Good afternoon. And thank you for attending this somewhat belated convocation to mark the start of the spring semester, 2013.

Well, so much for that Mayan prophecy about the end of the world. But we all suspected that this was just a prank by some Mayan teenagers anyway.

So, cheer up. It's not the end of the world.

It's 2013. Or quasquicentennial plus one. And I promise never to say that again.

Let me start with a few introductions and a story. Barbara Fortin is our new vice provost for Enrollment Management. She succeeds Meredith Kelley, who retired from the university last December. Prior to coming to Chico, Barbara was the director of Enrollment Operations at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

Sara Cooper of the Department of International Languages and Cultures is our new director of the Center for Excellence and Teaching. She succeeds Lee Altier who directed CELT for over four years. So, thank you, Lee, and congratulations, Sara.

Holly Nevarez of the Department of Health and Community Service is our new director of the Office of Civic Engagement. We are very much looking forward to Holly’s work in developing civic health indicators for our campus and community. Again, thanks for taking this on, Holly.

Now, let me tell you a story to frame my remarks this afternoon. A true story. It’s about the people – all students – in this photo.

(Story about WREC students)

As is so often the case at Chico State when we turn to our students to inspire us -- the Up til Dawn fundraiser for St. Jude; CAVE and CLIC and 170,000 hours of community service performed by members of our University family in 2012; Blitz Build locally and nationally helping communities help themselves; Safe Place and Take Back the Night and our annual human trafficking conference sending a strong message about respect for women; the annual This Way to Sustainability conference and this year is its eighth; the efforts of our student veterans to build a nationally recognized support environment for vets; our intercollegiate athletics program sending 11 of 13 teams to post-season NCAA championship play last year - - yes, when we turn to our students to inspire us, we should burst with pride and recognize that there’s a powerful metaphor in this story.
A metaphor about recognizing a challenge; knowing how to handle it; springing into action as a team to do so; trusting each team member to do his or her job; and meeting it.

No protracted debate; no denial that a problem exists; no hesitancy to act. A clear reminder of the critical relationship between understanding and action if the action is to be meaningful and consequential.

So, let me talk about understanding and action and how they connect with three issues on our plate this spring…and beyond. Three issues that require immediate attention and long-term resolve. Three issues that are intimately connected to each other, because they each speak to the heart of the matter – the success of our students and the environment we create to foster it – an environment characterized by the high expectations we should have for our students and which we must set for ourselves.

These three issues are:

Fighting alcohol abuse;

Building a partnership with our students;

Developing a four-year degree culture.

First, fighting alcohol abuse

As I am sure most of you know, a couple of weeks ago I initiated a public call for action to the civic, educational, and business leaders of our community to address the problems associated with excessive alcohol consumption. And, I am pleased to say, the response has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic, supportive, and generous. Because we all recognize, as the local press documents on a regular basis, on our campus and in our city, this behavior causes, or is a major contributing factor to, medical emergencies, injuries, assaults, sexual assaults, gang violence, vandalism, fights, drunk driving, academic problems, and deaths.

And week after week, 10-20% of the alcohol-related arrests, citations and medical transports in our city are our students. Yes, some may point out, and correctly so, that this means that 80-90% of these cases are not our students. In fact, among the scores of alcohol-related arrests and citations over New Year’s, none of them were. What these numbers mean is that these problems are not limited to our Greek system, in particular; or our students, in general; or our student neighborhoods. It means that alcohol and drug-related problems are a larger Chico problem. But, make no mistake about it, our students are a significant part of this problem and we, the University, need to be a big part of the solution.

How big a problem? Five alcohol and/or drug-related deaths within the last six months were either students of our University or student visitors to our community.

35% of our incoming freshmen – almost all of whom are under 21 – tell us that they have engaged in binge drinking. That is, young people who have consumed five or more drinks at
one sitting in the past two weeks. The national average for this student group is 22%. In other 
words, percentagewise, we exceed the national average by almost 60%.

Check out these stories on pages one and two of the last issue of The Orion in the fall 
semester.

Is this our story? Is this the story we want prospective students and their parents to read? Is 
this the image of our University we want anyone to have?

I can tell you first hand from what our students and their parents tell us: they do read this news. 
And they are worried. And we should be, too.

Listen to these excerpts from e-mails I have received or statements made by some of our 
students to the press:

- From a parent: I volunteer in the Career and College center at our high school, and I spoke 
  with a high school senior recently who indicated that she was not interested in Chico State 
  because of the party atmosphere. This student would have been a prime candidate for 
  your school, but she will not even apply.
- From a parent: My husband and I were discussing recently that perhaps we made the 
  wrong decision in encouraging our daughter to attend Chico State. We are worried that 
  during job interviews she will have to explain why she chose this school. My daughter 
  should never have to defend her decision to attend Chico State.
- From a currently enrolled, 22-year-old, foreign exchange student: Upon my acceptance, I 
  checked out Chico State on YouTube. Links immediately popped up for “Chico State 
  parties,” including videos of happily drunk students on Halloween and Cesar Chavez Day 
  events. I thought “Yeah, I’m going to the right place.”
- From a 20-year-old, second-year, sorority member: I was surprised at how much I was 
  pushed to drink. It was a bit extreme. Honestly, I felt a lot of pressure. I started carrying a 
  red plastic cup of water at off-campus parties so people would say, “She’s drinking. She’s 
  fine.”
- From a 25-year-old graduate student, commenting on his beverage of choice – a $5 quart 
  of vodka, soda and cranberry: The good thing is you can get drunk for almost free.
- From a former student who told me about the alcohol-fueled hazing “games” she and her 
  fellow pledges to a sorority went through, including the final incident, four shots in 15 
  minutes followed by a pitcher of beer, that left her incapacitated for a week and her would-
  be sorority sisters angry at her for questioning why they encouraged such behavior. “I quit 
  the sorority and left the University because I knew I would be dead if I stayed. “

I could stand here, well, sit here, all afternoon, and evening, and read you stuff like this. And 
we’d all leave this room looking like this if I did.

But there is a paradox in all of this, that is, substantial evidence that contradicts, or seemingly 
contradicts, a tale of reckless drinking, raging parties, and ruined lives. It’s the same paradox
that accompanied Pioneer Days for most of its existence before riots, DUI fatalities, and a murder-rape in a fraternity finally put an end to it in 1987.

We stand among the top two or three CSU campuses for our graduation rates, the high academic profile of our incoming students, our Princeton Review, Kiplinger’s, and US News & World Report rankings; we are recognized nationally in such areas as sustainability, community service, support for veterans; we consistently rank in the top tier of all the CSU campuses for the number of alumni who contribute to our annual fundraising efforts, the satisfaction they have in their Chico experience, and their starting and mid-career salaries.

The truth is our paradox is not unique in American higher education. For high on the lists of our country’s finest universities are schools topping another list, the party schools list. These are places particularly noted for heavy alcohol consumption and drug use. Places like the University of Virginia, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Vanderbilt, Tulane, Lehigh. These are not shabby places; they are worthy of praise and emulation in many regards. But not in all regards.

The ancient circle of Roman gods included Janus, a deity with two faces looking in opposite directions. Janus was the god of gates and doorways and his image is a clever statement that we simultaneously face what is before us and what is behind us. January is, in fact, the festival month of Janus. So, we have, in fact, Janus partially to blame when we make our New Year’s resolutions and consider both beginnings and endings. Can we begin to end the scourge of alcohol abuse among our students?

Here’s a resolution for us. Or, more precisely, a reaffirmation: Nothing should be more important to us than our students’ success and well-being. It sets the stage for everything that follows. And it defines what a high quality learning environment looks like.

We must end the decades-long toll taken by binge drinking. And we cannot take more decades to do so. I fully realize that there are limits in our ability to eliminate every threat to our students’ health and safety. But there should be no limits in our resolve to build a stronger culture of higher expectations on our campus. Yes, that begins with academic performance, but it also includes adherence to such campus values as civility, accountability, responsibility, and wellness.

These values ring hollow, though, if they exist within a context of reckless and dangerous behavior by our students. But what I’m talking about has so much more to it than getting students to obey our rules, to respect our values. We must find better and more effective ways to help our students understand their roles in our community and the consequences of their behaviors – for better and for worse – for our University, for our city, and for themselves. Especially regarding destructive behaviors, there is so much more at stake than their ability to make progress to their degrees. For also at risk is their ability to have good choices, and to make wise choices, in the world beyond. Today, after all, does decide tomorrow.
Carol Huston asked the graduating nursing students this fall, as they were about to embark on a pub crawl, to remember that any celebration which included alcohol should reflect moderation, safety, and good sense as a highest priority. She also suggested that bar crawls in which students openly display their affiliation with the University have the potential to damage our reputation and theirs. The students took the message to heart and they cancelled the event. They made a wise choice for themselves, for their program, for their University, for their futures.

Good job, Carol. And thank you to your students. And here they are, champions of wellness and good example.

I am very fond of the statement by Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, that the goal of education is not just to equip a student to make a good living, but also to lead a good life. All of us in this room, on this campus, are partners in this good and noble work. And so, too – critically, so, too – are our students. Let me turn now to our partnership with them.

Second, building a partnership with our students.

The principal basis for partnership with our students springs from the recognition that the heart and essence of higher education is student learning. It is manifest most importantly in the interaction between students and faculty that results not just in the joys of learning but also in the stages of self-discovery. And the best faculty – people like Peggy Rowberg, Keiko Goto, DingXin Cheng, John Schwarz, and Teddy Delorenzo, who we honored just before the holiday break as this year’s recipients of the Outstanding Academic Advisor, Professor, Research Mentor, Teacher, and Faculty Service awards – do this because they recognize that learning involves more than the transmission of knowledge. It depends upon an ethos that fosters personal integrity, intellectual honesty, kindness, fairness, decency, service and inspiration. That is, those human qualities which stand for the largeness of the human spirit.

The best places, in other words, orient their every element – faculty, staff, space, curriculum, calendar, student services, expectations, attitudes, and efforts – to support student learning. And these places “teach” with the power of its performance, daily accepting the challenge to align their professed values with their actions.

This is what we pledge our students. This is what we bring to the partnership.

What we expect from our students is engaged and responsible attention to their own success. Learning is an active exercise. It doesn’t just happen to you. It requires effort and commitment. It requires seriousness of purpose.

Said Abigail Adams, the wife of President John Adams: “Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and diligence.”

Ardor, that is, passion. Diligence, that is, effort.
Are we a place that aims to develop within our students a passion for learning? A place that develops within them an understanding that learning is not a passive encounter with information? If we are, our students will never cease to learn, never cease to want to learn, never cease to grow.

This is the essence of a learning compact with our students.

We need to forge another kind of compact with our students, too. This one, as well, ultimately rests on the trust between teacher and student, but it is largely formed out of the necessity of dealing with the terrible financial consequences of the state’s abandonment of its own compact with higher education.

That compact has had two main expressions. First, there was the original 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, which promised substantial, reliable General Fund support in order to develop a differentiated, three-tier system of public higher education in our state characterized by access, affordability, and quality. The Master Plan flourished for about two decades, the ‘60s and the ‘70s, before losing momentum. But, still, it remained a catalyst for supporting a robust state economy and serving as an instrument of hope for millions of Californians who believed in the promise of higher education for themselves, their families, their communities.

The second iteration of a compact occurred about ten years ago with bi-partisan support in the legislature and with both Democratic and Republican governors committed to re-vitalizing the vision of the Master Plan. In fact, it was called the Governor’s Higher Education Compact Agreement. Its main elements were guaranteed increases in General Fund support from 3-5% a year to enable a steady increase in enrollments from 2-4% a year.

Well, guess what? The enrollments grew (systemwide by 50,000 FTES) and the money did not. So much so that the gap between the funds promised for the enrollments realized is now almost $2 billion.

In other words, if the compact had been honored, our campus would have received about $75 million more than what we have been allocated.

And, in fact, to make matters worse, not only did the state renege on its promise to increase funding to support enrollment growth under the terms of the Compact, but it also sharply reduced funding, whether enrollments grew or not. In the last four years, the loss of General Fund support for the CSU has amounted to $889 million. That’s about $36 million just for our campus.

In part, of course, some of that loss has been offset through dramatic increases in the State University Fee which our students pay.

But, here’s the bottom line in this picture. We are no longer state supported; we are state assisted. Some would even say that we are on our way to merely being state located. The
percentage of the CSU budget now supported through the state General Fund is 51%. It was 80% ten years ago. And ten years ago, student fees provided 20% of our budget revenues. They now provide 49%.

Yet, we are very cautiously optimistic that the governor’s recently released proposed budget for 2013-2014 will signal the beginning of a period of serious re-investment in public higher education in our state. What the governor has proposed is well short of what the trustees have requested in order to support enrollment growth and university programs and operations. But, if enacted, this budget will be our best in many years and that is heartening.

What is also welcome in this budget – certainly for us – is that it explicitly raises high expectations for our universities to focus on student learning and to improve degree completion rates. We welcome this because this is exactly what we should be doing. It is the essence of not just a compact with the state, but something more fundamental – a compact with our students. And the campuses which will manage this new reality the best are the ones which have stayed true to a compact framed around student learning and success. A place like Chico State.

The proposed Chico Compact for Student Success is predicated, first and foremost, on a partnership of purpose and performance with our students to support their learning, their timely degree attainment, and their success beyond the University. So, yes, we have placed student learning and success at the heart of our enterprise and we can demonstrate that in countless ways. But the success of this compact also depends upon having the means to deliver it. And that is the proposition that I introduced to our students in the Fall: to consider a campus-based fee exclusively dedicated to helping ensure the success of the compact itself.

When I introduced this notion in September, I made it very clear that it would not move forward without substantial student input and without clear student support. A compact is predicated on trust and truth.

As Jay Virdee and the seven AS presidents who preceded him with whom I have worked know, I mean what I say.

I also directed that a process of consultation be designed and initiated to assess opinion that, hopefully, would be both informed and engaged. I wanted this feedback to be timely and thoughtful, so that we would know what’s ahead of us sooner than later. But, always, I emphasized that a Chico Compact for Student Success is more than a fee because what we are trying to achieve for our students, and with our students, involves the choices we make together as we build greater distinction and as we seek higher achievement.

The consultation process with our students was joined with input from the governor in his proposed budget. And, as I have already mentioned, that has been a welcome element to considering the work ahead of us and the expectations attached to it.
This much is very clear from student feedback and the governor: both have valid questions and concerns about expenditures and priorities and their assessment. Some of this comes from fee fatigue. Some from uncertainty. Some from distrust. And some from a lack of awareness of what we are accomplishing.

The essence of a compact is to achieve important, worthy, and measureable goals together. There is no public university in California more capable of doing this, none more imbued with a collaborative spirit and a focus on student success, than Chico State. So, we will not risk that trust, we will not jeopardize the partnership of attitude and effort we need with our students, by pursuing a new campus fee at this time. It does not have the kind of support that I think is necessary to move it forward.

Nevertheless, I am very appreciative of all of the hard work, all of the long hours, that so many have spent in developing the compact case and materials. More than anything, this effort has underscored our focus on the bottom line – student success – and helped define its elements. We will be served and guided by these efforts in our on-going conversations on the shape of a high quality learning environment that fits our campus and serves our students.

As with other themes in these remarks, we have a lot on our plate to demonstrate that our commitment to student learning and success is true. But we are willing to face that test any day. Because we can pass it every day.

If the governor wants to find a place where operational cost efficiencies, improvements in graduation rates for all students, improvements in time-to-degree completion for all students, a commitment to accommodate transfer students, a commitment to improve the college-going rates in our region, and a bottom line focus on student learning and success to meet the needs of our state characterize the place, all he needs to do is drive 90 miles north on 99 and here we are. Our place.

**Third, developing a four-year degree culture.**

Our efforts to raise expectations regarding student behavior and to strengthen our compact with our students to this end come together in the four-year degree. That is, four years for incoming freshmen; two years for upper division transfers. Let me focus on the four-year degree, because that involves most of our new students every year.

Let’s take a look at where we are in this regard.

In a word, not great. The bad news is that misery loves company and we have lots of company in the CSU with a lack of distinction in this story. So bad, in fact, that the CSU’s touted Graduation Initiative doesn’t even talk about a four-year graduation rate. Its framework is a six-year graduation rate. The good news is we don’t have to improve very much in order to have the best four-year graduation rate in the system. And, if we do, the five- and six-year graduation rates will take care of themselves.
So, why not be the best? And what’s it going to take?

How we answer these questions underscores the notion of a compact with our students – a partnership of high, attainable expectations and mutual responsibilities and obligations to meet them.

First, it signals a commitment to student success in one very measurable way – timely degree completion.

No, the four-year degree is not some sacred cow, never to be challenged or examined. But it has been designed to accomplish, among other things, two main purposes: to recognize the elements of General Education, major, and free electives that balance exploration, focus, and self-discovery in a baccalaureate program of study; and to acknowledge that learning is progressive, cumulative, and interactive.

College degree programs that promise low-cost and quick completion may be politically attractive, but they can also be educationally naïve and short-sighted. A degree should be worth every cent that it costs and every hour of study that it requires. Caveat emptor. Let the buyer beware. A cheap degree is, well, a cheap degree.

Second, improving the graduation rates of our students signals a seriousness of purpose that should engage them and motivate us.

Our message to our students should begin at the moment of first contact with them, while they are still in high school or even earlier, whenever they first begin to think about college. It should be reinforced through our outreach efforts; their visits to our campus as applicants and then as admitted students; through Summer Orientation; through their first days on our campus during New Student week and their initial meetings with their faculty, their advisors, and other staff; through their degree planning and degree progress; through constantly inspiring them to high aspirations.

The message is simple: come here for the right reasons. Come here for a journey of self-discovery and responsibility. Come here to develop the skills and habits for a lifetime of learning. Come here not only to get ready to make a good living, but also to lead a good life. Come here to learn. Leave here to succeed and serve.

We need to spend a lot more time talking about the behaviors and attitudes that we expect than what we reject.

We need to hold accountable, for example, our students to what they tell us in surveys about their drinking habits. 37% of our students, compared to 21% nationally, tell us that as a result of alcohol or drug use they performed poorly on a test or an important project; 47% of our students, compared to 33% nationally, tell us they suffered memory loss as a result of their drinking; 48% of our students, compared to 33% nationally, missed a class because of their alcohol consumption.
The four-year degree depends on their understanding this reality and choosing to do something positive and healthy about it. The University strives to remove any obstacles to the attainment of a degree in four years, if not sooner. But our students must confront decisions and habits that will result in their losing ground in this quest no matter what we do. The clock is ticking.

Similarly, to our faculty and staff, teach here and work here for the right reasons. And those reasons are the same: devotion to our students, their learning and their success.

This week marks the beginning of my tenth year with you, which I am celebrating with a few repairs to my back, neck, and arm. This was the three for one special at the UC San Francisco Spinal Care Center. But ever mindful of metaphors, as this is how my remarks began today, this gear does not signal a broken back or a dampened spirit. Rather, I am pleased to say, that I am thrilled to come to this campus every day. I love the walk through Kendall lawn; the history and the beauty and the morning energy all around; and arriving at my office where the Queen of Plan B, Karla, and a great staff await.

Yes, there are those days like any of you when I am happy that it is the end of the day. But there are no days when I do not feel immense pride in what we are accomplishing together and great confidence in our focus and in our future. We measure satisfaction in real ways here.

In one of my first messages to you, an Inside Chico State column of February, 2004, I noted that one of our challenges together was to be able to allocate resources in terms of clearly articulated priorities in order to make our University more outstanding than it has been in terms of teaching, academic reputation, diversity, student learning and achievement, and service to our community and region. Some of these core areas that will keep Sara Cooper and Holly Nevarez busy.

In two other areas – diversity and service to the North State – I would like to acknowledge the good work of two more of our colleagues, in particular.

First, thank you to Tracy Butts, who has completed her term as the University’s first Chief Diversity Officer. I will be meeting as soon as possible with our Diversity Action Council to determine the next steps we take for this important campus leadership position, but I want to say we are in a much stronger position to accomplish the goals of our Diversity Action Plan because of Tracy’s dedication to its work and vision. Thank you, Tracy.

Second, I would like to acknowledge the terrific work that Debra Barger has been doing regarding our North State Initiative. In particular, her travels with other colleagues throughout the North State have been warmly received. The meetings and conversations which she has been having underscore how much our service region depends on us; how important it is for us to deliver on the promise within our claim to be the University of the North State. Thank you, Debra.
Completing this first decade with you, I am most proud that strengthening our commitment to, and our environment for, student success, and protecting our represented workforce against layoffs, if not against all hardships, as our top priorities has enabled us to do both. This despite the withering budgets we have experienced and the pressures we often face from Sacramento or Long Beach to jump from one unfunded mandate or poorly considered initiative to another.

It is much too early to say if the governor’s budget for 2013-2014 will, like Janus, look forward on the beginning of a period of true re-investment in public higher education for California or take us back to the future as just another of those previously failed promises. The governor proposes to increase the General Fund’s contribution to the CSU by 5% per year for the next two years, and then another 4% per year for the two years after that. Very similar to the commitments within the short-lived Governor’s Higher Education Compact Agreement of a few years ago. As my wise Aunt Marie would often say, though, when her children and nephews angled for a movie treat or ice cream because we thought we had been particularly good and worthy, “we’ll see.”

But, if a sustained period of re-investment does occur, we are ready to demonstrate that we will continue to be wise and effective stewards of the public trust.

Because we are able to demonstrate that we are worthy of our students trust.

Yes, high performance is the consequence of high expectations. We don’t need the governor telling us that. Or even my Aunt Marie. We get it.

As always, thank you for your kind attention, your support, and, most important, your dedication to our students, our University, and our community.

Happy New Year, our 126th, for which we are ready, even if the Mayans never saw it coming.

Thank you.