The Fork in the Road

Fall Convocation Address

August 21, 2014

Good afternoon! And welcome to the start of the new academic year.

As usual, greeting you on the screen today are images from last year. Reminders of what we are all about, and evidence of how we are doing. And thank you again Chris Ficken and your team of photographer Jason Halley, helicopter pilot Randy Wall (just wait) and techies and videographers for once again helping to put together this presentation.

As most of us know, our University was founded as the Chico Normal School in 1887. It took about two years to build this building before classes started. And they did, in fall, 1889, 125 years ago. Two years later they would be our first graduating class. Here they are, the Class of 1891, assembled with their faculty. The person, by the way, under the first “s” in Class is faculty member Emma Wilson, who taught music and drawing. Yes, this is the Emma Wilson of the Emma Wilson Elementary School in Chico. And she was probably someone you did not want to cross, especially with her mahl stick and Victorian high laced boots. I wonder how she did on Rate my Professor.com.

We've added a few more buildings since then [aerial overview of campus] and are still doing so [arts and humanities building under construction].

And a few more faculty and staff and students

So, a few introductions. First, let’s meet our new 37 tenure-track faculty. They are the largest cohort of new faculty in many years. These new colleagues are the consequence of 39 searches, so a 95% success rate in building this class. Not too shabby. Would you folks please stand to be recognized? I will be coming back to you shortly.

Next, four deans, two of whom you've already met because they joined us in January – making them almost our most senior college deans: Judith Hennessey in Business and Angela Tretheway in Communications and Education. And two Davids: David Hassenzahl, who comes to us from Chatham University in Pittsburgh to head up the College of Natural Sciences; and Dave Daley who tells me that his cattle herding skills have perfectly prepared him to serve as the interim dean of the College of Agriculture. Alas, no new deanship for Mike Ward. However, we have an opening for an assistant coach for our women’s golf team. Mike, we need to talk.

We also have several members of our various boards and advisory groups with us this afternoon. So, as I mention these organizations, would the members please stand to be recognized. And please hold your applause until we’ve met everyone. Thank you.
Let me now ask some familiar folks to share some greetings and messages of their own with us as this academic year begins: Taylor Herron, Scott Gruendl, Paula Selvester, Annette Heileson, Elaina McReynolds.

Thank you, all of you, very much. Your words and participation this afternoon are much appreciated.

When I introduced our new faculty colleagues a few minutes ago, I mentioned that I would be coming back to them. So let me do so now and, in fact, largely direct my remarks the rest of the way to these folks and what their presence means for us.

To begin with, we had the good sense to invite you to join us. Your credentials are truly impressive. You come to us from such institutions as Ohio State, UCLA, the University of Texas, Virginia Tech, the University of Pennsylvania, Indiana University, UC-San Diego, the University of Washington, Texas A&M, the Berklee College of Music. Five of you are Chico State alums. Your areas of expertise include gangs and the law, eLearning, healthcare, robotics, sports medicine, mobile applications, and sustainability. You have received awards for your research, doctoral work, and scholarly potential.

Your promise, though, to fit our needs, to embrace our values, to complement our strengths, to move us forward, to be great colleagues on this campus and good citizens in our community, is what made the difference in our invitation to join us. We have very high expectations of you.

But you had the good sense to accept our offer. And let me tell you why.

First of all, you are surrounded by stellar colleagues. Guggenheim and Fulbright winners, authors of highly acclaimed books, celebrated composers, performers and conductors of music, interpreters of the human condition and our world through their art and research, recipients of grants and funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. Yes, masters of their disciplines. And so much more. And I’ll come back to this point shortly.

Second, let me tell you something about the main reason you are here – our students. Especially those like yourself who are also freshman on our campus.

Simply put, joining us this fall is one of the most academically qualified and certainly the most diverse class in the University’s history. Our 15,245 admits present an ACT composite score of 22 and an average high school GPA of 3.39. As you can see on this slide, this profile is only barely exceeded by an ACT composite score of 23 in 2010, and a high school grade point average of 3.40 in 2013, when, in both years, we admitted significantly fewer students.

Our new students originated in the largest applicant pool of underrepresented minorities in our history: 13,930 applicants or 65% of our total freshman applicant pool. This compares to one-fourth that number of applicants only ten years ago.

We have responded more positively than ever to that pool. 59% of those to whom we offered admission for this fall are students of color, compared to under 25% of those admitted in 2003.
Most impressively, 54% of these admitted students have enrolled, compared to only 22% in 2003.

Over this ten year period, African-American freshman applications rose from 437 to 1,048, a 140% increase; and their confirmed enrollment for this fall are 95, or 3.2% of our incoming class, compared to only 37 African-American first-time enrollees in fall, 2003, when they constituted just 1.9% of that incoming class. In all categories, these are record high numbers. In just one year, last fall to this, the number of first-time African-American freshman has gone up 63%.

One of them is in this photo. No, not the tall guy in the middle, but the other tall guy three from the left. His name is Dylan Gray and he comes to us from Inglewood. A few weeks ago, he was invited to meet with the tall guy in the middle, President Obama, because Dylan has been a star in his high school through his academic achievements and a leader in his community through his efforts to improve the well-being of his peers. Especially the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative that focuses on closing the opportunity gaps that particularly exist for young men of color. Dean Hennessey, and all of us, please say hello to one of our new business administration majors, Dylan Gray.

The numbers are beginning to go off the charts for our Hispanic/Latino student population. Their applications for this fall totaled almost 9,800 compared to under 2,000 for fall, 2003. That is a 400% increase in their applications. Their intents to enroll are 1,114 or 39% of our incoming class, compared to only 249 and less than 13%, respectively, in fall, 2003. Again, record highs.

With new Hispanic/Latino numbers like this pushing us forward, we are on the verge of achieving federal designation as an Hispanic Serving Institution. This means that 25% of our total student population is Hispanic/Latino. Depending on the enrollment yield for these students, we could hit this mark this fall, but, almost certainly, by next.

Approaching this number underscores one of the tasks that I will be setting before our new University Diversity Council. At the particular urging of Susan Green, Vincent Ornelas, Chela Patterson, Gary McMahon, and others, this will be to consider what it means to be an Hispanic serving institution, not just an Hispanic enrolling one.

The University Diversity Council’s principal job, though, will be to further accomplish the goals that were established in our 2011 Diversity Action Plan. Without exception the advice I received both on and off the campus to do this was to put the University’s diversity agenda on the President’s Cabinet agenda at every meeting. And there’s one sure way to make this happen. I will chair the UDC. But I will be assisted by a three person steering group – Tray Robinson, Wenshu Lee, and Michelle Morris – and I thank them and the other members of the UDC, which is still being formed, for their commitment to the success of our work ahead.

Another part of this group’s work, particularly as we embark this academic year on the process of updating our institutional Strategic Plan, is to call the question about adding a specific diversity priority to the Plan. The Values section of this document establishes diversity as a core element of our purpose in this statement:
“We hold dear the values of multicultural respect, awareness and understanding and we pursue diversity not just as an idea to embrace, but as a community to form”

And, clearly, that statement provided context for the Diversity Action Plan. But would this plan be more surely realized if it was anchored in our strategic priorities, as well as a values statement?

Just as our students are changing the face of our campus, they are shaping the nature of our story. No, this is not a perfect and absolutely smooth narrative. Because, guess what, our students are not perfect. I know, hard to believe. They may occasionally miss a class to attend the funeral of their eleventh dearest grandparent; or be late on an assignment because the cloud was stormy; or do miserably on your exam because they were up all night studying for someone else’s exam. Or, perhaps, because their brain was full.

But let me tell you three things about our students that you should always keep in mind.

First, they will trust you and they will respect you. They may not know exactly what it means for you to be counted among the elite in your disciplines and endeavors. To have received this award or to be honored for that prize. That’s all very nice, they may say. But the rubber hits the road for them in their interactions with you.

And their evaluations of you will make this very clear. They deeply care about your accessibility, the classroom learning environment you establish, and the feedback they need from you.

Yes, they take it for granted that you know what you are talking about. But it is the capacity to share what you know with effectiveness and even style that has the greatest impact and warrants their highest regard.

To combine enthusiasm and skepticism. To avoid cynicism and condescension. To champion integrity, intellectual honesty, decency and civility. To encourage an outlook that the best is yet to come, that they can travel to distant horizons of their own choosing where surprise and discovery and joy await.

Indeed, no student will ever succeed in changing the world for the better – and, thank goodness, so many tell us that this is their goal – without curiosity, idealism, and compassion.

They learn that from you.

Second, our students love this place. And don’t just take my word for it. At the exit session for their visit a few years ago, the chairperson of the WASC accreditation team said this. “We discovered that your students love this place.” Then he hesitated and started again. “No, what I mean to say is that your students love, love, love this place.”

And, third, they have increasingly recognized their role, and accepted their responsibility, for the story of this place. They want that story to be worthy of attention and conversation for all the right reasons.

Our students have become more aware of how their actions and behaviors impact how our University is viewed and regarded. We see lots of evidence of how this impact is registered. From the annual college
Rankings, to the advice of high school guidance counselors, to the concerns that the parents of prospective students have about us, to the questions that prospective employers ask our new graduates about the quality of their degree, to the impressions that prospective faculty have about us.

The examples that reflect this responsibility are myriad. But consider these two.

Keeping with an annual tradition that began in 2006, when a Chico State team went to New Orleans to help with recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina, students primarily from the College of Engineering, Computer Science and Construction Management gave up their spring break vacations again in 2014 to help a community in need. This time they built two LEED-certified, 1600-square foot duplexes in just nine days for the Chico Salvation Army to support families transitioning out of rehabilitation. They’re at the corner of 8th and Salem. Check them out and you’ll feel just a little pride because our students built what’s there [photo].

This most recent Blitz Build involved nearly 200 volunteers; dozens of industry suppliers, subcontractors and sponsors; and substantial financial support from members of the Chico community. The support of the City of Chico was particularly key in moving through the licensing, approval and inspection processes. So, thank you again Mayor Gruendl.

But let’s listen to what the students themselves had to say about this project. Listen to what they discovered about themselves, about the joy of giving, about the meaning of citizenship, and the importance of partnership between the University and the city.

Here are a few excerpts from a video on the 2014 Blitz Build.

[acknowledge Blitz Build student leaders and faculty in attendance]

My second example has less to do with the learning that flows from a particular academic experience or curriculum, than something that transcends all disciplines and gets to the heart and purpose of education.

It is reflected in this photo. This band of happy brothers. And let me tell you why.

This is a photo of our men’s basketball team a few minutes after they won the NCAA Western Regional championship in March on their way to the Elite Eight round of the national championship.

They affirmed what, I believe, is the essence of education – self-discovery. We accomplish this in so many ways: reading, making friends, meditating, volunteering, exploring foreign cultures. Each of these activities, and choices, causes us to look at ourselves in different ways.

But, no less so, observing how we do in moments of stress, when we are pushed to our mental and physical limits, reveals much about who we are and of what we are capable. And sport provides an infinite variety of these moments. Even for those of us who are in the post-glory athletic world of couples golf, Fantasy Football, and bocce ball.
But consider these guys. Down by 18 with 12:09 left to play in the second half. Still trailing by 13 with 2:36 left on the clock. And still down by 7 with 46 seconds left.

In these tense moments can you keep your mind functioning clearly enough so that you can perform at your best? How deep can you dig? That is a real learning experience, a lesson in self-discovery and self-mastery. For every contest is also about not yielding to the doubts and fears, indeed, the adversary, within us.

So, with 1.9 ticks left on the clock, and still down by one, senior guard Amir Carraway stepped to the line and drained two free throws. It was the first, and only, time the Wildcats had the lead in the entire game. One last desperation heave by Stanislaus fell short at the buzzer and Chico State was the champions of the West.

Please welcome and give a cheer to Coach Greg Clink and the Champions of the West!

So, like what our faculty Jim O’Bannon and David Shirah and Allan Bond accomplish with our Blitz Build students, thank you Greg and your assistants – thank you Anita Barker and your staff and all our coaches – for what you teach all our student-athletes. No, these lessons may not always produce championship seasons and All-Conference and All-American performances. Although, quite frankly, when nearly 100 of our student-athletes earn academic All-Conference or All-American honors, when we win our conference’s overall performance trophy four years in a row, it just seems that way.

One of these outstanding students is Kasey Barnett. She is an All-American in the long jump. She holds the all-time Chico State record in the pole vault and anchored the fastest 4x100 meter relay team in school history. She has twice been named our conference’s field athlete of the year. But more. She is a four-time conference All-Academic selection. She was named the conference’s Female Scholar Athlete of the Year for 2013-2014. She has twice been named to the USTFA All-Academic Team. She received the Outstanding Student Leader Award from the School of Communication and Education where she will graduate this fall with honors in recreation administration. And she was just named the NCAA Division II West Region Scholar of the Year. She leaps tall buildings in a single bound and she completes her homework on time. And she is here today with us. Please say hello to an extraordinary Wildcat, Kasey Barnett. And here are the four Commissioner’s Cups behind me, which Kasey helped win.

So, faculty class of 2014, these are the students who will be in your classes. And actually I see a few more of them with us today. Looking absolutely fabulous in their brand new shirts are several members of the leadership team of the Cross Cultural Leadership Center. If you want to find out where diversity, community service, academic achievement, and leadership for constructive social change come together, check out the CCLC. Thank you Katie and Krystal and Angel and all of you for the values you champion and the example you provide.

But beyond them, beyond the company of your new faculty and staff colleagues, let me tell you what you can expect both as the vanguard in the renewal of the ranks of our faculty and as a witness to how your University demonstrates its commitment to all our faculty. And, in that process, to the thing that
matters most here: the success of our students. For the circle is unbroken between the quality and the performance of our faculty and the quality and the performance of our students.

As most of us in this room know all too well, it was only last year, 2013-1014, that after seven years of scarcity, seven years without an across the board salary increase for our workforce, seven years without an increase in our state General Fund allocation, we saw that change. No one predicted a biblical transformation to of plenty, but, for the second year in a row, and as promised by the governor for the next few years (if he is re-elected), we are seeing modest increases in our General Fund allocation.

Make no mistake about it, this is not the good old days. If there ever was such a thing. For even with two years of budget increases, the CSU is still receiving $500 million less than it did seven years ago – when we enrolled fewer students than we do now.

So, here’s the picture: we have done more with less. In ways that matter.

Graduation rates: The 4, 5, and 6-year graduation rates have all improved from 8 to 10 percentage points over the last decade.

Course loads: Average undergraduate unit loads have risen steadily from 13.94 to 14.14. The system average is under 13.

Alumni satisfaction: Many ways to measure this, but, just in the last five years, the number of alumni donors annually has increased by 22%. We rank #3 in the CSU for this measurement of alumni support.

And in areas that reflect a rising tide of institutional distinction which positively affect student learning and values—such as sustainability, STEM programs serving underrepresented students, and civic engagement, civic literacy and other expressions of public sphere pedagogy.

Regarding the latter, as some of you may recall from Spring Convocation, I believe that there is a strong nexus between how we define and demonstrate our responsibility to serving the public good and how we embrace such elements of “public sphere pedagogy” as civic engagement, community service, community problem-solving, and applied research.

That nexus is so strong that it has the potential of giving distinctive, compelling and measureable shape to the notion of “the Chico experience.” And in ways that distinguish and mark all Chico State graduates and underscore how we are a university worthy of the trust that our students, our community, and the people of California should have in us.

For at stake here is the long view. To strengthen the University’s ability and commitment to prepare our students not just to work in the 21st century, but to have the knowledge, skills and inclination to improve where and how they live. To influence the quality of their communities and the shape of our democratic society for the better. So, Dylan, if this is what you want, you’ve come to the right place.
Towards this end, and in conjunction with our Strategic Plan review, I have asked Thia Wolf, Ellie Ertle, Zach Justus and others to tee up two matters for us. First, the addition of a priority on civic engagement to our Strategic Plan. And second, the establishment of a center or institute on public sphere pedagogy.

What we have accomplished and what we have ahead of us rests mightily on the dedication of our staff and on their backs. And what I have to say now applies no less to our staff. Friends and colleagues, like those pictured on the screen, who are here for our students and for you, our faculty.

Friends and colleagues, for example, like those in the Student Health Center who recently learned that their accreditation association recognized them with the highest national award it bestows for superior service and laboratory excellence.

And those in International Programs who have brought our University to #2 in the nation among master’s level institutions for the number of our students who engage in full-year, study abroad programs.

And those in the Office of Veteran Affairs, who, again in 2013, pushed Chico State to the top of several honor rolls recognizing those schools which are doing the most to embrace America’s veterans as students.

And so many, many more people and programs worthy of shout-outs and kudos.

So, let me make it very clear that the rationale and the prescription for faculty renewal that I am about to lay out provide a template for staff renewal as well. That, too, will be informed by collective bargaining. But it will be guided on this campus by appreciation and recognition that our staff support both our students and our faculty and that dual role is vital to the accomplishment of our mission and the quality of our work.

But let me conclude today with where I began, with a focus on our faculty – a faculty which deserves not just our students’ trust and admiration, not just our praise and gratitude, but our best efforts to foster their professional development, to affirm their role in the success of our students, and to strengthen their confidence in their University’s commitment to them.

Here, though, is the bottom line with faculty that is important for all of us to embrace: The heart of a university’s reputation is its academic reputation. And the foundation of a university’s academic reputation is its faculty.

So, beyond what I outlined in my July message to the faculty – that is, beyond hiring at least 100 new tenure-track faculty over the next three years (of which you 37 are the start),

beyond the nearly $1 million in base funding we have already committed to implement Equity 2,

to raise the salaries of about 13% of our current lecturers through correcting their classification levels,
to provide salary bumps averaging almost 80% above the contract minimum for 38 newly tenured or promoted faculty,

to establish this kind of increase as the new benchmark moving forward,

beyond supporting and developing a comprehensive compensation strategy within the framework of a new collective bargaining agreement that aims to improve the base salary situation for all faculty and address inequities in individual cases,

beyond these measures,

I am announcing today a $14 million program to renew and support our faculty.

Its elements as developed by the provost and her staff and the deans – with input from faculty and a few nudges from me, include, but are not limited to the following:

- Increased funding for all aspects of faculty professional development, including CELT, sabbaticals, annual grants to support travel and other professional development activity, and a mentoring program for new faculty
- Increased start-up funding for new faculty
- Dedicated funding and efforts to achieve greater diversity in the ranks of our faculty
- Increased funding to support such programs as the Diversity Academy and the e-Learning Academy
- Increased funding to support the more frequent renewal of desk top and related computing needs
- Increased funding for lab equipment and to modernize and energize learning spaces in the library and throughout the campus
- Increased funding to support faculty in their work spaces and with their workloads, such as office furnishings and upgrades for the former, and lab assistants and graders for the latter
- Dedicated funding for the hiring and development of staff who contribute directly to the support of faculty
- Assigned new funding for such initiatives as the establishment of a student research program and the support of our public sphere pedagogy efforts

We will roll out this program in stages, but we have already commenced with several of these investments and initiatives. Not because some new source of funding has suddenly arrived to enable this spending. Clearly, that has not happened. But because we can no longer wait for that funding to arrive and we have work to do now, and we have commitments to our faculty and our students to keep now.

That work and these commitments cannot be delayed if we are to seize this moment not just for faculty renewal, but for institutional renewal. We must signal to our new, current, and future faculty that this University will choose excellence in the ranks of its faculty and dedicate the resources necessary to build and sustain it.
This funding – some one-time, some recurring – will come from reserves, General Fund management, revenues from strategic enrollment growth decisions, such as international students, and private fund-raising. The latter will derive from the leveraging of our demonstrated ability and determination to allocate resources to clearly articulated priorities that support student success and academic reputation, and effect positive institutional momentum.

There is no clearer way to pass this test than investing in the renewal and support of our faculty and the staff who support them and our students.

There is no more important priority guiding our work for the next several years.

There is no more important issue that I expect you to hold me accountable. And which I will hold the provost and the deans accountable.

So, why did you demonstrate good sense in joining us?

For the members of our faculty and staff who are delighted you are here and eagerly anticipate your contributions to the noble work of our University and the good life of our community.

For our students, like Taylor and Dylan, who wait to be challenged and inspired by you.

For our University, which recognizes in each of you both a statement about institutional renewal and the responsibility we have to forge a compact between our high expectations and your high performance.

For the future we choose, the future we build, together.

The further accomplishment of our Diversity Action Plan, the renewal of our Strategic Plan, the next phases of our comprehensive fund-raising campaign, the preliminary preparation for our next WASC visit, the completion of the First Street renovation and other aspects of our campus Master Plan – all await over the next eighteen months. Each of these events has transformative potential for the University.

But the most important, the most transformative, will be the strengthening of our ability to attract – and then witness the success – of students, faculty, staff and leadership of the highest quality.

The 4400 new students who start their studies with us on Monday, and this class of new tenure-track faculty, have a lot in common. But I hope nothing more important than an unfolding and deepening confidence that you – and we – have chosen wisely to be together in this place, at this time.

As Yogi Berra said: “When you come to the fork in the road, take it.” Well, here we are, having chosen the fork in the road that has brought us here. We now have choices to make to ensure that we took the right path and that others will choose to follow.

Again, as always, I am extremely grateful for your kind attention and very mindful of your trust. We have a lot to do and a lot to accomplish together this year. So let’s go outside to a reception that awaits and figure out how!
Thank you and all the best for the year ahead.

8/21/14