of Chancellor Ryan and the recommendation of Provost Palm, the SUNY Board of Trustees passed a new policy that would provide for an academic excellence fee to be initially granted to Geneseo that would provide additional resources to take us to the next level as a public liberal arts college. Under state law, any tuition or fee policy must go through a rulemaking process in Albany. The fee proposal is currently in the Governor's Office of Regulatory Reform, but it is at this point that we go into the wild. While this process is taking place, Governor Spitzer's Commission on Higher Education is considering issues such as differential tuition, SUNY itself is trying to define its position on these issues under an interim chancellor and a very recently appointed system provost, and it is impossible to tell where we will end up. Having agreed upon a means of partially addressing the state resource problem, we must wait until a number of related

uncertainties can be resolved in a very complicated situation. The college administration will of course press forward on all fronts, but it is time to see what we can do locally to reach some of our goals. In that context, I am pleased to announce that we plan to address faculty salaries in a significant way in the next two months, using the modest new funds in the 2008 budget and mandated savings in all divisions. Given the high quality of our faculty, it is disappointing that many salaries of full-time faculty fall below national averages for rank and academic field. Working with Institutional Research and the Budget Office, Provost Conway-Turner has conducted a careful salary study and will introduce a major plan to improve the salaries of full-time teaching faculty so that average salaries across campus come as close as possible to the national means in the 2006-07 College and University Personnel Association salary survey. As I have long maintained, we can do nothing less.

Diversity. Few issues are more important to sound liberal education in the twenty-first century than preparing students for full participation in a diverse society and success in an increasingly global environment. I've talked about this before. At Geneseo diversity efforts have always been firmly situated in our liberal arts mission. In order to fulfill that educational mission, Geneseo needs to pay heed to diversity. We were reminded of that fact at the time of the Middle States visit, and I am pleased that our efforts in the past five years have shown measurable progress. We are working hard to get it right, but I think most of us will agree that there is much more to be done. No issue is more complex or more vital to achieving excellence as a public liberal arts college. Diversity is a multi layered concept, and in a public liberal arts college it not only involves structural (or compositional) diversity (representation of various groups in the

College community), but also subtler but equally important factors related to campus climate and the way we function as a community.

Our Periodic Review Report indicates the progress we have made in diversifying the faculty, staff, and student body between 2000-01 and 2005-06. In terms of compositional diversity, the percentage of people of color in the faculty has increased from 12.3 to 16.7 percent, and among the staff from 7.8 percent to 12 percent. These are encouraging signs, but we need to redouble our efforts. Similarly the percentage of students of color has increased modestly over the five years, to 11.2 percent. Given our concerted efforts, such modest progress is frustrating. I am pleased that the Provost and Vice Presidents have shown leadership in implementing diversity plans, and I applaud the work of the Task Force on Recruitment and Retention of Students of Color. I expect these efforts to bear more fruit in the coming year, and in the past year we have in fact seen the results of focused and vigorous recruitment of outstanding new faculty. If we are to fulfill the promise of liberal education in the twenty-first century, we need to enhance structural diversity.

In our context, however, and especially given our aspirations as an outstanding public liberal arts college, efforts to address the subtler aspects of diversity related to campus climate and discourse in our community are just as important as structural diversity. Our Commission on Diversity and Community, through its assessment subcommittee, has made good progress in studying campus climate for students of color and has identified a set of benchmarks so that we can measure progress in that area. Through the Deliberative Dialogues program, the Commission and others have also worked to bring diverse groups of students, faculty and staff together to discuss important

issues related to race and gender and to community. If you have not already participated in the Deliberative Dialogue program, I encourage you to do so. Our topic is community this fall, and there will be a special Saturday dialogue program targeted at students organizations on September 8 and a regular program for everyone on September 20.

As I consider campus climate, it is clear to me that we need to pay far greater attention to the differences in the ways students from different groups experience a Geneseo education and we need to attend to the real differences, not just in retention rates but in the outcomes of a Geneseo education, between white students and students of color. The assessment committee of the Commission has suggested that we look at both outcomes and student satisfaction, and Professor Monica Schneider has recently shared some of the results of a longitudinal study of campus climate that she has conducted. In order to improve campus climate—in order to get it right—we need to attend to this information. On September 12, during the new All-College Hour, I will convene a special convocation entitled "Community and Diversity: A Call to Action," to share some of what we are learning about campus climate and diversity and to begin what I hope will be part of a year-long consideration of diversity and the beginning of campus-wide discussions that will lead to action and in turn help move us ever closer to our goal of true distinction as the premier public liberal arts college in the county. Please join me, student leaders, and members of the Commission for this important event. The Convocation will be followed in October by strong programming in Cultural Harmony Week, and we plan a campus teach-in on racism in the Spring Term.

Because we have high standards and because we have high aspirations as a public liberal arts college, we care about getting it right at Geneseo—even when we encounter

the most challenging issues in higher education and American society. I am looking forward to an active year in which we continue to get so many things right and when we fall short of our ideals we make further progress in building an outstanding, diverse teaching and learning community second to none in its commitment to liberal and liberating education. Often when I meet campus tour groups on campus, I sum up what Geneseo is about in the following terms: We are dedicated to one simple principle—to do the right thing in undergraduate education. If we do the right thing, we will indeed get it right.