

Convocation Address to Faculty and Staff  
 Minot State University  
 August 21, 2013; 10:30 a.m.  
 Missouri River Room Conference Center  
 Minot State University Student Center  
 David Fuller, President

Knowing Who We Are and Where we Are:  
 On Birds, Education, and Place

**WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to the start of our 2013-2014 academic year—our proud 100<sup>th</sup> academic year. It's a time worthy of reflection, contemplation, and celebration. While our resolve was tested during the last few years, from the flood that hit our community, our enrollment pressures, the persistent issues with housing, the oil industry pressures impacting our community and university, and the situation in the North Dakota University System, we are now prepared to welcome a return to a renewed faith in our students and learning. Those are the essential things that help us know who we are and where we are.

This morning I would like to say a few words about this summer and this new academic year. I also ask for your patience as I contemplate where we've been and where we're going. And, of course, I would like to share with you a bird story and, if you don't mind, read a couple of poems for old time's sake. That's all.

**SUMMER 2013**

Summer, well, most of it, was a welcomed relief. I very much hope that your summer was relaxing and satisfying. Our campus was busy and doing well. We hosted the state-wide Staff Senate meeting, the campus was busy with summer school, activities, repairs and upgrades, and recruiting. We had a ceremonial ground breaking for our new Herb Parker Stadium project, our Registrar's office received an award for superior service, our Alumni Luau Party at the State Fair was a success; and our State Fair Parade and centennial float, with more than 100 MSU people walking the parade route with us, was a grand success in honor of this proud milestone.

I would be remiss not to mention our wonderful Summer Theatre and its successful, packed-house, season. It is, and has been a gem for 48 years, on our campus and in the community. As many of you know, it is a special joy to attend Summer Theatre, marvel at the fun and professional performances, eat popcorn, and enjoy \$1 root beer floats, no less. Congratulations to Kevin Neuharth, his staff and colleagues and all of the performers who made this season such a joy. We were even treated to Conrad Davidson playing the ukulele, dancing a difficult side-step, and singing, and portraying, out of character I might add, the notorious and skeptical Herod in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar. The musical, the final performance of the summer, was indeed a superstar performance, as was the performance of the musical Shrek, which was the first musical of the summer in honor of our Centennial. None of this would be possible without our first-rate theatre program and our drama professor and theatre director Kevin Neuharth.

I don't know if you know this about Kevin, but in addition to being a very effective teacher and director, he too is a fine actor. I heard the other day that early in his career he decided to stay connected to

acting and keep his acting skills sharp. Just a few years ago, as I understand, he received a phone call from a distinguished director who wanted him to perform in a very popular theater performance in New York City. The director explained to Kevin that, while knowing that he was very busy as a professor and director and did not have the time to devote to a major part, Kevin would not need to learn many lines. He said he wanted Kevin to appear in this important role to add to the reputation and appeal of this performance. The director told Kevin that he needed to learn one very important line and to deliver it in a timely and powerful way, with panache. The director explained that all Kevin had to say at a precise and critical moment of the play was: "Hark! I hear the cannon roar! Kevin agreed, but he confided to others that he was somewhat worried that he was rusty as an actor and wanted to deliver his line well, so he practiced and practiced. Opening night arrived, and while he waited in the wings, Kevin, wanting to get his lines exactly right, muttered to himself, "Hark! I hear the cannon roar! Hark! I hear the cannon roar!" The time for the entrance finally arrived and as Kevin made his appearance on the stage, he heard a loud boom, "broooooom!" Startled, Kevin turned around on the stage, his eyes wide open and alarmed, and exclaimed loudly, "what the hell was that?" [borrowed and modified from a web site; Robert De Nero... <http://www.greatcleanjokes.com/jokes/other-joke-types/funny-speech-openers/#ixzz2c4lc6pPq>]

#### **NEW ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013-2014**

This year marks the proud start of our next 100 years serving our university, our students, and our community. In 2004 when we thought about the centennial and this year, commemorated by our new vision, it all seemed so far away. And now before we knew it, here we are at 2013-2014.

Classes are ready; our faculty are prepared and ready; our service centers are already working to help our incoming students; our campus looks beautiful and ready for the return of our students. Our maintenance staff continues to do so well keeping our campus looking great.

Enrollment (as of yesterday, we are projecting a 2.27% head count increase Enrollment and retention continues to be something all of us need to focus on.

Residence Halls (our total residence hall numbers are now sitting at 742, which is compared to 676 this time last year, which was one of the highest numbers in our history). Housing pressures continue to offer us challenges, but they are improving slightly.

Budget and Finances (our budget analyses and reduction and the support from the North Dakota Legislature have helped after the flood, thank goodness). Here are a few highlights:

#### North Dakota Legislative Appropriations

- Award of \$2.5 million in one-time dollars for flood relief was directed to paying off the Beaver Lodges, restoring our financial ratio challenge when we used our reserves for the lodges and University Heights.
- Oil-Impact funds and application for \$4 million; and initial plan to apply for support for another University Heights and for a student service center (AKA as a one-stop student service center) renovation and funds to increase our level of support for regular students, adult, and transfer students.
- Increase in appropriation funding allowed us to cover mandated increases (operations, utility increases, increases in health insurance rates, security enhancements and others).
- Security awards: \$160,000 for four new security positions

- \$116,000 for increased operating budgets.
- \$2 million for the construction of a new maintenance facility
- \$610,000 uncommitted annual dollars (with a special appeal to the legislative appropriation committees and with Karen Krebsbach's efforts, we were able to secure additional support for flood and oil-impact). You will recall that our special request of the legislature was for \$7 million to account for our \$3 million budget reduction and other losses).The priorities include: Projects that provide opportunities for increased revenues and create value added enhancements to support students and learning.

Student services and support: Quality programming and increased enrollments ; advising and professional mentoring and guidance; curricular planning; mentoring, tutoring, career guidance. support improved academic advising program; plan to create coordinated plan between various services and additional support for academic advising and guidance. CETL continuation; focusing on faculty engagement training for professional mentoring and guidance; career support, tutoring, and learning communities.

#### Learning

Academic enhancements (internships, experiential learning, undergraduate research, technology, professional development; program prioritization and strengthening); annual academic excellence initiatives; prioritization support for high performing programs and high-potential programs; professional development in strategic areas on campus (undergraduate research, technology, service learning, pedagogy); internship and experiential learning program

#### Process

Teams will work to define processes and procedures.

### **OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR 2013-2014**

- State Grant Funding Program 2:1 Projects  
MSU is eligible to propose projects for support up to \$1 million  
Potential projects: Endowed chairs, Walter Piehl Art Gallery, Augustana Church, Energy Economics and Finance program; Scholarships; entrepreneurial program.
- Search process underway for the new president; and committee members
- Four-year scholarship program and four-year programs.
- Prioritization planning and professional development.
- Plans to host a series of open forums with faculty, staff, and community leaders to discuss ideas for the future, the transition to a new president, and to clarify what is meant by student success and how to realize it; to contribute to our own thoughts on the current student success initiative; to make sense of the concepts, the original proposal, and how MSU might be able to contribute more meaningfully to the idea and the genuine need to improve student success. We will be hosting small group meetings with refreshments.
- Preliminary plans to invite the Chancellor and SBHE president to learn about their perspectives and how we might mend the breakage.
- Bids for the construction of a new maintenance facility.
- Herb Parker construction.
- 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue grading and opening.
- And, last but not least, our Centennial.

## CENTENNIAL

The big news for this year is our celebration and party, our Centennial activities and special events. Thanks to the countless people on campus who have worked hard and planned for our celebration. Teresa Loftesnes, Marv, Deb, Susan, Mark, Bonnie, and many others on our steering committee and across campus and in the community have put together a fine celebration, including, to name but a few activities:

- Centennial banners and a distinguished centennial logo designed by Bill Harbort and Patrick Sheldon.
- Special production of Shrek in Summer Theatre.
- Special centennial prints developed by Walter Piehl, Ryan Stander, Max Patzner.
- The Great Plains Symposium, featuring the distinguished keynoter speaker and writer, Ian Fraser, the author of The Great Plains, and presentations on the Great Plains.
- A special Centennial book, When Dreams Come True, the book written by Jonathan Wagner and Mark Timbrook.
- A special Minot Symphony Orchestra performance highlighting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.
- The unveiling of a special beaver sculpture by Bennett Brien at the entrance of the recently reopened 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue.
- Homecoming celebration highlighting our centennial; and parade.
- A new MSU fight song.
- Special theater performance “!00 years of Normal”
- And much, much more in honor of our great tradition, our dedication to students and service, our commitment to outstanding teaching and learning, and our prominent role as a premier, regional university in the “great” Great Plains. For those reasons, we have a lot to celebrate and a lot to be proud of. Come and join me in our celebration this year. It's going to be a great year.

## BIRDS, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND PLACE

A few years ago I shared with you one of my first bird stories, which recalled a long line of immature pelicans flying into the entrance of a bay, led by a bright white pelican. The younger, darker ones, were following in a line gliding low to the water behind the lead bird, in nearly a perfectly straight line. I speculated then that it must be the case of an adult pelican teaching the young ones to fly and coast above the water. But an ornithologist-biologist friend of mine, in hearing my speculation about this example of bird “education,” immediately corrected me that that was not the case at all. Birds are dumb, he insisted, and what I saw was a quirk, with a line of birds merely trailing unknowingly behind a pelican.

When I shared that story, I remember a few of our own biologists adding to my own friend's cynical comments, and nodding affirmatively from the center of the room, acknowledging with scientific assurance that my own romantic speculation was the fancy of a misguided English major and college president both prone to exaggeration (I interpreted their nods to mean all of that). The next year, as you might remember, I read an excerpt from a poem about the flight of pelicans by Robinson Jeffers titled “Boats in a Fog.” I will repeat this passage here to highlight a point in my little story about the line of pelicans and their importance and meaning.

From "Boats in a Fog"

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.

It seems to me that we are more now than ever before challenged not to lose sight of our nobler purpose, to determine where we are and who we are as we go about our "business" of education. And I do mean business. While we must attend to the essential realities of our business, we do so at our own hazard if we are not careful. The more we go about our business of higher education, the greater the potential is for us to lose sight of the nobility of our world, our sense of our place, its beauty, its interconnections, its morality, and our essential, profound responsibilities. I suggest that without the arts, without humanities and sciences, without all of our areas of knowledge, and without the clear and powerful vision of the best of what we know in higher education, we risk losing sight of our place, the beauty of the birds, the beauty and joy of reading aloud poetry, reading of great books, listening to great music, valuing our own humanity, and working selflessly and ethically on behalf of the common good and others.

I was reminded again of our place and its beauty this summer when I witnessed two adult Canada geese and about seven young geese swimming into the water, with one adult in front, the seven youngsters in a direct line behind, and an adult following closely at the rear of the line. That scene is full of wonder for me, and it illustrates so well again the ethic of care and attention that all of us know is essential for what we do every day at Minot State University. I suggest that that's what we mean by the word "higher," and that is why birds and place have offered me a deeper and stronger sense of what all of this is about, what our obligation is working with our students and having faith in them, one at a time, to grow and prosper.

I read this poem a few years ago, but it is worth repeating to add meaning to what I am talking about in regard to the geese family and our own work at Minot State University. The poem is titled "Wild Geese," and written by Mary Oliver.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees  
 for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
     love what it loves.  
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 the mountains and the rivers.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,  
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
 over and over announcing your place  
 in the family of things.

#### AND FINALLY A FEW WORDS ABOUT OUR SENSE OF PLACE

This past year we were caught up in the business with scores, defining levels of preparation or lack thereof, sliding scales, uniform tuition rates, uniform waivers, and structural tiers. In all of that time, there was hardly any attention given to the arts, humanities, the sciences, quality learning, and the student. I continued to worry that we had lost sight of our purpose, lost a sense of who we are. And we expressed our concerns and our students and faculty stepped up tall to do just that, as we should have, in a year that was tumultuous, confused, and directionless, and lacking in a sense of who we are and where we are.

The attention centered on governance structures, graduation rates, and on students who don't have the potential to make it in "higher" education, all for the sake of improved quality or lack of quality, as we were told. We were subverted by the rush of the rhetoric, and told that this is the way it is. We were caught breathless and silent. We were unable to distinguish ourselves and our unique place and purpose in a generic and uniform broader vision. We lost sight of our place, who we were, and how we fit, and we lost sight of our individual students. I heard the president of the University of Mary, Monsignor Shea, announce to a state-wide meeting that this past year and all of its travails were bad for public and private education because the student was lost in the tumult and confusion.

Without a deep sense of appreciation for our place and for the potential of our myriad students, our system lost sight of its genuine educational ethic of service and responsibility, and with it we seemed to lose respect and trust that underlies everything we do. For us at Minot State University, our ethic of service and responsibility is focused on a wonderful array of different people, different needs, different interests, different intelligences, and different backgrounds. Our special responsibility is to help all of them, not just a few.

When we started the Vision 2013 process and identified the goal and strategies, we defined the outcomes, the characteristics of a student we hoped would represent what we value and claim to do. Vision 2013 anticipated that the "MSU graduate of the future will be known for vision, creativity, compassion, tolerance, character, sound judgment, and commitment to the life of the community and the common good." We are reminded all too often about the need for academic assessment, to prove that we meet our goals. But I want to tell you that there is no more effective learning assessment, no survey form, no portfolio, or skills test than what we witnessed this year through the actions of our students.

We witnessed our own students and faculty taking a stance to express their strong concerns about what was negatively impacting our campus, students, and system, and they did so with the utmost professionalism, resolve, and commitment to higher education and our place. That wasn't easy to take an unpopular position, while others across the state remained surprisingly silent in face of legislative and administrative rebukes—one calling our students' voice silly and uncalled for. It would have been easy to remain quiet, to see how things go and hope for the best, but it would not have been right. Many of us who should have been expressing those views, sat quietly. In my view, our student association, our faculty senate, and countless others from our campus did what they should have done:

express their position confidently, support our vision, exercise sound judgment, act professionally, and reveal a genuine commitment to our university and the common good. Our students and faculty demonstrated what is meant by responsible and genuine civic engagement. That's an extraordinary assessment of what we do in higher education, and we did it well. We demonstrated well that we knew, and proud of it, where we were. Minot State University stood apart from all the others. We were not lost or silent.

One last poem titled "Lost," and written by David Wagoner, touches very well on what we mean by sense of place and about if we know where we are—a theme central to our own Vision 2013.

#### Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
 Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
 And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
 Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
 The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
 I have made this place around you.  
 If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
 No two rocks are the same to Raven.  
 No two branches are the same to Wren.  
 If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
 You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
 Where you are. You must let it find you.

#### Centennial Year

This year we can celebrate our first 100 years and do so with an assurance that Minot State University has been successful in serving our students, our community, and our profession. We recognize the values of the best of "higher education," inclusiveness, diversity, civic engagement and responsibility, learning, and genuine and heart-felt service. We have every reason to be proud of what we do and who we are.

We "are" one of the premier, regional universities in the "great" Great Plains, for our 100-year tradition of serving others all these years and, no doubt, for many years to come.

Let's have a great year!

Go Beavers!

Thank you for your kind attention and for everything you do for our students and Minot State University.