

**Convocation Address to Faculty and Staff**  
**Minot State University**  
**August 18, 2010; 9:30 a.m.**  
**Missouri River Room Conference Center**  
**Minot State University Student Center**  
**David Fuller, President**

## **SUSTAINING OUR GOOD FORTUNE**

### **WELCOME**

Welcome and good morning, and what a beautiful morning it is to start off our new academic year. I want to extend a warm greeting to all our new faculty and staff. We're pleased to have you join our community of learners and our colleagues.

### **A QUICK LOOK BACK AT LAST YEAR**

This year of 2010-11 will prove to be another good year at Minot State University.

Last year we witnessed and experienced, to name but a few:

- notable and measurable progress to meet our performance indicators for Vision 2013
- six percent enrollment increases and greater increases in key areas in the state and out of state
- the full implementation of Grow North Dakota Tuition plan
- our success in fulfilling our compensation task force goals and remarkable progress in raising our market salaries to competitive levels
- acceptance into NCAA Division II candidacy
- increase in our first-year to sophomore retention rate and an institutional merit award to recognize everyone's role in that effort
- notable progress on our faculty's exciting new general education program
- new renovations and academic enhancements for our classrooms and programs
- the completion of the first phase of our landscaping plan
- the unveiling of the beautiful MSU monument sign and Broadway landscaping to highlight our university and our theme of the North Dakota place and engagement
- the development and campus approval of our new admission criteria and proactive plan to help all of our students succeed
- the revival after 30 years of a new marching band
- the revival of the Greek system, with a new chapter and house, after it was discontinued 30 years ago
- a new student success center, with expanded mentoring and a full-time advising coordinator, and tutoring
- addition of two new sports: women's soccer and men's wrestling.
- the receipt of a highly competitive multimillion dollar, five-year Title III grant in support of our new Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning
- and, new directions for sustainability, partial funding for our geothermal system, a new interdisciplinary program for Studies in the Community and Environment, a one million dollar gift for a new entrepreneurial center and course of study, and much more.

There are many accomplishments, far too many to cover. The bottom line is that we had a great year last year and we anticipate this year to continue that trend. What all this means, I want to emphasize, is not a collection of individual achievements or a laundry list to wave around, but the creation and growth of a higher education culture, a strong tradition, rich with activities and learning, the best of academics and learning experiences, complemented by notable and nationally supported best practices for student support services, a vibrant and growing community with clear performance indicators and benchmarks to measure our successes, and a community of friendly and supportive faculty and staff that believes that all students can succeed, that there is a strongly held sense of mission and a distinctive vision, and that our campus holds a special sense of family and inclusiveness. That's what that list of accomplishments means, plain and simple.

The results and the successes we've experienced raising the bar and raising our standards have helped us make significant progress in reaching our Vision 2013 goal to be known as one of the premier regional public universities in the "great" Great Plains. Each and every one of you should be proud of your contributions to our many accomplishments. And to get there required your individual commitment and tireless efforts. We have a great deal to be proud of at Minot State University, and my remarks today will be focused not on boosterism but on what I see are proven ways to sustain our growth and good fortune. And then, in the end, I'd like to share a couple of poems.

#### **THE START OF THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

To sustain our growth and fortune, we need to be prepared for the legislative session that begins in January, and with it the specific and demanding expectations of our legislature and the State Board of Higher Education. Our state is, according to the most recent AP Economic Stress Index, the healthiest in the country, and our own county of Ward in that same index was ranked no less the healthiest county in the nation. In the nation! Our local economy is booming, which is certainly good news for higher education and other state agencies. But what we anticipate facing in the legislative session is caution and, unfortunately, some outspoken critics of higher education who believe that we are over funded and not as productive and efficient as we should be.

On Monday I attended an Interim Higher Education Committee meeting, a legislative committee charged with reviewing and recommending to the legislature actions for the Legislature. A common question and concern expressed in those meetings is about productivity, graduation rates, workforce training, career preparation, and vocational training. I anticipate that the legislature will ask the State Board of Higher Education to develop a funding formula for the colleges and universities tied to specific performance indicators, such as graduation rates and jobs. I hope I'm wrong, because we all know that higher education cannot be simplified in such a way. Our value is multi-dimensional, complex, and focused on teaching and learning. Whatever happens, it appears that the legislature will not support higher education at the level it did last legislative session. So our job is to show our legislature how good of a job we are doing and to continue on our path to meet our high performance objectives. Please, when you meet a legislator, put in a good word about the excellent job Minot State University is doing for our students and our community.

## A COLLEGE DEGREE

In view of these expectations and legislative comments about the practical reasons to get a college degree, it is true that many students do indeed arrive on our campus with the goal to get a job, with a focus on a diploma and the life after college. And there's certainly nothing wrong with getting a college degree and hoping to make life after college more rewarding and satisfying. We know that students who study, learn, and eventually achieve a degree will do better than those who do not pursue a college degree. We all believe that for many a college degree can lead to a better life, although there are plenty of jokes out there that question that assumption. Here are a couple from an Internet site:

Two young men who had just graduated from Harvard were all excited and talking effusively as they got into a taxi in downtown Boston. After hearing them for a couple of minutes the cab driver asked, "You men Harvard graduates?" "Yes Sir! Class of '94!" they answered proudly. The cab driver extended his hand back to shake their hand, saying, "Class of '58."

The second joke is really more of the same to highlight the practicality or impracticality of getting a college degree:

The graduate with a Science degree asks, "Why does it work?" The graduate with an Engineering degree asks, "How does it work?" The graduate with an Accounting degree asks, "How much will it cost?" The graduate with a Philosophy degree asks, "Do you want fries with that?"

A clerk at a store recently joked proudly that he was able to complete his degree in business in less than 8 years. Whatever jokes we hear, we understand that the intrinsic and extrinsic value of completing a college program is no doubt high, and that's the reason, I suggest, that enrollments in colleges and universities has sky rocketed. And with that reputation, higher education attracts a greater number and diversity of students—many who are prepared, many who are not prepared, and others who have little idea about what they want to pursue. Our challenge, of course, is to remain accessible and, at the same time, focused on our critical role, which is high-quality teaching and learning.

## WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE ARE... PARDON A BRIEF DIVERSION

With an intention to fulfill my original pledge today to suggest how we can sustain our good fortune and progress, I'd ask for your patience for a moment as I drill down, which is an appropriate metaphor for our state's fortunes in North Dakota, into the value of a university education—both practical and impractical. To do that, I want to get back to some basics to raise some questions about who we are and where we are.

With all these legislative concerns for accountability and definition about what colleges should do or not do, and in light of the work we do, our lives, and commitment to make our university the best we can make it, I've had to take some time to reflect on what all of this means. And summer is indeed the time to do that.

For me, summer is a good time to reflect and to think. This summer on my reading list I decided to include some classics I haven't read, and then to reread some books, poems, and essays that deserve revisiting. I had plans to read the second volume of a biography of Margaret Fuller and to finish the biography of Teddy Roosevelt. I chose to put off Margaret and Teddy to the winter and instead pursue

another route. My reading experience this summer included, to name a few, Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, which is now celebrating 50 years since its publication, Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure, a collection of essays by Ed Hoagland, Kathleen Norris' Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, piled up editions of The New Yorker and Harper's, a wide assortment of poems in anthologies, Rick Watson's The Lost Colony, a new magazine called Poetry, and in the New Yorker, and an historical treatment of Vietnam. The reason I mention my summer reading list is because I have found that my thinking and reflection not surprisingly gets better than when I read a barrage of emails and board reports, which takes a lot of my time during the year and, I fear, zaps my ability to read well and to think clearly.

So what does all of this mean? I was moved by Harper Lee's character and model of Atticus Finch and his comment to his daughter Scout, which was that one needs to crawl inside the skins of other people and work yourself around to get a better sense of that person. What a powerful and provocative novel! I was perplexed and provoked by the religion and other imagery in the Lost Colony, such as the dead raccoon found on the road and used to form a hat on one's, but I found it to be, as I would expect from Rick Watson, provocative, wild, and deeply earnest. And I'm struck by Hardy's character of Jude whose personal challenges diverted his attention from his ambition for learning and scholarship. Incidentally, I can see why this one was Hardy's last novel, since it didn't own up to his Return of the Native. And I reread Thoreau's essay "Ktaadn" in his posthumous Maine Woods because I wanted to remember the context in which he exclaimed uncharacteristically as he climbed the mount in 1846: "Contact! Contact! Who am I? Where am I?"

Upon further reflection, I rejoice in the thought that our students are exposed to great books and learn what not only the liberal arts can teach, and that is to question, ponder, and reflect. In fact, I think all of our students would gain something immense and indefinable if they were to ponder Thoreau's two questions and spend less time thinking about how to speed up their time to a diploma. Pondering those questions is not very practical nor easily assessed or defended in a forum of critics of higher education who demand proving our productivity and levels of efficiency. The thinking required of those questions and others, nevertheless, is what we do and should do well for students, although it is not very measurable. I suggest to you that what will sustain our good fortune is to make sure we keep focused on the values and benefits of questioning and thinking before and after graduation and not to confuse those aims with over-simplified practical expectations of what we do. We need to keep it straight in our mind who we are and what we should be doing, and not lose sight of our essential responsibilities.

## **OUR SENSE OF PLACE**

For us and for me personally, Thoreau's questions invite contemplation of one's place and relationship to it. This may be a real stretch to explain at a legislative hearing, but for many, who we are can be understood better by where we are. That's the sense of place we've been talking about for a few years—a fact that a principle responsibility of a college or university should be, in some people's thinking, an occasion to ponder profound questions and to realize how one may be a steward of one's place. Know it, honor it, preserve it, appreciate it, learn from it, engage in it, and protect it. This epistemology underlies much of the rationale for sustainability, environmental responsibility, community service, and basic citizenship.

Kathleen Norris, in Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, answered one of those questions posed by Thoreau by saying, "Where I am is from the "America's outback, the grasslands west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian that

constitute the western half of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas” (107). She claimed that in fact a sense of place is in fact unavoidable in western Dakota. I think it is equally unavoidable here at Minot State. It seems to me that our vision and our responsibility as educators, our sincere commitment to our students, and our engaged stewardship of our place in the Great Plains are increasingly more important now than ever before. We’ve handed out a bookmark to help you remember your “place” in the next book you read, to reiterate our vision, and to help you help our students understand their sense of place in the Great Plains. That’s who we are and where we are, and knowing that will contribute in many ways to helping us sustain our direction and vitality as a university.

### **WHAT’S IN STORE FOR THIS YEAR?**

It will be extraordinary in some wonderful ways and in some notably challenging ways. As for this year, here is what we have in store:

- predicted increase of two percentage points in our retention rate and graduation rate.
- predicted increase of 6-10% increase in enrollments.
- meeting our annual objectives for performance indicators for our aspiration Great Plains institutions.
- full residence halls
- dedication and opening of a premier and beautiful educational building, Swain Hall
- the start of the construction on our new wellness center
- the completion of our new field-turf athletic field
- the visitation in October by the Northern Sun Conference and acceptance into that conference
- the construction of the first phase of a new system-wide geothermal system, and installation of 400 wells north of the football field
- the start of a pilot for our new passport program with Dakota College at Bottineau
- the word of approval and start up our new Trio program recently awarded by Title IV
- faculty leadership in moving us forward in new curricula and reaching benchmarks for quality teaching and learning experiences tied to our mission and vision.
- identifying new and exciting educational initiatives connected to our vision and mission.
- building a strong case to show our detractors that our university is indeed effective
- seeking and securing legislative support for our university vision and mission
- announcing and sharing our accomplishments with those who question our effectiveness.
- meeting the new demands for accountability and measures set by the SBHE
- fostering a climate and commitment to thinking, reflection, communication, appreciation of the arts, respect for reading and contemplation, freedom of expression, inclusiveness, behaving ethically and responsibly, and valuing our commitment to helping others
- and fulfilling our institutional core purpose daily: “Minot State University helps people appreciate life and learning and contribute meaningfully to the lives of others.”

### **EXPECTATIONS AND PLANS**

Who are we? Plain and simple: our primary obligation is fully to our students, not our schedules, our research, our committee meetings, our banners or signs, our aspirations, or our presumed status. But we

know that our status and reputation comes from how well we treat our students, how well we help them succeed and grow, how well we help them learn. We talk about retention, and some people bristle because the effort seems more directed at keeping those who are not prepared, building our numbers, accepting mediocrity. That's not the retention we're talking about. Retention depends on education. Ralph Waldo Emerson hit it right on the head when he said that "The secret of education lies in respecting the student." It is all about believing that all students can succeed, doing all we can to make their time here worthwhile, memorable, full of new knowledge and learning, and yes—enjoyable and rewarding. This is the year when we make explicit our goals and palpable our actions to celebrate our place, and focus exceptionally well on our students' success. And it takes all of us to do that. In all due respect to those who think our oil wells are responsible for our good fortune, I'd suggest that it is more so the quality of the way we respect, support, assist, and guide our students that will sustain "our" good fortune.

And here's how we sustain it.

### Retention and Student Success

Each of you has a critical role to play:

- We need to fulfill our urgent need to serve our students exceptionally well, with sincere concern, with a strong commitment to the students' success, courtesy, helpfulness, and overt service. We need to look them in the eyes and listen to them to show that they are seen and heard and respected.
- We need to reach out and help even if we are not asked. If we see a student looking for something in a hallway, we need to go to them and ask them if we can help them find something. We need to look up from our desks and greet students personally.
- We need to fulfill defined and required responsibilities for advising, counseling, and monitoring our students' work, progress, and special needs. It is not too far fetched to expect from everyone that reporting and monitoring expectations and requirements are met—including posted deadlines to submit student records, to follow up with students who you are notified of their special needs, to take the initiative and extra step to contact students in need of help and support. Attendance records, early-alert monitoring reports, academic deficiency reports, and grades reports are essential from everyone to make this work.
- We need our faculty and staff to show our students that we do indeed believe that they can succeed and show them that we are committed to helping them succeed.

### Other Plans to Sustain our Good fortune

- Our compensation task force will continue to raise the bar for competitive market salaries and will establish a responsible, fair, and focused merit system this year to reward and recognize those people who are meritorious in the way they serve our students well and responsibly, and those who continue to meet Vision 2013 objectives and goals.
- I also intend to identify one-time funds to continue to support initiatives related to our role as a university of place and engagement. Here are a few thoughts: to support a major conference and speaker highlighting education and place, to host poetry readings, to reconstitute the intellectual climate committee under a new rubric related to our sense of place and our intellectual character, to encourage our library to develop a plan to acquire special holdings of Great Plains writers and

local writers, renew academic enhancement awards to support and encourage field-based learning for students, to encourage and incent our departments to add to our curriculum and schedule courses and programs related to our local place, appoint a steering committee and support the work of planning for our Centennial to celebrate our place and our university, support service learning projects focused on the people and heritage represented by our adjacent Lutheran Cemetery and other places, and reinstitute Vision 2013 awards (20 one-time \$1300 awards) and an institutional award to recognize our collective successes.

- I will also ask our Compensation Task Force to develop a merit system that recognizes outstanding service to students, activities and initiatives complementing our commitment to our role to support student engaged learning, service to local communities, exciting and new innovative programs and activities that result in raising the bar and leading to our goal to be a premier university. A special criterion will be the extent to which our faculty and staff work to support our retention efforts and to fulfill our basic responsibilities for helping our students succeed.

Now is the time for us to demonstrate unquestionably our commitment to our place, and then show people here and elsewhere that we are serious about it and we do it well. In my view, these are key steps in sustaining our good fortune and to reaching our high expectations for our university. Now for the poems.

## POEMS

I'll end with a couple of poems, which I believe fulfill the greatest expectations for a poem, and that is to provoke some thought. While they certainly may have something to say about our university and my remarks today, I'll just simply leave it up to you to think about it and find that meaning. The first one is by Henry Taylor, who is a teacher, poet, and author. I found this one and the next poem in Garrison Keillor's 2002 Penguin edition titled Good Poems.

### Riding Lessons

I learned two things  
 From an early riding teacher.  
 He held a nervous filly  
 In one hand and gestured  
 With the other, saying "Listen.  
 Keep one leg on one side,  
 The other leg on the other side,  
 And your mind in the middle."  
 He turned and mounted.  
 She took two steps, then left  
 The ground, I thought for good.  
 But she came down hard, humped  
 Her back, swallowed her neck,  
 And threw her rider as you'd  
 Throw a rock. He rose, brushed  
 His pants and caught his breath,  
 And said, "See that's the way  
 To do it. When you see  
 They're gonna throw you, get off."

And the last poem is by W.H. Davies, a Welsh poet who lived from 1871-1940, who, as Keiller mentioned, “worked his way around Europe as a cattle wrangler and fruit picker.” Keiller didn’t mention if he had a college degree. This one too is included in the collection Good Poems.

### **Leisure**

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

No Time to turn at Beauty’s glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.

A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

### **FINAL COMMENTS**

We look forward to the work of our senates and the leadership of Cheryl, Linda, and Chase. Best wishes for a good and rewarding year. Again, welcome to our new faculty and staff. It’s great to have you with us. Thank you for your attention, and thank you for your commitment to Minot State University’s students and future. We do all this together.