

Convocation Address to Faculty and Staff

Minot State University

August 17, 2005 ; 8:30 A.M.

Ann Nicole Nelson Hall

David Fuller, President

Good morning. It is so nice to see you. Welcome to all -- faculty and staff, and student leaders -- to the new academic year of 2005-2006. We will extend special welcomes to our new faculty and staff later, but I want to say now how pleased I am that you have joined us. We're very proud of our community and Minot State University.

Things have gone well this past year, or at least that's what I think. I went to the dentist last week and while the doctor was injecting the Novocain, the assistant asked with a sense of eagerness in her voice, "Aren't you the new president of MSU?" I gurgled and nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, I thought so," she replied. "Our daughter graduated last May and I remember that you announced that the state of South Dakota authorized the degrees at Commencement." She smiled. "Uh, huh," I acknowledged, as the doctor went in one more time with the syringe.

With the exception of my slip at Commencement, I do believe last year went very well at MSU. In April we got to meet many of our 2013 class, and to see and hear 700 of them as they gathered in the MSU Dome for one of the inaugural events. I received hundreds of letters from them thanking us for inviting them to campus. I thought you would enjoy hearing a few of them.

Dear Dr. Fuller:

Thank you for letting us come. I was thinking of going to UND, but now I'm not sure if I want to go to UND or MSU. I didn't really like the name Buckshot for the new beaver [mascot]. Can you tell Josh and Ryan thank you for helping us for me? Does MSU have a hockey team? I got one of those green basketballs that Buckshot was throwing. A ball came and Josh caught a ball and handed it back and I took it. I got an autograph of my favorite football player, Corey Anderson, DB #10, and I know him, and he autographed my shirt and ball. It was really fun. I'll probably come in 2013.

Sincerely,

Cody

Dear Dr. Fuller,

I want to thank you for the wonderful day yesterday at the dome. I think that was fun when we made the shape of the year 2013. Thank you for providing the MSU t-shirts for us. Thank the athlete guides, Josh and Ryan. I will be coming to MSU in 2013 and hope to make it on the baseball team when I come to MSU in 2013. I got 20 autographs.

Sincerely,

Devin

P.S. Hope to see you in 2013.

Dear Dr. Fuller,

I had so much fun at the University. Thank you for inviting me and my classmates to the University. Congratulations for getting the job for the MSU President. Thank you for dedicating the tree for us. Did you know you were on the news and in the newspaper? I hope I see you another time because you are so nice. I hope you have good years of teaching at Minot State University. I hope you're still President of MSU till 2013!

Sincerely,
Austin

Dear Dr. Fuller,

Thank you for inviting us to the MSU Dome. It was very fun. I liked everything. Doing the banners and getting our shirts. I liked the navy blue shirts. Buckshot is ok. We're the class that thought of the name Chompy. Also, thanks for dedicating the Wonder Tree for the fourth graders. When we formed 2013 we stood right here in the 3. Congrats to you for being the eighth president of the MSU.

Sincerely,
Ashley

Those wonderful prospective students, our current students, and our graduates remind us so well that our purpose is our students -- their learning, their growth, and the support we provide to them. Our mission says that we advance knowledge. While we do, of course, we do much more than advance knowledge: we create it, we immerse students in it, we excite them, we help them understand that it is not for knowledge's sake that we're here, but for their own wonder, curiosity, their ability to test and question, and their growth. Our staff works to create an environment that is supportive and that provides meaningful and caring assistance to ensure that learning happens. That's, in my view, our ultimate obligation. And it is that obligation, our pledge of "students first" that I would like to address in the next few minutes.

Fulfilling the expectation of "students first" depends in large measure in our ability and success understanding our students. Aristotle's and other rhetoricians' advice to know the audience comes from their understanding that unless we know the audience and their interests, we could often miss the mark if our aim is to persuade or influence the members of that audience. When I was in college, the concept of a stereotypical and perhaps mythical student was a full-time student, motivated, an avid reader, an analytical thinker, well prepared from a college preparatory curriculum in high school, engaged on campus, interested in lectures, respectful of faculty, and with little say into the way the course was taught or delivered. When I first started teaching, I held on to that view of the stereotypical student and carried on that tradition of framing my classes with that student clearly in mind. I started to find -- as all of you know very well -- that many students worked in the evening and weekends, that all learned in different ways, that all brought with them different experiences and skills, that many came into the classroom with various attitudes about the value of education and study, and that many, much to my dismay, surprise, and disappointment, didn't possess an inherent and unquestioning respect for me as the professor.

Our new Web site, which will appear on August 26, includes statements about what “students first” means, what we pledge as our level of support and service to students. The statement reads, “Why do we put students first? Because we firmly believe that a student’s ultimate success requires continued, collaborative focus and dedication – from faculty, staff, alumni, and students themselves.” The Web site tells about our approach to education, too. “How do we approach education? By individually engaging students in critical thought, showing them how to explore and evaluate new concepts, and encouraging them toward personal excellence.” Note the key words in that passage, a passage that was developed based on information from the interviews of our faculty, staff, and students. Those key terms are: individually engaging, critical, showing, exploring, evaluating, and encouraging.

Most institutions these days, even the Research 1 universities, proclaim their focus on student learning and success; many state that their mission is student centered, whereby they are devoted to individual students, their welfare, their learning, etc. Our sister institutions and our primary competitors do so as well. Mayville State, for instance, pledges to “educate and guide students, as individuals.” Valley City’s mission states that it is “clearly focused on preparing individual learners for the future.” UND and NDSU pledge a commitment to student learning as well. Many schools across the nation proclaim that they have well qualified, caring faculty, devoted to individual student learning and growth. Two-year colleges make similar claims. Williston State College’s advertisement in last Sunday’s Minot Daily News proudly announced, “small classes guarantee personal attention with caring instructors.” MSU-Bottineau, our sister institution, publicizes that students receive “a quality education in a caring environment.”

Two weeks ago we conducted our fifteenth focus-group meeting for the research we’re doing for the University’s strategic planning. This one was with the local news media (both television stations and the Minot Daily News), a group that covers and features us and our stories almost weekly if not daily. A group that knows what we do. We asked questions we’ve asked of all our focus groups, from students, faculty, staff, community members, parents, health-care professionals, local educators, to others. We asked the standard but not necessarily easy question about what our mission is, but there was a general silence, until one participant ventured to say that we’re really not sure what your mission is, what your identity is beyond your historical mission to train teachers. Another volunteered that the campus and its identity seem to be in transition. When pressed on the point about the mission, though, all participants seemed to agree that Minot State University’s mission and purpose are yet to be defined. None referred to key points of our published mission, which is that Minot State University advances knowledge, critical and creative thinking, and the vitality of community and cultures. None referred explicitly to the key points of that mission, nor did any refer to our core values of students first, pursuit of excellence, responsibility, respect, and learning community. Why is that? Have we not done a good job telling people what we do? Are we not particularly clear ourselves as to our mission, or what the idea of students first really means? Is a concise definition of our purpose blurred and hidden in a general sense of our “doing” education, or providing a good “college” education?

Perhaps our Carnegie classification as a master’s 1 comprehensive public institution, which means that we offer a comprehensive array of educational programs, including master’s degree programs, is published and generally descriptive, but not

necessarily very revealing or understandable. For the participants in that focus group, our classification or our published mission was not particularly memorable or helpful. Many people in our focus groups state explicitly or imply in various ways that we are indeed the local, good college. Some say that it is a good place to come for a short time before they transfer, or a good place to pick up the generals, or a good place to come, stay, and graduate. Based on what we're learning from our focus groups, one can conclude that we have some work to do to clarify and communicate our mission and purposes.

What we do know clearly is that higher education these days is fiercely competitive, with marketing niches, declining state resources and institutional support, and, most notable, declining demographics and enrollments. Institutions are becoming more interested in distinctiveness, unique missions, brands, and meaningful and descriptive tag lines. Pressures for academic assessment and documentation that institutions are accomplishing what they say they are accomplishing (e.g., student learning, graduation rates, career placement, employer satisfaction with the skills of our graduates) are coming not unexpectedly from federal and state legislatures who are allocating significant dollars to higher education and who are calling for accountability. Pressures are also coming from prospective students and current students who are finding it easier and easier these days to shop, enroll at multiple institutions in multiple delivery modes, transfer four or five times, and influence the nature of their education and its delivery by shopping with their feet, expressing opinions in course satisfaction surveys, and being more vocal about it than they were in my days. These changes are requiring institutions to be acutely responsive to student needs, which include not only better service but documented and effective student learning.

Many of us do indeed believe that what represents our genuine value is "students first." But even for us it is a controversial term verging on cliché. It is not easily defined. Our commitment and faith in students' growth, wonder, and success depends on our knowing our students, not as I assumed I knew the students when I first started teaching. Current information about our students describes their interests and characteristics, their expectations, their weaknesses and strengths, their academic and social needs, and the teaching and experiences that will ensure their growth and success. We need to continue to pay close attention to that information and to seek additional information. "Students first" should demonstrate our unquestionable commitment to their learning and individual success, whereby we provide a nurturing, friendly, and supportive environment and services that are first and foremost designed for our individual students. Practicing "students first" is not just delivery of a good education or advancing knowledge, as our mission states; it is much more than that. "Education covers a lot of ground but it won't cultivate it," as a Chinese proverb reminds us.

Recently, I asked all members of the new University Cabinet, all vice presidents, deans, and directors and senate presidents to join me this summer in a full-day retreat focused on the concept of students first. Through the day, members shared stories of their personal experiences practicing the concept of "students first," worked together to figure out what the concept means, and brainstormed and then prioritized major activities and projects that could make a significant difference and improvement in the way we practice students first.

The definitions we brainstormed included such key terms as challenging students to do their best, focusing on outstanding student learning, treating students as we

ourselves want to be treated, being accessible to students, providing support and assistance to individuals, recognizing them as individuals, listening to them, treating them professionally and courteously, and the list goes on. Based on our definitions, the University Cabinet proceeded to work in small groups to identify ways to improve significantly the way we demonstrate and deliver on our “students first” pledge. Briefly, here’s what they came up with.

1. Open and Active Campus – Create a Home (weekend activities, dorms open on holidays, more people here during summer, more access to offices during peak times, hold student forums to find out what they want, open up activities to community).

2. Advising Undecided Students (student affairs and academic affairs should reach out to new first-year students, improve attendance notification, career nights, identify undecided students and develop process to work with them).

3. Identify Student Learning as MSU’s Primary Mission (identify/develop metrics, develop a first-year seminar, establish advisory and/or mentoring programs and strategies, promote extracurricular activities that are learning experiences, associate rewards and systems with student learning, use technology “smart” – to engage, not just transfer information).

4. Student Centered (job descriptions that incorporate expectations of serving students, supervisors expected to evaluate staff on student-service criteria, set aside resources to train/invest in faculty and staff to develop or enhance needed skills, hire faculty and staff to align with institution’s mission; study other universities that have achieved a student centered culture; work to improve higher-than-average staff/student ratios).

5. Accessibility (offices open as deemed necessary based on traffic/student needs, no closed lunch periods, improve parking for visitors, improve signage, general handicap accessibility re-evaluated across campus).

6. Know How to Direct Students for What they Need (telephone directory, orientation for all new employees, new students should have a list of a “who does what list” identifying staff and faculty, online information – easy to find items, employees need to know what we have - publications, etc.)

7. Holistic Approach to Students; Campus Involvement in Community (students, faculty and staff improve communications, social activities that involve the whole campus community, engage students in research and public service activities with faculty and staff, make work study experience more meaningful, professional development for all in both skills and social interaction, build student service into evaluations of faculty and staff, reflect student service commitment in publications, make sure students first is supported by or is incorporated in our mission, measure with the goal of student engagement and satisfaction, etc).

All of these projects have immense potential for us and our students. The recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results we recently received reveal many directions and opportunities for growth and development, particularly in the need for increased engagement by our first-year students, our collective effort to emphasize diversity, and enhanced student life on campus. The North Dakota University Systems’ annual accountability measures report provides as well areas needing our attention and areas demonstrating what we are doing well. These sources of information should

provide all of us information for continued dialogue about how we're doing and what we can do to improve.

In the process of considering new proposals and initiatives, we need to build on the successes of current projects that make a huge difference, such as our Bush-supported Partners in Learning project for faculty mentoring, our Intellectual Climate Committee initiatives, the Horizon's Unlimited program and the international initiatives, the diversity committee's work to make us a more diverse and welcoming campus, and many others. And we also need to take some bold steps to address our challenges, those identified in the NSSE results, in the strategic planning research, and in our assessment of student learning. For instance, I believe strongly that we need to consider a major program supporting our first-year students, which should involve mentoring, first-year seminars, and integrated academic and student affairs. I also believe strongly that we need to require first-year students to live on campus. I believe that life on campus helps improve academic performance, retention, greater involvement in student activities, improved graduation rates, and strengthened allegiance to the university, besides adding students to our campus environment. We need to ensure that our campus and campus life remains strong and vibrant. We also need to continue to support our online program and other forms of alternative deliveries, such as degree completion programs, 2-plus-2 arrangements with community colleges, and collaborative partnerships with other institutions and agencies. A comparable effort needs to be made to improve the connection our online students have to our campus. We need to take on directly the whole issue of student employment, and look at expanded employment opportunities on campus, cooperatives, internships, teaching assistantships, and the like. And, we will continue to pursue aggressively new directions and projects to support the economic development of our community and our state.

"Students first" underlines all of the projects and initiatives this year. We're going to renovate Crane Hall into a living and learning hall with studio spaces for apartments, and be ready for the class of 2006. The first floor of Dakota Hall will be renovated to house a new and responsive residence life office and service. The Student Union Ballroom will be converted to a new and exciting student activity center. Enrollment management will come together as a strong and responsive recruiting services operation to provide first-class and responsive service to our prospective students. The information from the strategic planning work will be shared with the campus and goals collectively identified to guide our future, our decision-making and budgeting, and our capital campaign focused on our Centennial in 2013. A campus master plan will be completed by all of us to address entrances, signage, future growth, and new relationships. Our new advancement office and vice president will begin focusing exclusively on building relationships, seeking funds for new initiatives, and for the goals of our strategic plan, such as initiatives supporting "students first." We'll continue to work on a shared environment, so faculty, staff, and students are involved directly in major decisions on campus. We're going to develop an infrastructure to build a marketing avenue for the institution. We're also going to build our public information services and make sure that our communications are timely, regular, and that we share students' successes and our accomplishments widely. We've worked to identify how the new administrative reporting lines will be defined. The separation of a number of combined functions and the resulting opportunity to focus more directly and effectively on key strategic directions has been

completed. You've seen and heard the marketing on television and on billboards, I trust. Marketing and recruitment improvements come from your strong view expressed to me throughout last year. And we had the opportunity at the last open meeting to talk about the recommended tag line "Be Seen, Be Heard," which defines and complements our students-first value by emphasizing that students will be heard and seen as individuals. That line will be revealed on the full rollout of our new brand and marketing campaign on August 26. That will be followed closely by newly defined standards manual for our publications.

This summer, Cathy Horvath, Larry Atwood, Dick Jenkins, Stephanie Witwer, and I went to a two-day conference in Orlando hosted by AASCU and EDUCAUSE that focused on understanding the Net Generation -- the new generation of students coming into our classrooms. The two days were full of focused examination of student expectations, their characteristics, study habits, and recreational habits. We listened to panels of students, we heard researchers describe characteristics of the different generations, and we were challenged to think of the impact this information and the new students will have on our institution. As we were sitting in the airport on our way back, we talked about how interesting it would be to ask our own students about their expectations. In response, Cathy, Adam, Anton, and others took the initiative to work together to compile a video of our students talking about their expectations and experiences. I thought it would be interesting to share this video with you, so that all of us can see and hear what students are saying. Let's look at this video now.

Thanks to Cathy and her staff for the excellent work devoted to creating this video. What you've seen doesn't advance a position that we should place the emphasis on merely pleasing or satisfying them without a clear focus on effective student learning. In fact, what you have just seen matches almost to the T the characteristics and expectations identified by Diane Oblinger in her national study and 2005 article, "Educating the Net Generation" (Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, editors, Educause, 2005). The Net Generation, as she pointed out, was born in or after 1982, interested in group work, respectful of social conventions and institutions, and fascinated by new technologies. She cites Marc Prensky's article ("Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part II: Do They Really Think Differently?" On the Horizon, 2001) to report that the average person will have spent countless hours on video games, sent thousands of emails, watched countless hours of TV, spent countless hours on cell phones, with a countable number of hours reading. Today's Net Generation learners, as he summarized are "digital, connected, experiential, immediate, and social." Their learning preferences are: teams, peer-to-peer, engagement and experience, visual and kinesthetic, and interested in pursuing things that matter. The Web is their primary information source, not the library; they have a short attention span, demand fast response time, and are reflective.

Oblinger draws on Carie Windham's 2005 article study to describe these students' expectations for faculty. Those expectations are: "be engaging; challenge us; be responsive: answer voice mails and emails; office hours still matter; be seen: we'd like to see you and get to know you outside of class; set boundaries: tell us when you're available; use technology appropriately: don't be Power Pointless; use real world, relevant examples; be an active participant in class; show you are excited about the subject; ask students what they think; and not everything needs to be on the Web.

Oblinger also emphasizes the role of “informal spaces” in this students’ world. I immediately thought of the informal space on the first floor of Old Main where students are gathering, using computers, and socializing as a good example of what Oblinger mentions. She notes that “students spend more time out of class than in it.” For them, learning occurs through conversations, web surfing, social interactions, team projects, spontaneous interactions, mingling, sharing, and making connections. Important learner characteristics, according to Oblinger, are: experiential, non-text, limited time due to outside work, opportunistic style, and a desire for personal touch. She ended her presentation with a quotation from Prensky, who said, “Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.” And to add complexity to that world, nearly 25 percent of our students are older than average, with different interests, expectations, learning styles, and abilities with technology. Balancing the needs of the new generation and the older-than-average students will be a large challenge for our classrooms.

These specific demands and different learners will require us to approach academic assessment and curricular and pedagogical research with a new fervor, one not intended to satisfy external agencies but to satisfy our own interest in and need for understanding our students and their learning. This work gives us in-depth understanding of how well we are meeting our learning and teaching objectives. We must be intentional in collecting cognitive, behavioral, and other data to show us how we’re doing and what we can do to improve ourselves as an educational and social organization.

Let me shift direction slightly here to the environment that supports our students and their learning. The way we cultivate good education is by maintaining a supporting environment and campus atmosphere. That’s got to start from a community that is respectful of its members, one that recognizes our community and the general satisfaction of being a member of the community. Satisfaction depends primarily on the intrinsic value of being respected as individuals and enjoying one’s job. Recognition, appreciation, support, good communication, inclusiveness, and friendliness go a long way to helping all of us enjoy our campus, our colleagues, and our position. Without those, you don’t have a good morale or a strong community focused on our mission. Job satisfaction, too, depends secondarily but importantly on extrinsic rewards, such as pay, benefits, and acknowledgement. We’ve got to continue to work on both the intrinsic and extrinsic. The spouse and dependent waiver program is a good example of the campus working together to define a real need for employee satisfaction and support and developing a cogent proposal.

The important issue of competitive staff and faculty salaries is one that we need to work together to review and address in a systematic way. I am planning to work with Faculty Senate and Staff Senate to nominate members for a salary task force, with the express purpose of studying salaries on campus, looking at regional and national market data, identifying specific problems, and defining a five-year plan with realistic salary goals. The plan should be responsive, communicated, and endorsed by our respective senates. It should as well serve as a primary rubric for salary decisions. Without a plan such as this one, we will not be able to demonstrate our collective commitment to competitive. We also must look at the processes we use to communicate salary decisions

and award raises. I would expect that this task force can give us guidance about those communications.

Regarding generally the atmosphere and morale on campus, there are a number of actions we can take to make a difference. Each individual on campus has a role to play, too, in recognizing, greeting, and acting as a supportive colleague. One small but meaningful attempt to get us started in the right direction this year is the Staff Senate's initiative to plan and coordinate a campus-wide family event. Our MSU at the Zoo event tonight is a great opportunity for us to come together and to enjoy the company of our colleagues (and that does not at all refer to the animals at the zoo!) and our community. It should be a fun time.

The open meeting a couple of weeks ago allowed all of us to discuss and consider the tagline "Be Seen, Be Heard." For students, we understand that most are interested in recognition as an individual, that they expect support and respect, that they want to be seen and heard and guided and supported.

To be seen and heard reminds us internally, as well as those externally, that we have faculty worthy of being seen and heard and honored. You have in front of you our new academic excellence report, which shows our exceptional faculty and our qualities as an academic institution. It will be our challenge to make sure that our faculty and their accomplishments and their abilities as teachers and scholars are shared proudly internally and externally.

Staff members are absolutely essential for us as we practice and redirect our efforts to our students' interest in being seen and heard. Student support services, residence life, food services, registration, financial aid, recruiting, academic support services, the library, and all such support is made better and more "students first" through our message that students will be seen and heard and assisted in meaningful ways. I can't say enough about the essential role all of our staff plays in making sure that we are indeed a students-first institution.

To be seen and heard reminds us, too, about our institutional need to counter the notion that we are a best-kept secret. To be seen and heard requires exceptional academics and services. To be seen and heard requires that we market and proclaim who we are. We need to identify our distinctiveness and qualities to attract new students and to generate interest in and respect for MSU. Recently we've been running television ads, placing newspaper ads, putting up new billboards honoring and acknowledging our students -- all with the purpose of sharing our secret. You've noticed, I hope, our new welcome banners across campus. The effort is to send a loud and clear message welcoming people to our campus and expressing the pride all of us have in our institution. A new sign at the Broadway and University intersection and redesigned corners on Broadway and University and 8th St NW and University are in the planning and design stages; those too will help us show our pride in our university. Today you received a canvas bag with our bright red logo, a window sticker, and a discount coupon for MSU logo wear and clothing. I strongly encourage you to attach the sticker proudly to your vehicle and to wear MSU logo clothing proudly and when possible. With all of us showing this pride in our university, others will notice and hear us.

Along with that, I am asking you to join me in recognizing Fridays as MSU pride days, for all of our faculty and staff to keep the formal clothing hanging in the closet and to wear casual professional clothing and MSU logo wear when possible on Fridays. Our

MSU pride day on Fridays will demonstrate and send a strong message to others about our pride in our university and who we are. If any of you think that this approaches the mandate in the movie Office Space, where all the employees are required to wear Hawaiian garb on Friday, it is not. There is no requirement or mandate, just a suggestion for casual dress and MSU pride.

With all of this talk about being seen and heard, I can't help but think of poet Walt Whitman and his incredible poetic voice to be seen and heard as a spokesperson for democracy, freedom, and personal expression. He exclaims in Leaves of Grass, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." What we can do in much the same way is for all of us -- our students, our alumni, our faculty and staff, and our institution to sound our barbaric "yawps" over the roofs of the world about Minot State University. We've got a lot to "yawp" about now and into the future.

Continuing with the theme of our tagline and call to be seen and be heard, I must remember Franklin D. Roosevelt's good advice to public speakers: "Be sincere, Be brief, and Be seated." Following upon that advice, I assure you of my sincerity, and I assure you I will be seated soon. Being brief? Well, two of the three ain't bad.

It's going to be a terrific year. Thanks for your attention and the exceptional job you do for Minot State University and for our students. It's a pleasure to work with you.

David Fuller
President
Minot State University