Good afternoon! And thank you for attending today’s Spring Convocation.

[acknowledge Farshad Azad, Missy McArthur, Bruce Hagerty, Matt Jackson, Mike Halldorson, Arlene Ward (tentative), Don Carlsen (tentative), Susan?, David Evans? et al.] And the man behind the curtain, Chris Ficken.

I’d like to begin this convocation with two brief film clips, each about two minutes long.

The first contains some abbreviated scenes from Samuel Beckett’s play, Waiting for Godot. First staged in 1953, this work has been hailed as one of the most significant English-language plays of the 20th century.

Its plot is absurdly simple: two companions, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot. They have been told that Godot will meet them “near a tree.” But it is not clear where or when. So they wait. Near a tree.

Although other characters arrive while they are waiting, Godot does not. And we, like them, are left to contemplate the meaning of all of this. In this 2009 staging of the play, Ian McKellen plays Estragon and Patrick Stewart is Vladimir.

The second film clip is the theatrical trailer for the 1997 film, Waiting for Guffman. This film was directed and co-written by Christopher Guest, who also did the same for a 1983 “mockumentary” film about a fictional British rock band named “Spinal Tap.” In that film, Guest played the role of the lead guitarist for the band, which famously claimed to be Britain’s loudest band. In Waiting for Guffman he plays the eccentric producer, “Corky St. Clair.”

Waiting for Guffman is also done in a documentary style as it follows the good citizens of Blaine, Missouri, as they rehearse and then stage a musical history of their city for the 150th anniversary of its founding. Among Blaine’s claims to fame (actually, its only claim to fame) is a factory that made foot stools, thus earning Blaine the somewhat dubious, yet self-proclaimed, distinction as being “the stool capital of the world.”

“Guffman” is a Broadway producer, who, the Blaine players are told, will be in the audience on opening night. Like Godot, and, hence the title reference, Guffman never shows.

So, enjoy, first, two pretty good actors, McKellen and Stewart, in Waiting for Godot and then Guest and a brilliant ensemble with him in Waiting for Guffman.
So, how on earth are these two examples of absurdist theater relevant for us ... as we wait for some visitors of our own, namely, our accreditation agency, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, aka WASC? Who do we expect to show up here in a couple of years.

First, although the absent Godot and Guffman added both context and suspense to their respective stage dramas, their absence did not prevent the characters (or audiences) from discovering something about themselves or appreciating the possibilities that might arise from a joint or community undertaking.

Second, neither Vladimir and Estragen nor the Blaine players needed Godot or Guffman to tell them what mattered in their lives. Or to judge them. They recognized the need to figure a lot of this out on their own. And then to deal with it.

So to cut to the chase: we don’t call upon WASC to direct us. But we depend on WASC to validate us – to affirm the clarity and conviction of our story – the quality of our production, so to speak.

Yes, we determine and develop our story. But we accept as a condition of accreditation the need to both demonstrate and document it. So, WASC is more than a mere bystander in these matters, but far from being the manager of our purposes and choices.

Let me acknowledge a few folks in the audience this afternoon who illustrate what I mean. These are individuals whose achievements and contributions to the story of our University reveal who we are, what we aspire to be, and how we are doing. They reveal our understanding of what are the most important things to accomplish and the right way to go about our work. They reflect our values and our best features through their actions. And they underscore such elements of the WASC scorecard as engaged learning, educational effectiveness, student success and well-being, a dedicated faculty and staff, and so many other matters.

But more. They reveal a commitment both to shape and to live a story on our own terms. Because, if we fail to do that, we lose our identity and our distinction. And we become, well, we become ... ordinary. And there is nothing ordinary about these members of our University community whom I am now most pleased to introduce.

First, I want to acknowledge the student leadership who encouraged the University Foundation to amend its investment policy to exclude direct investment in fossil-fuel extraction, production, and energy generating companies. Initiated by sixteen students in Professor Mark Stemen’s Environmental Thought in Action class, and presented to the University Foundation Board by Kevin Killion, Kaitlin Haley and Taylor Herren, these students challenged the University to align its enacted values with its professed values. The University
Foundation Board agreed. In so doing, we join Stanford, Pitzer, San Francisco State and Humboldt State in California, and about 400 institutions worldwide in the vanguard of a movement and a statement. The quality of their advocacy – informed, articulate, thoughtful, civil – was impressive and underscored that our students are far from ordinary.

Several of these students are with us today. Please join me in recognizing them.

Second, here are the photos of this year’s class of “Most Outstanding” faculty, whom we honored just before the holidays. These are folks whom their deans, fellow faculty and students nominated for their professional achievements and significant contributions to our University through their teaching, scholarship, and various demonstrations of service. As much as any other class, though, what distinguishes this group is the extent to which they have taught and inspired not simply through words and lesson plans and lofty standing in their disciplines – but through the force of personal example. For this is a group connected in a style that embraces kindness and enthusiasm, generosity and inspiration, decency and civility, personal integrity and intellectual honesty. They embody the teacher-scholar model and the best practices for faculty excellence. They are not ordinary at all. And a few are with us this afternoon to recognize.

Third, the leadership and staff of our Student Health Center, which just achieved re-accreditation by the national accrediting body for campus health care centers. Not just re-accreditation, mind you, but re-accreditation with a perfect score. That is, full, unqualified compliance with the standards governing their work. Although our Health Care Center has always been accredited, this is the first time we have received a perfect score. When we asked the head of the accreditation team which evaluated us how often this occurred, we were told “rare, very rare.” And he added: “This is a very high quality student health center. I would be proud to have my four children come to this university and this health center.” Not ordinary. So, thank you, Deborah Stewart and the terrific colleagues on your team.

And, fourth, as the CSU celebrates the occasion of its three millionth graduate in 2015, I want you to meet a few of our own contributing to this number. They sit somewhere between our first class in 1891 and our most recent in 2014. Here are their photos when they were students here: Lynn Balmer and her sisters Thea and Jeanie. Thea in 1943. Jeanie, the baby of a family of six sisters, in 1946. And Lynn, their big sister, who we and the Chancellor’s Office believe to be the oldest living alum in the entire CSU at 107 years young. Lynn was in the Chico State Teachers College Class of 1927. Here is a photo of the six sisters. That’s Lynn, second from the left; Jeanie to her immediate left; and Thea on the far right of the photo. And here with us today are Lynn and Thea and Jeanie. Incidentally, twenty-five members of their family have attended Chico State. Not ordinary at all.
These students, faculty, staff and alumni, and their stories, and so many, many more, have a direct connection to the last time WASC visited us. The last time WASC came, saw, reviewed ... and applauded us.

That previous visit occurred in March, 2009, and was the culmination of four years of preparation and a very intensive process that, back then, actually involved two campus visits about eighteen months apart. WASC has since revised its process so that there is now only one campus visit. But it is no less demanding. And perhaps even more so because we have only one chance to get it right when they do visit.

So, in order to go forward, we need to look a little backward. In two key regards:

First, to understand the context for the last WASC visit; and,

second, to focus on those areas that WASC identified then for our “continued institutional attention.”

When a WASC delegation last visited our campus, several contexts and recent developments had set the stage for their assessment of our educational effectiveness. These included:

- A new Campus Master Plan (2005). Informed by the enrollment “compact” with two previous governors and both State and CSU initiatives which focused on access and affordability, the plan addressed a multitude of issues associated with raising the campus physical plan capacity from 14,000 California resident FTES to 15,800, as assigned by the Chancellor’s Office. Our resident FTES enrollment target, by the way, for 2015-2016 is 14,709. So, we have room to grow to meet our current capacity, but not much.
- A newly updated Strategic Plan (May, 2006), which had added a “Values” section underscoring our University’s shared purposes and beliefs and a sixth strategic priority on sustainability and environmental awareness.
- A new Advancement division to help take us forward into the brave new world of substantially reduced and unreliable State funding, the harsh realities of which we were beginning to see ten years ago.
- A new enrollment management plan tied to our Master Plan, the Governor’s Compact for higher education, General Fund support, two CSU strategic planning documents (Cornerstones and Access to Excellence), and our emerging Diversity Action Plan.
- Newly articulated institutional initiatives on student learning, General Education, diversity, civic engagement, regional stewardship, and sustainability.

We were anxious to see if WASC found that we had set our course wisely and, especially at the beginning of very rough budget times, including the furloughs of that year, whether we
had both prioritized our resources properly and presented our story effectively. We were anxious to see if WASC found us to be true to what we stated in our Strategic Plan about being “a community connected in our conversations, confident in our strengths, and intentional in our aspirations.”

We should never have worried that we had done so. Or that WASC would fail to recognize this about us.

The WASC visiting team did exactly what we had hoped for. They voiced appreciation and provided encouragement. They offered observations not just aimed at developing a good story, but at forging an exemplary one. They challenged us with higher expectations. And they emphasized that their high expectations were largely echoes of what we had established for ourselves.

They were particularly impressed with our commitment to student success. And it followed a simple formula:

- Every student whom we admit has earned the right to be here.
- Every student whom we enroll deserves our best efforts to enable their success.
- This doesn’t mean that every student who comes here has the same level of preparation, readiness, capacity and potential. But it does mean that every student who comes here has provided us with the privileged opportunity to build their capacity and strengthen their potential.
- So we meet our students where they are – and we take them forward.
- And student success means more than degree completion and career preparation. It also means the development of those attitudes and aptitudes, those habits of the mind and heart, that will contribute to individual happiness and growth, support our democracy, and benefit our communities.

The outcome of the WASC review could not have been better. They expressed their high regard for what they discovered through their decision to award us re-accreditation for a full ten years, that is, the maximum period. We were the first institution in WASC to be so re-accredited under the new standards that were in effect then. And, of course, in the process setting the bar for everyone else.

So let me now focus on a few aspects of that WASC review in order to demonstrate how the WASC challenge is being met. And, more specifically, how we are preparing for our next WASC self-study (due in spring, 2017) and our next WASC visit (scheduled for spring, 2019). But, most important, and this is key to the work for WASC, how we have become an even more vital institution in the larger community of higher education, not just in our state but in
our nation, since we embarked on our last dance with WASC almost exactly ten years ago this spring.

But, first, a word or two about process and the staging of our next WASC self-study and campus visit.

In 2005, when we began to organize for the WASC self-study and visit, we were in the process of updating our Strategic Plan. And, as already mentioned, that update included the addition of a “Values” section, a sixth priority on sustainability, and a sharper focus on diversity.

In other words, even though it was new and provided more in the way of direction than a demonstrated record of achievement, we let the updated Strategic Plan inform the WASC self-study. And WASC responded with approval and encouragement. WASC affirmed the appropriateness of our overall direction, but made it very clear that the Commission would expect clear evidence of the progress of that journey when they see us again ten years down the road.

So, we must be sensitive to timing and sequence as we connect strategic planning and the accreditation process. We must ensure that the one informs the other.

And we will do that. But this time we will do so simultaneously. We will set the stage for the renewal of our Strategic Plan through the WASC process. Specifically, WASC expects that we will strengthen our commitment to diversity and better define “The Chico Experience.” So we will bring before our University community this spring proposals to add to our current Strategic Plan a seventh priority on diversity and an eighth on civic engagement. In other words, we will marry what WASC expects to see us address with what we have already identified as critical areas for our attention and distinction, as well as steps to this effect.

Such steps will also include an examination of the structure of our institutional budget and the process for its development in order to ensure that our budget better reflects our values and priorities and more effectively serves them. Our current budget model is about twenty years old. A serious re-examination is long overdue.

So, here’s the obligatory Lincoln quote: “A good place to start from is where you are now.”

Sound familiar? It should. Not just because you’ve heard me cite this Lincoln quote previously, but because a version of it is carved in the stone above Kendall Hall and has been guiding our University for over a hundred years. Yes, “Today decides tomorrow.”

So, where are we now, where are we today?
We have the 2009 WASC report.

We have our current Strategic Plan.

We have a Master Plan which has guided the addition of seven major building projects on the campus since its adoption and many more indoor and outdoor improvements, even as we have softened the borders between the campus and the city, and protected our green spaces, urban forest, and creek environments.

We have a Diversity Action Plan and an emerging new academic plan.

We have identified the elements and pledged the resources for a comprehensive plan of faculty and staff renewal. And I will shortly be announcing further details on the campus-based compensation and equity aspects of this, including an implementation schedule that is dictated by provisions in the collective bargaining agreements and directions from the Chancellor’s Office.

We have re-imagined Greek life and re-structured student life along lines of student leadership development.

We have emerged as a national leader in providing high impact learning experiences for our students and demonstrating how they positively contribute to student academic success and degree progress. In fact, as he frequently does regarding us, Chancellor Tim White just highlighted our record in these matters at the annual conference of the American Association of Colleges and Universities last week in Washington, D.C. Before a national audience, including representatives from several federal agencies, he said that Chico State is “a prime example of a progressive, trend-setting institution worthy of state and national attention.”

And we are on the kinds of lists we want to be on. Lists that reflect our values and our decisions about what kind of institution we choose to be. Not lists that flow from anecdote and exaggeration and rumor, and, which, unfortunately and unfairly, still force us to live in their shadows. Like Playboy’s party school list, which we haven’t been on since 2002. In fact, we haven’t been on anyone’s party school list since then.

But consider some of the lists which we are on, thirteen years after that party school ranking, and consider what they say about everyone in this room and throughout our campus:

* Ranked in the top ten of all public comprehensive universities in the West every year since 1988 by *U.S. News & World Report*.  
* The best possible score in the inaugural “College Scorecard” of the U.S. Department of Education in 2013. In fact, we were the only higher education institution in California earning this distinction.
• Founding signatory to both the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment and the Alliance for Resilient Campuses. Only six other institutions in the nation share this distinction.
• The highest possible score on The Princeton Review’s Green Honor Roll in 2014. And one of only eight schools to repeat on this list from 2013.
• Named this fall one of the six national Climate Leadership Award winners by Second Nature for our sustained and advanced commitment to sustainability and climate mitigation and adaptation.
• Routinely named by a half dozen veterans organizations and publications as among the most “vet friendly” institutions in the nation.
• Announced earlier this month, a ten-year re-affirmation of our classification as a Community Engagement institution by the Carnegie Foundation. While most everyone else must apply every year for this designation, we do not have to do so again until 2025.
• Listed for the sixth time in the last seven years as a member of the U.S. President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.
• This year our students will pass the $1.5 million mark in funds raised to support St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. We were, in fact, the fastest university in the nation to hit the $1 million level through the annual Up Til Dawn fundraiser. This year’s fundraiser, by the way, is February 27.
• And speaking about fundraising, Chico State ranked third in the CSU for the percentage of alumni who contributed to the annual fund in fiscal year 2014 and is one of only three CSUs which have seen both total gift commitments and total gift receipts increase for each of the last three years.
• Listed by BestColleges.com in 2014 on a national list of those schools yielding the highest return of their investment for our alumni.
• Ranked in the top 15% of all on-line bachelor degree programs in the nation.
• Exceeding the graduation rate targets for both freshman and transfer students established for us in the initial CSU Graduation Initiative in 2009.
• Ranked #2 in the nation among all public, master’s level institutions for sending students abroad for a year or longer of international study.
• Listed in a Chronicle of Higher Education lead story in December with Yale University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Lehigh University as an exemplary national model for changing the party and drinking culture on American college campuses.
• Along with such universities as Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, UCLA, Ohio State, Princeton and Stanford, recipient of the Jed and Clinton Foundation Health Matters seal in 2014 for comprehensive mental health and substance abuse prevention programming for our students.
And just one data point that relates to the formula for student success and our graduation rate improvement. In the 2007 “fact” book prepared for WASC, the percentage of first-time freshmen, EOP students with a GPA of 2.0 or higher was 73%. The percentage of all EOP students with a GPA of 2.0 or higher in 2014 is 92%. And a special shout-out to a lot of folks responsible for this: Chela Patterson, Chris Malone and their dedicated staff in the EOP Office; Lori Holcombe and the Summer Math Boot Camp in the College of Natural Sciences; the folks who run and staff the Student Success Center, Student Support Services and the Student Learning Center; Paul Villegas and his colleagues in the MESA program; many more. It takes a village... Thank you.

Let me conclude by focusing on two areas identified by WASC for “continued institutional attention.” Because these two matters involve connecting many dots.

First: Engaging students in a residential campus

Increasing student engagement was a major focus of our previous WASC review. Yes, we emphasized how this was a key element of “The Chico Experience.” But WASC challenged us to do more. In particular, WASC encouraged us:

- to “find ways of extending the opportunities of a CSU, Chico education to a broader diversity of students”;
- to “persist in a branding exercise grounded in a sharper understanding of the uniqueness” of that education;
- to “continue to challenge a culture still too grounded in alcohol abuse”;
- and to “incorporate ways in which the First Year Experience connects integrally to The Chico Experience.”

In other words, they asked us if “The Chico Experience” is really any different, any better, any richer than “the Cal Poly Experience” or “the Western Washington experience” or, for that matter, the experience at scores of very good, primarily residential, largely full-time undergraduate enrollment institutions, all claiming that their faculty and staff really care about their students and all advertising that their students get a high quality education preparing them for happiness, prosperity, and lives of purpose? And they asked us for proof.

A tall order. But we can answer this question more confidently and with more evidence now than we could ten years ago. And, just as much of this evidence comes from external acknowledgments, so much of it comes from our students. Consider what we can now share with WASC:

- The 2015 Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification.
• A broad array of efforts under the banner of Public Sphere Pedagogy, including
the Town Hall Meeting, the Great Debate Program, the Book in Common, and the U-Course
initiative, all designed to bridge classroom learning with the experience of public, democratic
participation.
• The impressive results of the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement
revealing that the experience of our students with community-based learning is 16 percentage
points stronger than the CSU average.
• And, in a recent letter of support for our application for a State Higher Education
Award that recognizes innovative practices contributing to student learning and degree
completion, these words from Susan Albertine, Vice-President of Diversity, Equity, and Student
Success for the Association of American Colleges and Universities: “There is no doubt about it:
the Chico State model of Public Sphere Pedagogy is the most influential evidence-based
example of high impact practice that we can identify in any public institution in the nation.”

Yes, things connect:

Student learning and student success,
Public Sphere Pedagogy and High Impact Learning Practices,
The Chico Experience and The First Year Experience,
Changing the alcohol and party culture and student leadership development,
Becoming an Hispanic Serving Institution and closing the graduation achievement gap
between our underrepresented students and those students who are not underrepresented.

Our story has increasingly become one that recognizes these connections and addresses
them in a strategic and purposeful manner.

Second: Strengthening institutional data and data-informed decision-making

WASC gave us high marks on institutional planning, noting that the University has made
“comprehensive strategic planning a major institutional priority and has had much success in
doing so.” Nevertheless, the Commission observed that we are “still not at the point where the
big questions are being informed by data.” Accordingly, they recommended that we focus even
more so on bringing reliable data to bear in the targeting of our key goals and the
measurement of their achievement.

This relates to another thing that connects, that is, being both a high quality and a high
morale institution – especially given the rising expectations that understandably accompany an
improving budget situation (no matter how slight and uncertain that case might actually be
regarding State General Fund support) and the successful completion of new collective bargaining agreements for most of the CSU’s represented workforce.

Yet, high quality and high morale are closely related characteristics. And, as such, they are at least implied in the Values section of our Strategic Plan in this statement: “We affirm that we are ‘One University’ where collaboration, mutual support and trust, and common goals define our work together and the spirit of its engagement.”

This goal, though, requires some collective sense of definitions and notions and indicators of what a high quality and high morale institution looks like.

I am sure we can all generate lists of what we think these definitions and notions and indicators are. And that’s a good thing.

But is there any consensus around these matters?

Are they anchored in – are they informed by – our Mission, Vision, Values and Strategic Priorities, as they should be?

What data do we have to help us answer these questions?

And to improve institutional performance in these matters?

This latter point, of course, is the bottom line with WASC: institutional performance and goals informed by reliable, systematic, useful and examined data.

The “campus climate questionnaire” which was undertaken just before the end of the spring semester last May, is an example of trying to be more data-driven. And thank you to all who took the time to complete that questionnaire. Yet, a principal goal of that questionnaire was to set the stage for a more systematic, comprehensive and longitudinal assessment of campus climate issues that would engage all University constituencies: faculty, staff, administration, students and alumni. Working with the executive leadership of the Academic Senate, cabinet and I pledged to do this. And now we need to move forward to do so.

Through consultation with the Academic Senate leadership, the Associated Students, our Alumni Council, and Staff Council, we will proceed this spring to engage the most appropriate and the most highly regarded national experts in the development, administration and analysis of such surveys. We need surveys for all of our constituencies and we should have more than one round of these surveys completed before WASC shows up again. We need to do that in order to demonstrate both seriousness of purpose in undertaking this course of action and responsiveness to the issues that the surveys will help identify. That is, seriousness of
purpose and responsiveness, not just because WASC expects evidence of data-driven attention to critical campus issues, but because our campus depends on it.

I look forward to the first round of these surveys this spring and a subsequent roll out of all others later this calendar year. This will allow us to introduce either an annual or biennial schedule for such surveys, ensuring that we will have at least two rounds of surveys to inform the WASC self-study and partially satisfy the need for useful, longitudinal data in these matters. Updating our Strategic Plan will also benefit from the results of this important tool to assess campus climate, student success, institutional effectiveness, and other performance indicators.

And, just as certainly, I look forward to pursuing the promise, and more clearly accomplishing the goal, of being “One University” – a place of people and ideas, of respect and passion; a community connected in our conversations, confident in our strengths, accomplished in our service, intentional in our decisions, and bold in our aspirations.

Such a place is not ordinary. And such a place doesn’t wait for Godot, or Guffman or WASC or anyone to accomplish the extraordinary. Rather, we invite them to witness it.

So, thank you for your kind attention this afternoon. And I wish all of you a very successful and gratifying semester doing what you do best – being extraordinary.

Thank you.