

A Clearing in the Distance

Opening Convocation Address

August 18, 2011

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

As usual, you've been greeted by some great images on the screen today as you arrived. And we'll show them again at the end of the program. This year these images especially connect to one of the books I read this summer.

No, not this one: *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. Although there are some really good tips in here for dealing with the folks in our state who are trying to suck the blood out of higher education.

Nor this one: *A Band of Misfits: Tales of the 2010 San Francisco Giants*. This is not the greatest sports book ever written, but it's a terrific gift for my friends who are Dodgers fans. (Tray – do you have your copy yet?)

But this one: *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century* by Witold Rybcynski.

I've actually read this book before and shared some comments on it with you in a column for *Inside Chico State* a few years ago. It's a biography of our country's most important landscape architect, an extraordinarily complex and talented individual, who opposed slavery, fought for women's rights, and designed some of the great open spaces in our country, from Central Park in New York City and the grounds for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, to the campuses of Stanford University and Berkeley in California. My copy of this book is dog-eared and highlighted and I keep going back to certain passages, such as these words Olmsted wrote his son:

"I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future."

Therein lies the title of the book, an abiding sense of the long view and the ability to visualize and anticipate the effects of one's work many years afterwards. 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.

The images that greeted you on the screen today are all about the stories of our work here together. They are the stories of what we are doing today. They fill us with pride and satisfaction and confidence. But, more than that, they are the basis for what we will accomplish in the distance, whether that is tomorrow, or next year, or many years down the road. For our focus is not just on what we will accomplish **at** our University and **for** our good reputation, but **through** our University for the benefit of all whom we touch, all who count on us, beginning, of course, with our students who are our most important legacy. In short, as Alfred North Whitehead said, “The task of the University is the creation of the future” and this is an awesome responsibility.

I will return to a few of these stories in a few minutes. Because at the heart of my remarks today are the messages we draw from the stories that inspire us and those which we choose to guide and define us.

But please note the distinction I am making. We are graced with good stories, uplifting stories, affirming stories. That is not the issue. The issue is how to make sense of these stories; how to organize their telling; how to find within them the elements of our distinctiveness and to incorporate that awareness – purposefully, wisely, clearly – into our everyday operations and aspirations. It is about choosing the central themes of our institutional narrative and then building on them.

Olmsted moved millions of cubic yards of stone and earth and planted over 300,000 trees and shrubs to create Central Park in New York. Every one of those actions reflected a decision, a choice, in order to accomplish something grand. And, if a park can connect people, nature, and society in beautiful and powerful harmony, why not a university?

Let me introduce now some of our friends and colleagues, some of the people of our University and community, who are helping to answer that question.

- Advisory/foundation board members
- New faculty and administrators
- Yasuko
- Speakers (London Long, Ann Schwab, Russ Mills, Paula Scholtes, Vincent Ornellas)

We also have several students with us today, many of whose pictures you’ve already seen. I’d like to acknowledge some of them individually. And then I’d like to take those

acknowledgments one step further. So, hold on while I do these shout outs, and then we'll recognize everyone altogether in a few minutes.

- Jillian Ruddell. She is a senior majoring in Multicultural and Gender Studies and is the recipient of the 2010 William Randolph Hearst/CSU Trustees Award. Jillian has recently been appointed by the governor to a two-year term as the student trustee to the CSU Board of Trustees. She joins two other members of the Chico State family on the board, Glen Toney and Bob Linscheid. She also joins two other members of our campus who are having an impact in Long Beach: Pat Gantt, president of the statewide CSU Employees Union; and Jim Postma, chair of the statewide Academic Senate. In other words, Jillian is part of our long-range plan to take over the CSU. Then we move on to Sacramento and Washington.
- The Chico State Chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America, which was named the number one student chapter in the nation for its January Blitz Build projects.
- The Chico State Association for Computing Machinery team, which finished first in the West, and fifth among all US teams competing in the world championships.
- All-American athletes in soccer, golf, track and field, and cross-country; and the overall competitive excellence of our intercollegiate athletics program in 2010-2011, which enabled us be the first CSU school to win the Commissioner's Cup recognizing the best sports record in our conference. Incidentally, over 100 of our student-athletes received awards both at the conference and national level recognizing their academic achievements.
- Our Up til Dawn leadership team, showing the way again in 2010 in supporting children's cancer research and treatment at St. Jude.
- The Concrete Industry Management team, and their project manager Andrew Billingsley, who conducted their Summer Field Program on Alcatraz for a second consecutive year.
- For the second year in a row, an unprecedented achievement, one of our HFA students, Meaghan Gates, has won a lucrative Windgate Fellowship, allowing her, like last year's winner, David Strock, to travel abroad to perfect her craft. Meaghan's is in ceramics; David's in glassmaking.

What each of these students, and so many more, know so well is that they didn't realize their achievements at Chico State alone.

For behind Jillian Ruddell are Sara Cooper and Kathy Kaiser. Kathy, incidentally, received the prestigious 2011 Distinguished Contributor to Sociological Praxis Award from the Pacific Sociological Association. Not a bad mentor for anyone.

Behind Meaghan Gates and David Strock are Sue Whitmore, Bob Herhusky, and Cameron Crawford.

Behind Kyle Souza, the NCAA Division II individual national golf champion, and fellow All-American teammate Eric Frazzetta, is T.L. Brown.

Behind our seven cross-country and track and field All-Americans are Gary Towne, Oliver Hanf and Kirk Frietas.

Behind Ferid Celosmanovic, the All-American on our Western regional champion men's soccer team, is Felipe Restrepo.

Behind the Blitz Build team are the Construction Management faculty, especially David Shirah and Jim O'Bannon.

Behind the Alcatraz crew are the Concrete Industry Management faculty, especially Tanya Komars.

Behind the ACM team are the Computer Science faculty and the team's faculty advisor Moaty Fayek.

Behind our Top Twenty in the nation ranking in *Forbes Magazine* as one of the best colleges for minorities in the STEM fields are the faculty in those disciplines, Lori Holcombe of the LSAMP program, and the MEP team, Paul Villegas, Lupe Jimenez and Ben Duarte.

Behind our women in agriculture [photo from *Chico Statements*] are our women in Agriculture, including the only woman to be a dean of a college of agriculture in California, Jennifer Ryder Fox, and the nearly dozen women faculty in a college, which, twenty years ago, only had one female instructor.

Behind *The Orion's* fifth consecutive National Excellence Award are the faculty of the Journalism department, especially the paper's advisor, Dave Waddell.

Behind our Marketing and Communication team which finished first in the West in the National Student Advertising Competition are Bill McGowan and Alan Relaford.

Behind our recognition as one of the country's most vet friendly universities is Larry Langwell.

Behind our Up til Dawn leadership team is Larry Bassow, who, this summer received the inaugural St. Jude Spirit Award for his extraordinary contributions to St. Jude and our students over the years. This award, in fact, was created with Larry in mind. It recognizes someone who truly embraces a passion for the St. Jude mission and who serves as an inspiration for the kids at St. Jude and our own students.

Thank you, Larry, and congratulations.

Now, would all those folks who I've just mentioned – and that's about half the room here today, and that's the point – please stand so that all of us can acknowledge you. Thank you.

Yes, behind the success of each and every one of our students are the people in this room today and our colleagues throughout the University. For behind every decision we make, every argument we frame, every case we build is the recognition that what we **most** need to affirm is the primacy of student learning and success; and what we can **least** afford to lose are the people of our University who recognize this and who are committed to the learning and success of our students both within and outside of the classroom.

Every division, every department, every operation of our University has a role to play in this goal. To the extent that we understand this, to the extent that we appreciate and respect the different roles that all of us play in attaining this goal, is the extent to which we achieve not only **clarity** about the kind of place we are, but also **certainty** in the distinctiveness and quality of our institutional culture.

Make no mistake about it: our message is powerful and positive. It is predicated on both solid achievements and high aspirations. It soars beyond some unflattering, ancient reputation and it holds no place for ambivalent, much less despairing, resignation to the challenges of hard times.

To prospective students and their families, faculty and staff, supporters and stakeholders, we say if you want a place where community service, civic engagement, and a focus on the public good matter, come to Chico State. [photo of President's Honor Roll certificate]

If you want a place where sustainability and green values matter, come to Chico State. [photos of LEED certified buildings]

If you want a place where social justice and habits of the heart matter, come to **this** place. [photo of Up til Dawn, CLIC, CAVE, ...]

If you want a place where civility, respect, and a sense of community matter, come to **our** town and campus.

If you want a place where faculty teach not only through command of their academic disciplines, but also with such personal qualities as enthusiasm, kindness, personal integrity and intellectual honesty, come to Chico State.

If you want a place that is ahead of the curve with regards to academic and information technology, come to Chico State. [photo of smart classroom]

If you want a place where leadership development and student success matter, come here. [photo of CCLC]

If you want a place where diversity matters, where its social, cultural, and intellectual expressions expand our view of the world and inform our capacity to improve it, come to this place. [diversity images]

If you want a place where our students graduate and get jobs, come to Chico State. [Commencement photo]

Let me tell you why, more than ever, the clarity of this message and the proof of its authenticity are so critical. And then how, even in these most trying times, we can aspire, and we should stretch, to new levels of distinction. To do so, here are two very familiar illustrations.

It's another year, but we're still talking about the same triple whammy of declining state support, rising student fees, and a roller-coaster ride for enrollments.

As this first slide shows, the state allocation to the CSU is now back to a level we have not seen since 1998. And, today, we are serving 58,000 more FTEs, over 70,000 more total students, than we did a dozen years ago.

The story and detail within this second slide, though, are most appalling. Since 1998, state support per FTE has declined 41% and the State University Fee has increased 115%.

In 1998, the ratio between state General Fund support and the State University Fee was 4.25:1. It is now 1.15:1. In other words, over the course of these years, what was once the most distinctive element of the Master Plan, namely, public investment in higher education as a cornerstone for access, opportunity, affordability and the state's future, has disappeared.

In these measures, where we are now is no longer a place of distinction or leadership or envy.

There's a saying about California: it's just like the rest of the country, only more so. With respect to public support for higher education, we were once in the vanguard of where much of the country **aspired to go** – a robust commitment to public higher education as a foundation for economic growth and competitiveness, for social justice and well-being.

We are now on the edge of where much of the country **has gone**: the **privatization** of public higher education through student fees that now exceed state support and the

prioritization of revenue-seeking approaches (such as the enormous growth of the for-profit sector, corporate partnerships and other client relationships) over student learning.

We are no longer daring leaders of a bold vision. We are anxious travelers on a threatening journey.

But there are ways forward. And, amidst so many things which happen to us, these ways are substantially dependent on two things which we can control: attitude and effort.

What you now see on the screen is a depiction of our financial situation in the form of a four-legged stool. But it is more than that. It is also the way we tell our story and how, like Olmsted, we recognize the forces, and anticipate the changes, affecting our landscape (that is, the landscape of higher education), and how we engage those forces and changes.

I've already said enough about state support and student fees. The former will keep dropping; the latter will keep rising. It is only the pace which is uncertain.

External support has several dimensions to it.

- Fund-raising through annual giving activities and special campaigns, such as the record-setting effort of our student-staffed calling center this year and the forthcoming comprehensive campaign tied to the 125th anniversary of our founding and first classes;
- Industry and corporate partnerships, which bring cash, gifts-in-kind, internship opportunities for students, and research opportunities for faculty to the University;
- Funds to individuals and programs from grants and contracts;
- Revenue which can come from technology transfer, intellectual property rights, and licensing agreements.

No matter what the source, though, and no matter what the means employed to win external support, there is a common denominator. And that is what the fourth leg of this stool represents. In fact, it is the key to all the other legs as well. For whether we are trying to convince Sacramento that we are worthy of state support, or assuring students that their fees translate into expenditures that clearly and directly support their learning and degree progress, or convincing donors and partners that we are wise and effective stewards of their dollars and their trust, it is our reputation and our claims of distinctive performance that are on the line. We earn support, not because we are intrinsically worthy or, metaphorically speaking, the **only show** in town; but because we are demonstrably successful and the **best show** in town.

Maintaining, even strengthening our appeal, depends on four interrelated actions, which are each expressions of attitude and effort. And, yes, there's another: being smart. But the four actions are:

- Accurate assessment of our strengths especially as they relate to the students we serve, the programs we offer, and the scholarship and research we perform;
- Clear resolve to sustain our strengths;
- Keen awareness of the forces affecting and changing the landscape of higher education;
- Careful adaption of those forces and changes to our use and our strengths.

Let me emphasize this fourth action, especially: the careful, sensitive and selective adaption to our use, to our context, of those changes and forces all around us.

Yes, we need to know which way the winds of change are blowing. We need to stay current. We also need to appreciate that the grand landscape of American higher education does not necessarily look like us. 50% of college enrollments, for example, are in community colleges. The fastest growing segment of higher education in this country is the for-profit sector, everything from the publicly-traded University of Phoenix to mom-and-pop on-line degree mills to Hamburger U. at McDonald's. More than 60% of students enrolled in higher education are over 25 years old. More than 60% of students are now working full-time while pursuing their education. Yet, if all you read are the letters to the editor and editorials in the *New York Times*, you'd think that the whole of American higher education is a set of elite, private, residential liberal arts colleges in New England.

Well, we're none of those places. And it makes no more sense for us to try to be like them than it does for us to reject or ignore out of hand everything that goes on at those institutions.

In fact, we can't. We may not be thrilled that community colleges, even in California, are gaining legislative support to offer baccalaureate degrees. But we should be working with them to strengthen articulation agreements so that their upper division transfer students are ready to engage in upper division work with us and thus move rapidly to degree completion here.

There is nothing enviable about the bad record and fraudulent practices of many for-profits: high loan default and debt among their students, employer dissatisfaction, deceptive pitches to unsophisticated consumers, business plans predicated on the revenues from

guaranteed federal and state loans to students, whether or not those students pay back their loans. Things are so bad with so many of these places that the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education and Labor is pressing for a “gainful employment” standard, which would mean that these places would have to demonstrate that their students receive sufficient training and education to achieve employment that would allow them to at least cover their loan obligations. These places purport to offer a kind of just-in-time, do-it-yourself education, but they often leave their students first-in-line at the unemployment office and done-in by do-it-yourself.

But we can’t ignore them. Because of these unscrupulous places – and, quite frankly, dismal graduation rates and alumni unemployment or under-employment at places that look more like us – we face tougher scrutiny from our students and in the marketplace about the value of the degrees we confer. We can expect only increasing pressure from government and accreditation agencies to demonstrate our value and improve our outcomes.

We face an interesting contradiction. Government and business leaders largely agree on the necessity for more Americans to attend college and earn higher degrees. President Obama, as you may know, concerned that the United States has fallen from 1st to 12th among all nations in terms of the percentage of its population of young adults, ages 25-34, with at least an associate’s degree, has targeted that percentage – now 40.4% nationally; only 35.6% in California – to grow to 55% by 2025. That would mean eight million more college degree holders in our country than now.

Just how this is going to happen, though, remains to be seen, especially, as I mentioned earlier, when states are severely reducing their funding for higher education and public institutions through higher fees are pricing access beyond the reach of many – in particular, such populations as immigrants, native first-generation college students, and low-income individuals of all races and ethnicities.

And, partially as a consequence of this disheartening situation, we are faced with mounting evidence that more and more citizens in our country are questioning the value of a college education at all. They are expressing less confidence in our institutions to provide good value and to prepare students well, whether, as Marion Wright Edelman famously observed, that’s either “to make a living” or “to make a life.”

This contradiction is starkly revealed in surveys conducted by the Georgetown Center for Education and the Economy. When people were asked “do you think everybody needs to go to college?” 70-80% said **no**. When they were asked “should your child go to college?” 85% said **yes**.

So, what does this mean for us?

It means that we're not among those places that deserve to be censured and exposed. But we're associated with them. When WASC, for example, accredits them, we suffer through guilt of association.

It means that diversity of institutions is one of the greatest strengths of American higher education. But nothing is more important than integrity.

It means that we need to be aware of the changing demographics of those seeking a higher education, but we are not everything to everyone. It means, though, that we are responsible to offer the best and most supportive experience, to anticipate and to respond fairly and genuinely to the needs of all students whom we enroll.

It means that we need to stay on the cutting edge of learning and information technology, but, first and foremost, as a means to support student learning, enable faculty effectiveness, and accomplish staff and management efficiency, not as a strategy to make a profit.

It means that we need to forge relationships with industries and businesses, **not to be their clients, but to be their partners**, to address their interests and to open doors for our students and research and professional growth opportunities for our faculty.

It means that a focus on issues of character and values, on habits of the heart and mind – social justice, altruism, civic engagement, service, leadership, creativity, critical thinking, respect, civility – is as much a curricular matter, especially for General Education, as the engagement of students with the subject emphases of their majors.

Along these lines, it means that we need to appreciate the fact, and accept the responsibility, that American higher education, that California, needs places like us.

In fact, let me go a step further. **We are indispensable.** We understand that mastering the challenges and opportunities presented by a fast-paced, global society requires more than just technical skills and fluency in the acquisition of information. We recognize that the young college students whom we mostly serve need an environment in which they can not only study, but also broaden their horizons and, quite frankly, grow up. The ideal of the traditional university, with its mix of intellectual breadth and depth, its diverse campus social milieu, and the potentially life-changing interactions that students have with faculty and staff is needed

more than ever. Remember, all of us were influenced by mentors who changed not just what we knew, but the way we thought and felt. That's what I meant when I said earlier about the awesome responsibility we have to shape the future. But, while we honor this tradition, we cannot simply go backwards in time for best practices. Our relevance, our effectiveness, our value will be challenged and questioned unless we can find innovative, less costly, and more sustainable ways to ensure our economic vitality and perform our uniquely critical roles.

And, of course, all of this means that we must take the long view.

So, back to Olmsted, Lincoln, and baseball, too. Now, surely, you didn't think you were going to get out of here today without a Lincoln quote or a baseball reference?

The genius of Olmsted was his ability to take the long view. To develop a vision that articulated the consequences of its enactment. Moreover, to make that vision both practicable and compelling.

The same can be said for Lincoln. "I walk slowly," he once said, "but I never go backward." There is a lot of self-confidence in such words, but also an acknowledgment that the future belongs to those whose focus **is** forward, and whose steps are informed by careful assessments and deliberate commitments.

Lincoln also said that "The best thing about the future is that it only comes one day at a time." No doubt that inspired Yogi Berra to declare that "The future is where you'll spend the rest of your life."

Well, yes. Thank you, Yogi. But the issue is **how** we will spend it.

For Olmsted, Lincoln and even Yogi, with that God-like view of all the play before him from behind the plate, the future is not just a destination in time; it is also a place of the imagination.

We either embrace that proposition, or we will sit by and have the future happen to us.

And as much as we'd like folks in Sacramento to think beyond positioning themselves for the next election, as much as we'd like them to join us in imagining the clearings and the constructs in our shared distance, we cannot just wait for that to happen. Make no mistake about it, we will continue to press hard for the re-awakening and the resources we need to do our work and fulfill the great, proven promise of higher education in our state. And, make no

mistake about it, we will affect the future, we will **create** the future, if not with a desperately needed new master plan that restores a purposeful approach to higher education in California, than through **one student at a time**.

And, as to all the evidence I cited earlier, there is no better place in this system, in this state – no better place in this system, or in this state, where **I'd** rather be – than here with you as we build our future **one student at a time**.

Thank you for your kind attention and, as always, for your support and dedication and all the great work you do every day, every year, for our students and our community and our future.

So, onward. To a reception outside and the year ahead. Our 125th, in fact, as Alan Relaford's design for the logo marking this anniversary tells us.

Again, thank you, and let's have a great year.

8/17/11