

## **Promise and Peril**

Fall Convocation Address

Christopher C. Dahl  
SUNY Geneseo  
28 August 2009

As always, it is a great personal pleasure and privilege for me to begin another academic year at Geneseo. Many of you were here in Alice Austin Theatre on Study Day, May 6, for a special All-College Meeting. My topic then was: “2009-2010 and Beyond: The Choices Before Us.” Well, today, in the context of the traditional Opening Convocation address, I am returning to that same topic. As is my custom, I would like to take a look at the year ahead, but also review the past year. My title today is “Promise and Peril,” for I believe that we face both great promise and significant peril in the coming year, and the decisions we make and the actions we take in the next few months may well determine the shape of the College for many years to come.

On the positive side of the ledger, I want to welcome the newcomers in our midst, for their presence itself brings promise of good things for the future. I am delighted to welcome our new provost, Carol Long, who comes to us from Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where she was dean of the College of Liberal Arts—in effect, chief academic officer at a selective liberal arts college with graduate schools in business, law, and education (where she also served in the role of dean). A graduate of Pomona College, with master’s and Ph.D. degrees in English from Northwestern, Carol brings deep understanding of liberal learning and the residential liberal arts college experience, a

strong interest in technology and the liberal arts, a dedication to undergraduate teaching, and a keen commitment to international education. Her three decades at Willamette, which included not only seven years as dean but also stints as associate dean and department chair, have given her an excellent grasp of virtually every issue in academic affairs. Her collegial style has already helped her fit in well at Geneseo, and I am already enjoying having her as a colleague. In the next month, Ruth and I plan to host a series of informal receptions at the President's House for all members of the faculty and staff to welcome Carol. I cordially invite you to join us.

In welcoming Carol, I would also like to thank Dave Gordon for his outstanding work as interim provost during the transition from Kate Conway-Turner to Carol. Dave's steady hand at the helm, his intimate knowledge of Geneseo and academic affairs, and his spirit of service have left all of us in his debt once again. I am especially grateful to Dave for his leadership in the Bringing Theory to Practice project, which has been one of the notable accomplishments of the past year. My thanks as well to Paul Schacht, who played a valuable role as interim associate provost and whose efforts have undergirded the Six Big Ideas initiative. Thank you, Dave and Paul.

## I

Despite an extremely difficult budgetary and political environment in the past year, Geneseo has continued in countless ways to achieve its promise as an outstanding public liberal arts college. That much is clear. The faculty and staff we recognize today, the new distinguished professors and excellence award winners at the campus and system level, offer abundant proof of Geneseo's vitality and stature as a public liberal arts

college. The great paradox for me as I consider the 2008-09 academic year is how much we have accomplished, in spite of continued withdrawal of state funds, sweeps of every dollar of new tuition revenue by the State Division of the Budget, and little explicit recognition of Geneseo's unique role in the system. Geneseo's remarkable accomplishments in the past year are the product of the hard work and continuing commitment to excellence in education displayed by everyone in this auditorium and on this campus.

In admissions this year, we have continued to maintain our position as the most selective college or university campus in SUNY—and the new first-year students moving into campus today are themselves harbingers of further promise. In the past year we received 10,410 applications for 950 places in the first-year class and another 1900 transfer applications—more than 12,000 applications. First-year applicants were extraordinarily strong: we were able to admit fewer than 35 percent of those who applied. Average SAT scores rose to 1341 (25<sup>th</sup>/75<sup>th</sup> percentile, 1370-1410); 57 percent of our new students are in the top 10 percent of their graduating classes. Their mean high-school average is 94. At the same time, the percentage of students of color in the class increased to 19.4 percent—23 percent of identified students. Much of the credit for our continuing success in recruitment goes to Calvin Gantt, Director of the AOP Program and George Anselme from Admissions. Increased diversity is a key indicator of excellence and great promise, as is the presence of 44 new international students on campus this fall, bringing our total international student population to 150.

Success in attracting a diverse and highly talented applicant pool brings with it challenges, however. As we increasingly compete with some of the best national liberal

arts colleges, we are playing in a new league. More than half of our prospective students this year applied through the national Common Application process, for example, rather than through the SUNY application processing center. Although the quality of our applicants and the selectivity of the entering class have risen sharply, our yield has decreased somewhat this year. Since we offer very little non-need-based aid, we have seen unusual fluidity and shifts in admitted students over the summer as some of our private peers have offered extraordinarily generous financial aid packages to keep their classes full. Nationwide, the admissions environment this year has been especially chaotic and unpredictable.

Back on campus, our students continued to achieve their promise. Data on the third annual GREAT Day is a good indicator of this: 761 student presenters, up from 441 in the first Great Day in 2007, and 414 presentations, up from 306 in 2007. More than 40 percent of the Class of 2008 went directly to graduate and professional school within a year of graduation. During the summer, a record number of undergraduates were involved in research on campus under various research grants and programs. This is another distinctive strength of Geneseo.

Students at a great liberal arts college do not achieve their promise merely in the classroom. Realizing the full promise of the liberal and liberating education we offer at Geneseo means, of course, helping to develop “socially responsible citizens with skills and values important to the pursuit of an enriched life and success in the world,” as we say in our mission statement. Here, again, the evidence from 2008-09 is clear. Geneseo was once again named to the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. Our students and faculty made four trips to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, through the

Livingston CARES program, continued their work in the community and raised more than \$100,000 for the American Cancer Society and various other charitable causes. And for the third year in a row, our intercollegiate athletic program was honored by the NCAA with the Jostens Community Service Award, for our student-athletes' work in hosting sportsmanship summits for local high school athletes.

Speaking of student-athletes, our intercollegiate teams also achieved considerable success last year, winning five conference championships and going on to NCAA competition in five sports, including a first-ever appearance by our women's tennis team in the NCAA Division III championships. More to the point, our athletes achieved their promise as *student* athletes: nine of the 22 SUNYAC Scholar-Athlete awards—or 41 percent—went to Geneseo students last year. We are only one of ten schools in the conference. In the past year, six of our student-athletes were elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Plainly, our students are achieving the promise of an outstanding Division III athletic program. We could do even more, however. In men's soccer and lacrosse, we compiled very good records in conference play, but the lack of a stadium and all-weather practice fields hurt our chances for post-season play. Construction of the stadium will allow us to achieve even more of our promise.

Academic excellence of all kinds is the central theme that links all seven of the College's major planning goals. All areas of the College support this goal. The entire College community works together, but the quality of our faculty and programs is the key element in delivering on our promise. Last week we received a welcome confirmation of our quality and reputation as an undergraduate college in the annual US News rankings. We held our position as the number 2 public college in the North, but we were also listed

in a new category, “Strong Commitment to Teaching,” where we ranked number 4 among all institutions, public and private, in the North. This is a tribute to the outstanding work of so many of our faculty in all fields. In this realm we achieve the promise of excellence every day.

Our vision of the teacher-scholar also includes active engagement in research and scholarly/creative activity. Our faculty continued to garner research grants, and research expenditures totaled approximately \$1.5 million in the past year. While I would like to see that number increase, there were a number of successes in securing major grants in 2008-09, ranging from \$140,000 to \$360,000 and coming from such prestigious sources as the National Institute of Health, National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and NASA. I congratulate all of our researchers.

We have also advanced in internationalizing the campus and curriculum. This year we further strengthened our agreement with Kwame Nkrumah University in Ghana. Professor Jennifer Rogalsky (Geography) has received a Fulbright Scholar award to teach and conduct research there in the spring, and Dr. Eva Tagoe-Darko from Kwame Nkrumah will join our faculty this year on a similar exchange. We also sent six of our student teachers to Ghana, and carried out an exchange of student teachers with the University of Exeter in England. Finally, our Communicative Disorders and Sciences Department received full reaccreditation from their national body—with no exceptions whatsoever. As always, these examples are merely the tip of the iceberg in demonstrating academic quality.

To realize our full promise as a public liberal arts college, we seek, in the words of our mission statement, to combine “a rigorous curriculum with a rich co-curricular life to create a learning-centered environment.” Some of our most promising initiatives in the past year have done just that. Under the aegis of the Commission on Diversity and Community, the Office of Multicultural Affairs has worked with faculty in several departments to create an integrated course program called “Real World Geneseo.” Designed to develop in students the knowledge, the ethical foundation, and social consciousness required for effective leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the course combines academic content with a residential experience and service learning. Supported by the Bringing Theory to Practice grant and a competitive grant from the SUNY Office of Diversity and Equity, the program will be offered in the Spring. I regard Real World Geneseo as one of the most exciting and fruitful projects we have engaged in since I arrived at Geneseo. If the pilot program goes as well as expected, it has the potential to serve as a model of engaged learning that will be replicable in many areas of the College. In Residential Life as well, we made important progress in creating the sort of integrated living and learning environment we seek, most notably with the opening of Writer’s House in Seneca Hall. These and similar collaborations between academic affairs and student life have great potential to unlock Geneseo’s full promise as a residential public liberal arts college. I look forward to more of them in the coming year.

All of the progress we have made in the past year in realizing our potential is enabled by the work of our colleagues in Finance and Administration. In addition to paying the bills and maintaining our physical plant, they support many aspects of our mission through policies and initiatives. For example, the Procurement Office is a leader

in supporting Minority and Women Owned Businesses. Last year, the Accounting Office took over the Geneseo Foundation's books and converted them to a new software system, thus ensuring that an even larger portion of the funds contributed to the College are used directly to support our mission. New web-based systems contribute to our sustainability efforts by eliminating hundreds of paper documents. And in Seneca Hall, Geneseo now has its first building with geothermal heating.

Seneca Hall is a good example of the ways all our capital projects are intended to support our programs and advance Geneseo's mission as a public liberal arts college. The completion of Phase II of the Integrated Science Center, the renovation of Greene Hall, provides purpose-designed teaching and lab space for two of our premier science departments. The newly renovated outdoor track and field complex serves one of our strongest Division III athletic programs. Although we are still seeking additional capital funding for the Doty renovation, we are going ahead with design on that project with plans for phased construction.

Advancement also plays an integral role in carrying out the College's mission. We are seeking to build what I referred to in last year's convocation talk as a "sustainable" advancement operation, one that will keep generating resources and building alumni support long after most of us are gone from the scene. Building a sustainable advancement program has required investment of scarce funds, but I believe we have no choice but to do so, given the declining prospects for state funding. Although 2008-09 was a terrible year for fundraising, we achieved relatively good results. Annual giving to Geneseo was \$1.23 million, down only 2 percent in a year when giving declined 10 percent on average nationwide. We also received \$2.5 million in new commitments

for our forthcoming capital campaign. Indeed, we have passed the \$9 million mark in commitments—and we are still more than a year away from any formal announcement of the campaign. I am very pleased to inform you that, at the Foundation Board meeting in September, we will announce the largest single gift in the history of the College, for an endowment that will directly support our academic mission.

Advancement is not merely the fundraising arm of the College, however. In the past year we have also made major strides in integrating the work of advancement with academic and student life. In April, for example, we created a “Best of GREAT Day” program for Foundation Board members so that they could be exposed to some of our most outstanding undergraduate researchers. We have redesigned the alumni magazine, and we are redesigning the Geneseo website. These efforts help to build a sustainable advancement operation, but they also contribute to the success of our mission.

## II

In reviewing the past year, I hope I have succeeded in painting the portrait of an outstanding public liberal arts college that is fulfilling its promise in many areas and continues to move forward as an institution. This is an accurate portrait of Geneseo today. But it brings us back to the paradox I began with. Even as we have continued to carry out our distinctive mission, we face significant perils. We will operate, as we did last year, with radically constrained resources and less support for equipment, supplies, and travel. Last year’s freeze on hiring has meant that we have no new tenure-track faculty joining us this year. Severe constraints on hiring will continue in the current year.

In this environment, we run the very real danger of losing much of what we have built here—of losing the promising things we have accomplished.

As I suggested at the All-College meeting in May, we face difficult choices in the coming year. The New York State budget situation is indeed perilous, and how well the State University of New York will be able to navigate the troubled waters of Albany politics remains unclear. I am encouraged by the arrival of our new Chancellor, Nancy Zimpher, who will provide vigorous leadership and much stronger advocacy on our behalf, but we have all seen the dysfunction and chaos that have characterized state government over the summer. Looking at the state budget, the only good news I see is that there have been no further cuts since I spoke in May. The Governor, however, has projected a cash shortfall of \$2.6 billion in November/December and a structural budget shortfall of \$2.1. He plans to call the legislature back into session in September to address budget issues, and it is possible—indeed, probable—that there will be midyear cuts this year as well.

Where does Geneseo stand in all this? As you will recall, we faced a \$2.4 million shortfall last year, having endured four successive rounds of cuts to the SUNY budget. We filled most of the gaps through hiring freezes, expenditure controls, and one-time cuts of 13 percent to all OTPS accounts across campus. In the coming year, we face a shortfall of \$3.3 million—*if there are no further cuts to the SUNY budget*. We will continue to hold lines vacant and limit spending from departmental accounts. These steps, as I pointed out in May, will yield total savings of about \$2.3 million. We will cover the remaining shortfall of \$1.2 million (which includes a shortfall of \$200,000 carried over from last year) with the use of reserves from revenue accounts. If there are

no further cuts this year, we will be able to use reserves to make up the shortfall for one more year (2010-2011). Let me emphasize, as I did in May, that the \$2.3 million in cuts, as well as the use of reserve funds to balance the budget, are temporary expedients. They are not sustainable. They are one-time actions to address an immediate budget crisis, but they cannot be continued indefinitely. They do not address the underlying structural shortfall in the budget. If these numbers seem abstract (one recalls Everett Dirksen's famous adage, "a billion here, a billion there—sooner or later it adds up to real money"), let me put them in human terms. We currently face a structural budget gap between \$2.3 million and \$3.0 million. That represents the equivalent of 45 to 60 faculty and staff positions.

You can see the magnitude of the challenges we face this year. Essentially, we have two years to fashion and implement a plan to eliminate the structural budget gap. We can choose to hunker down and react to the budget crisis by cutting everything across the board, pulling in our horns, and going into the equivalent of a sleep mode. Or we can be more strategic, making cuts judiciously, restructuring our programs, seeking new revenues, and using a combination of measures to eliminate the gap, all the while seeking to maintain forward progress in advancing the College's mission.

This is the challenge we face in the coming year. This is why the work of the Strategic Planning Group will be so important to our future. This is why the work of the Six Big Ideas task forces is much, much more than an academic exercise.

In the midst of all these challenges, there is good news. Let me bring you up to date on the work that has been accomplished since we last met in May. Here are some facts and figures. When we issued a call for task force members for the Six Big Ideas

initiative, response was immediate and enthusiastic. More than sixty members of the community responded within days, even though it was clear that the task forces would be meeting regularly over the summer break. Sixty-four members were appointed to the task forces; in addition, 52 faculty and staff were enlisted as “colleagues” for the task forces. The task force chairs met together twice to plan their work; and they met with Chancellor Zimpher when she visited campus in late July. The Bringing Theory to Practice Group (the task force plus other members of the original steering committee) held a two-day retreat. In total, 25 meetings of the various task forces have been held since the groups were constituted. I am deeply grateful to the task force chairs and the members who have worked over the summer.

Much of the work of the task forces is visible on the wiki created for the Six Big Ideas, and I urge you all to follow the discussions and reports on the web. Paul Schacht has done a brilliant job of setting up and administering the wiki—let me give you an idea of all the work done there. Including Paul, fifty-three individuals have edited pages; individuals other than Paul have made 262 edits. Paul has made 1011 edits. Work on the The Six Big Ideas over the summer has gone on, then, in both physical and virtual space.

What have the task forces accomplished? Quite a lot, I believe. Each task force was charged with finding ways to improve the College and to generate new revenues or achieve efficiencies, or unify and enhance our most important activities as a public liberal arts college. Each of the Big Ideas serves several of these purposes.

*Bringing Theory to Practice*, chaired by Celia Easton and Dave Gordon, was first out of the starting block because their work on transformational learning had already been taking place during the year. I’ve mentioned “Real World Geneseo,” the pilot

project promoting diversity and global learning, but the task force has also identified transformational learning goals, addressed high-impact practices that will enhance liberal learning and explored how to spread them more widely, and set goals for collaboration between academic and student affairs. The work of *Bringing Theory to Practice*, already well advanced, has the potential to make Geneseo a national leader in Twenty-First Century liberal learning and to provide new directions for curriculum reform. Though it does not address resource questions directly, it will help to bring together and enhance all that we do as a public liberal arts college.

The task force on *Innovative Five-Year Professional Programs*, chaired by Terry Bazzett and Dennis Showers, has begun to address the intricate questions of moving toward combined bachelor's and master's degrees in professional fields, exploring logistics, looking at the myriad of combined programs in relevant peer institutions, and preparing questions for the information-gathering phase of their work this fall. The ideas and insights of this task force will be particularly timely in our budget crisis because innovative five-year programs have real potential to increase revenue and to set Geneseo apart from other colleges with more traditional programs in fields like teacher education. The Task Force's work is central to our future.

The *Expand Instructional Delivery* task force, chaired by Gary Towsley and Polly Radosh, has explored a wide variety of ways to deliver instruction, to serve our students better, and to reach more students in the context of our public liberal arts mission—everything from enhancing summer school and providing non-credit courses to alumni, to the appropriate use of on-line resources in our rather traditional residential context.

Many of these ideas hold promise for garnering new resources and support, as well as demonstrating our creativity in teaching and our high quality as a liberal arts college.

The task force on *Rethinking the Course Load*, chaired by Anne Eisenberg and Richard Finkelstein, has worked hard over the summer, exploring the implications of moving from a five-course to a four-course load for students—and doing so very carefully, with a skeptical eye on the logistical and educational effects of the change. They have looked at other institutions that have implemented this concept and will visit the College of New Jersey in September. As you have heard, they plan to hold public forums on their work, so that the entire College community is informed and involved. The ideas of this task force have great potential for curriculum reform as well as better use of resources.

The *Center for Collaborative Research* task force, chaired by Steve Padalino and Michael Lynch, has focused primarily on sponsored research, surveying senior researchers on campus and gathering data from some of our aspirational peers on how they support faculty research. Increasing sponsored research obviously has positive resource implications, and the committee's August report will be helpful in that regard.

The *Strategic Community Partnerships* task force, chaired by Sid Bosch and Harry Howe, has generated interesting ideas for partnerships (including a Geneseo Summer Institute for alumni and community leaders), conducted an inventory of such partnerships on campus, and examined some of the resource implications of creating a center and/or expanding our partnerships in the region. There are many promising ideas here, and I expect the task force to develop and add to them in the coming months. Here,

again, the potential for garnering further support—financial and political—through strategic partnerships is great.

What have we learned over the summer? One of the most interesting things the task forces have found is the large amount of overlap in their work. Not only Bringing Theory to Practice but also the other task forces have the potential to affect our curriculum and mission, and the innovations that may add to our revenues also have the potential to help us realize our vision of Geneseo as the premier public liberal arts college in the country—that is, *to fulfill our promise* as an outstanding undergraduate institution with a distinctive mission in SUNY and in American higher education. As we face an extraordinarily difficult year that will require us to be very careful in addressing the budget crisis, a year that will require tough decisions on the part of all of us, I look forward at the same time to continuing our development as a public liberal arts college.

In the Six Big Ideas, we have set a challenging course for ourselves. Time is short. We have a window of opportunity this year. We will need to move quickly to develop some of the initiatives this year and begin to implement them, even as we face the significant perils that the budget situation presents in the next few years. The alternative we face—perhaps the greatest peril I am talking about today—is this: If we remain in a reactive mode, if we back away from the challenges, if we fail to face the perils head on, we will never realize the great promise of Geneseo’s mission.

In this environment, the work of the College’s Strategic Planning Group will be vitally important, as the task forces report back with ideas and reactions from the community. The work of the Budget Advisory Committee will also be crucial. I encourage you to read the reports of the various task forces and to participate in the

discussion. The planning group and the cabinet will share with the whole community our responses to their work at every opportunity in the coming weeks and months. If there are changes in the College budget, Vice President Levison and I will share them with you promptly and fully. In fact, we plan to present a detailed overview of this year's budget early in the semester. This is something we have done every few years, and now it is more timely than ever.

We do indeed face grave perils in the coming year, but the promise of Geneseo as an outstanding public liberal arts college remains. Together, through an open and strategic planning process, we have the ability still to realize this promise. I know we have realized much of our promise in the year past, in spite of the challenges we face, and I know this because I know the quality of our faculty and staff and the quality of this teaching and learning community. You are the agents who make Geneseo great, and I therefore want to close with two simple words: thank you. Thank you for all you have done for this special place and for all you continue to do—despite the vicissitudes of budgets, systems, and public higher education in New York State. Thank you.