

Beyond the Fence

Fall, 2012, Convocation Address

Good afternoon and welcome to the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic year.

As usual, greeting you on the screen today are images from last year. They are both **reminders** of what we are all about, and **testimony** to how we are doing. I'll return shortly to the story these images tell in the body of my remarks.

Let me first, though, make a few introductions... new faculty, Belle Wei, Julie Indvik, Michael Schilling, et al. Acknowledge Chris Ficken.

We have several members of our advisory boards in attendance. There are many reasons to acknowledge these folks, whose generosity and service help us in so many ways. But today I want to thank them, in particular, for an event that will occur in about a month, on Friday, September 21. After a few years' hiatus, we will be bringing back our fall reception on Kendall lawn to mark our 125th celebration and to thank our faculty and staff for all that you do for our University and community. I asked the members of our advisory boards if they would help us make this event happen and they enthusiastically and generously responded with funding to do so. Let me also thank Rabobank who just this morning provided us with a very generous donation for the event, as well. So, please, a special round of applause for these great friends and neighbors and supporters of Chico State.

While we're mentioning the 125th celebration, I want to remind you that tomorrow morning at 9:40 on playing fields 6 and 7 behind the stadium, we will be taking an aerial photograph of everyone who shows up neatly arranged into a giant one-two-five. If you thought the opening ceremony of the London Olympics was a logistical challenge, wait to you see what this is all about. Sue Anderson assures me that this will work. So we're going to assemble there with about 2500 incoming students and see if we can pull this off. Unless you plan on being around for our second 125th anniversary in 2137, come join us. No need to wear special colors, just clothes. Again, Sue Anderson assures me that this will work. She has already posted on her Facebook page that this will either be one of the coolest things we've ever done or she will be spending the weekend updating her resume. We like Sue. Please help her stay.

And, after this convocation, a reception will be held in the BMU. When you go into the BMU, each of you will receive a ticket to a drawing for one of our 125th Wildcat Cruiser bikes. No charge for the ticket, but you do have to be present to win it. And you can't leave here early to go there.

Also, as you enter the BMU, you will find a table there staffed by a student to help you log your summertime volunteer hours in our My Service Counts effort. We are over 70,000 hours now towards

our target of 125,000. I know that just this week some of you have helped several of our students and other residents who escaped a fire in their apartment building without serious injury, but with a considerable loss of their possessions. And others of you too, who are providing support for the hundreds of firefighters who are trying to contain the several fires that are still burning throughout the North State. This is the spirit of My Service Counts, the spirit of this community. Thank you.

There is another group of new people on our campus this fall, who are not in the audience today, but whom you will meet often because they are more numerous than ever before. These are our students of color. Ten years ago, such students constituted 20% of our freshmen enrollments in the fall. Five years ago 26%. This year they represent 43%.

They are a reminder of what is happening in our state, in the CSU, and on our campus. The fastest growing segment of this story, our Hispanic/Latino undergraduate students, has increased by almost 70% over the past decade, to about 115,000 of a total CSU undergraduate enrollment of 367,000. Within the next two or three years, this population will likely become the largest ethnic group in the system. The CSU, in other words, looks a lot like the rest of California. And we at Chico State are contributing, more and more, to that look as this graph shows. We must continue this course and not close our doors to the future of our state.

My deep thanks to all those who helped recruit these students to our campus and, who, like everyone in this room, are ready to support their success, indeed, the success of all our students. And back to this story, too, in a few minutes.

But now, as I do on this occasion, let me ask a few folks to share a few words with you:

Speakers:

Jaypinderpal Virdee

Russ Mills

Pat Gantt

Michelle Berglund-Smith

Ann Schwab

Thank you, all.

This summer, Yasuko and I spent about a week in Ireland to celebrate our first wedding anniversary. I love Ireland, the people, the music, the seamless blend of history and spirituality and mythology, the physical beauty of the country, the adult beverages. And to share it with someone who had never been there before was pretty neat.

And, of course, it was good to get away. Far away. If you know what I mean.

But, you know, and I am sure this is true for most of you, you can never get completely away. Yes, e-mails everyday, but something more.

So, wherever we went, whatever we did, I could not escape the feeling that Chico State was never quite out of the picture. Maybe you can help me figure out why I had this impression as I show a few photos from the trip.

Bunratty Castle
Durdy Nellie's pub
Pulnabrone dolmen
Golf
Riverdance
Merrion Square in Dublin

But, finally, as I gazed upon another omnipresent herd of fine Irish cows (there are six million cows in Ireland, by the way, Dean Fox and Cindy Daley, about 1.4 for every person in the country), it suddenly dawned on me why I was being reminded. For there stood the embodiment of one of my favorite Far Side cartoons entitled "Cow Poetry."

So, here it is, without the poem first. Let me explain the context then reveal the poem.

The context is something that I addressed in my mid-summer message to the University community about our budget situation. And, among the reasons why my remarks today are not focused on the budget is the fact that nothing has really changed since that message to you in July.

In brief, our budget situation is complicated, volatile and uncertain. It underscores the frustrations, contradictions, and disappointments that characterize our situation.

All of these are familiar to us.

We are frustrated with the \$750 million reduction in state General Fund support to the CSU, which has occurred over the last eighteen months, and we are fearful of the prospect of further cuts if the governor's ballot measure in November to raise taxes to close the state's budget deficit, his Plan A, fails. There is no Plan B.

We are frustrated with the absence of any funding for higher education in the November ballot measures, either the governor's or the alternative proposition.

We are frustrated with the lack of both hindsight and foresight in Sacramento regarding higher education. The former because it contains no memory of how California has invented and re-invented itself for a century and a half on the strength of a robust system of public higher education; and the

latter because it rejects any understanding that an educational system predicated on access, affordability, and quality is essential to the cultural, political and economic health, and social well-being of a nation and state.

We see the contradictions between efforts to support access and affordability, such as, freezing student fees, and, yet, other actions that compel such questions as “what kind of access” and “access to what?” Because when you reduce financial aid, such as the State University Grants, whether for undergraduate or graduate students, you require students either to take out loans or to take jobs, or both, to get through college. Jobs may extend time to degree and loans may leave students with heavy debt upon degree completion, if they ever get that far. On average, by the way, students leave us with about \$18,000 in debt. This is right about the system average even though we are a residential campus and well below the national debt average of about \$25,000 for students in public universities.

We see the contradiction in the ability of the governor to find \$125 million to buy out a fee increase, but not to begin some kind of recovery and re-investment in the CSU and the UC. These great systems, through the work of their graduates and the taxes they pay, are the economic engines of the state and provide over a 4:1 return on investment to the state. Yes, we see the contradiction between a gesture that speaks to access and affordability (and getting votes), but not to quality.

We are disappointed that so little of the hard work of our campuses in terms of providing access, improving graduation rates, serving the public good, providing the knowledge base and workforce to fuel the state’s economy, and welcoming increased accountability has earned the kind of appreciation and confidence it should as we go about our mission and business.

Instead we get blasted for housing allowances, course fees, faculty sabbaticals and release time, international student recruitment, hosting controversial speakers, and supposed reluctance to embrace change – easy targets from critics who pander to ignorance and emotion, because they don’t want the facts to get in the way of their righteous crusade against alleged waste, fraud and abuse. It is both ironic and sad that the ranks of these critics include so many who graduated from our institutions and who enjoy successful careers because of what they gained from their time and study with us.

We are disappointed to watch the abandonment of the California Master Plan for Higher Education, a model for public higher education that has worked and been emulated around the world. There is nothing heartening when those who shape the public agenda in our state choose supporting prisons over improving schools, when they embrace the politics of fear not the obligations of hope, when their actions (or, more precisely, inactions) take us deeper into peril and farther from prosperity, when they seem content to settle for mediocrity – perhaps their notion of the new normal? – not to stand for excellence. When they would tear down a great system of public higher education, and let it slide towards privatization. When they would betray a promise and fail a vision.

Yes, frustrations, contradictions, and disappointments. All barriers to what we are trying to accomplish, what we have been entrusted to accomplish – promises that inspire us and aspirations that define us.

So, back to “Cow Poetry.” This poem is entitled “Distant Hills” and it goes like this:

“The distant hills call to me. Their rolling waves seduce my heart. Oh, how I want to graze in their lush valleys. Oh, how I want to run down their green slopes. Alas, I cannot. Damn the electric fence! Damn the electric fence!”

Thank you, Cynthia Lammel, whose resume is not surely complete with “Cow Poetry.”

Well, besides the obvious, cursing our barriers, I like this poem for the title. It evokes the title of my convocation address last fall, “A Clearing in the Distance,” which was drawn from a biography of Frederick Law Olmstead, perhaps the most important landscape architect in our nation’s history. In a letter Olmstead wrote his son, he said “I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future.”

It is this notion of “a clearing in the distance” that I have found to be a particularly useful metaphor for the work of a university. For we are very much about clarity and distance, that is, the clarity of our mission and the consequences of our actions, both immediate and distant.

It was the mark of Olmstead’s genius and outlook not just to damn the electric fences he faced – harsh landscapes, limited funding, enormous skepticism, primitive technology – but to overcome them.

We can either “damn the electric fence” or we can overcome the damn fence. Or we can do both.

Let me focus on Olmstead’s notion of “distant effects” and return to that fellow on the rock in Merrion Square – no, not Willie, Oscar – for some perspective.

Like so many others, Wilde could not resist the easy target that education provides for criticism. In large part it is because the stated aims of education are often so nobly ambitious that they have little chance of being realized.

As self-assured, yes, arrogant, as Wilde was, he had the good sense, as he once observed, to realize that he was “not young enough to know everything.” But he believed strongly that the object of education was learning, which gives purpose to teaching, because “the aim of life is self-development” or self-discovery and that was a process that extended well beyond the years of one’s formal schooling.

I believe this, too. And I believe that the best teachers – whether professors or advisors, counselors or coaches – are so because what they offer goes far beyond mastery of a particular academic discipline or possession of certain expertise or skills. It is because such teachers are genuinely concerned about their students’ well-being and their futures. It is because they aim to teach, not just by words, but through the force of personal example and the imprint it can have on their students’ attitude towards learning and the self-trust and self-confidence it will build.

So, who cares about this notion of learning? Who recognizes that institutional distinction is, perhaps, more than any other marker, based on the achievements of alumni and their demonstrated capacity to continue to learn, to apply successfully the habits of true learners?

Who affirms that the heart and essence of higher education is learning and student success? That is, the interaction among students and faculty and staff that results in discovering and rediscovering the joys of learning and becoming lifelong learners. Ernest Boyer, one of our nation's most influential educators of the last fifty years, said this. But it harkens to Oscar Wilde, too, and others, like Marion Wright Edelman, the great American activist for the rights of children, who saw education as not just enabling one to make a good living, but to leading a good life.

There are, to be sure, many characteristics of high quality and high morale colleges and universities. These include a clear, compelling academic mission and a strong sense of niche among other institutions; a climate that will attract faculty, staff and students of high quality; a shared expectation of high standards; a future-focused outlook and sense of institutional momentum; and openness to all points of view within a culture that champions civility, diversity and respect.

Each of these hallmarks is admirable in its own right. But when they connect, when they reinforce one another, what emerges is a profile of academic excellence, even a roadmap towards institutional greatness.

So amidst the intense challenges all around us – the fences that would frustrate, contain, and disappoint us – it is well to find our roots in values and affirmations that transcend all of this. Because, if we do that well, we can translate understanding into actions that demonstrate intentionality, responsibility, goodness, and, even, wisdom.

Unfortunately, with many of the key players in the equation, it is not obvious that success in these terms is what they want. Parents generally want colleges to provide a safe environment where their children can mature, gain independence, attain a credential that will help them gain entry to the job market and a successful career path, and not come back home to live.

Students seek to enjoy the benefits of a full collegiate experience that is focused as much on social life as on academic pursuits. Many would like high marks in their courses, but not necessarily have to expend a huge amount of effort to get them.

Faculty at many universities – in particular, those elite public and private research-oriented institutions with their disproportionate influence on how so much of American higher education is perceived – are focused more on their scholarship and professional interests, than teaching undergraduates.

Administrators have been asked by their boards to focus largely on external institutional rankings and the financial bottom line.

Government funding agencies are primarily interested in the development of new scientific knowledge. And corporate funding agencies would like colleges and universities to be their clients through the intellectual capital of faculty and a reliable, renewable workforce stream of college graduates.

In short, by these expectations, the system largely works. Because no actors in the system are primarily interested in the intellectual and personal growth of undergraduates, although many are interested in student retention and persistence. After all, the latter translate into tuition revenues and create the lovely impression that something worthwhile is happening.

So, sadly, whether or not a college degree is more than the accumulation of units and years, whether or not degree recipients are prepared to be life-long learners, not just ready for their first jobs, matter less to many than meeting enrollment targets, sustaining the revenues they provide, and looking good for the U.S. News and World Report rankings.

This is a harsh perspective. And whether or not it is accurate, or even partially accurate, it begs the question of another approach. An approach that recognizes the role of our colleges and universities both to benefit individuals and to serve the public good.

But where are such places? What do they look like? How are they organized? Why do they matter?

More precisely: **Are** we such a place? Are we organized and focused as best we can **to be** such a place? **How** do we demonstrate that we are? **Why** does it matter?

I started to develop the framework to address these questions in last spring's convocation address when I talked about our DNA, that is, those fundamental building blocks of our identity and character. These include:

- a powerful sense of place through the physical beauty of our campus and the remarkable continuity of its development over the course of 125 years;
- a strong sense of public trust and public good rooted in such expressions as service to our city and region and the promotion of civic leadership and engagement;
- a clear commitment to the right rules of conduct for the academy, which emphasize civility, diversity, respect and community;
- a keen awareness of the nobility and the promise of our mission and the high expectations that we have for ourselves and which we want others to have in us;
- and, most importantly, an unambiguous emphasis on student learning and success.

In those remarks, I announced that I would be charging our new provost and Vice-President for Student Affairs, Drew Calandrella, to lead a broad campus conversation on what we are trying to accomplish for our students – and why – and how well we are succeeding in that effort. In other words, through affirming the primacy of student learning and success in our mission and work, achieve a clearer understanding of **what** we are doing, how **well** we are doing, and how **better** we can

strengthen the teaching and learning culture of our University. In other words, the case for our University.

Over the summer, especially through conversations with Provost Wei and the Council of Deans, I have given further thought to this task, in particular, how to ensure that the conversation is **inclusive, thorough, and consequential**. For it must be all three in order to be worth anyone's time and effort, and, of course, to be successful. That is one reason why I have delayed announcing any formal details regarding the conversation until even that phase reflects the engagement and inclusion of more members of our campus community.

So, too, this conversation does not begin in a vacuum. We have much guidance for it through documents and developments that have already been broadly inclusive and remarkably connected. These include the WASC Self-Study, the Diversity Action Plan, our new GE Pathways program, our Strategic Plan (which we will no doubt update in this process), the Information and Technology Strategic Plan, several years' participation in the national Collegiate Learning Assessment program, my opening fall and spring addresses of last year, our examination of what "The Chico Experience" means, and an extremely insightful document that the deans have been working on all summer, entitled "Imaging our Future."

But make no mistake about it. This is **not** academic re-org, part two. This is a much more fundamental and inclusive effort keyed to achieving consensus of understanding and action on several points:

Who we are, as a public, comprehensive, largely residential university in the North State of California in the 21st century.

What we have accomplished, especially what we have done particularly well in achieving our goals and undertaking our mission.

And both **where** and **how** we might be headed in order better to strengthen our academic culture, achieve greater distinction in both established and new areas of endeavor, articulate and choose our priorities clearly, and manage our resources wisely.

This, in effect, is a four stage process: **understanding, imagining, choosing and building**.

We must accomplish each of these tasks together. Because we can no more muddle through hard times without facing hard choices and making wise decisions than we can move forward without achieving a strong sense of a shared vision. We do not need perfect agreement, but we do need strong alignment with our values and clear resolve to sustain them.

Our challenge is to make purposeful decisions drawing broadly on the collective wisdom and experience of the University's faculty, staff, and students. We must plan, yet we must be sure that our

plans are feasible; that they address real problems, solvable problems; and that they pursue attainable goals.

We must ask: what might we do to accomplish our work better? What academic investments could yield exciting results over the long run? What potential contractions could make us a more effective educational institution? How do we strengthen our appeal as an institution of choice for faculty, staff, students, donors and partners? How can we fortify those assets that lie at the heart of the University's strength and reputation – our faculty, staff, students and service engagements?

Now, I mention people last in this list for emphasis. Because actually we begin with the proposition that supporting our people – our faculty, staff and students – trumps everything else. Our processes, our structures, our priorities, our physical environment must all be oriented to supporting the people of our University and an emphatic first commitment to student learning and success.

Ultimately, we will ask what does a place organized for, and committed to, student success look like? And we will answer that question with two resounding declarations of proof.

It looks like our people.

These people – alumni, young and old, who make us proud. Young alumni like Koudougou Koala, the son of subsistence farmers in Burkino Faso, West Africa who has created a business and education program to help impoverished farmers in his home country. And Katy Deaton, a graduate of our Communications program who, by her own words, has landed her dream job at Caring Choices, a non-profit which helps to bring food, transportation and health care to some of Chico's most disadvantaged adults and children. Older alumni like Rusty Barcelo, a 1969 graduate in Social Work, who is the president of Northern New Mexico College and one of the nation's foremost advocates for equity and diversity in higher education. And Kit Miyamoto, a 1989 graduate in Civil Engineering, who is President and CEO of Miyamoto International, one of the world's foremost civil engineering firms specializing in high performance earthquake engineering and disaster mitigation, response and recovery.

And it looks like these people, it looks like us – the faculty and staff and friends and supporters of our University who know that our promise is most revealed– our case most demonstrated – through the success of our alumni and the countless ways in which we prepare our students not only to become gainful members of the workforce of our community and state in the 21st century, but also to take on the challenges and obligations of citizenship in our democracy.

This is why we matter. This is why a place like this matters. Why a place like this University, this learning community, so focused, so accomplished, so oriented fills a niche in the larger landscape of higher education in California, and beyond.

I will never let anyone – in Sacramento, in Long Beach, in the Coachella Valley, in the North State, in Chico – forget that. For all that we have become and achieved, for all that we will accomplish, we stand **on** the record of those who have set the table for us and we stand **for** those who count on us today and tomorrow.

So, in closing, let me share with you another Far Side cartoon, perhaps my all-time favorite.

First, the image without the caption. Rex and his challenges. They are many and they are daunting and complex.

And now the caption: “High above the hushed crowd, Rex tried to remain focused. Still, he couldn’t escape one nagging thought: he was an old dog and this was a new trick.”

Well, I am an old dog. And there are a lot of other old dogs in this room today. And, you know what? We have not exhausted our bag of new tricks.

So, damn the electric fence.

Thank you and let’s have a great year.