

A Spirit of Boldness

Chancellor's Address to the Campus Community

Tuesday, August 23, 2016

A century ago, a visionary group of women and men welcomed 158 students for the first day of classes at Eau Claire State Normal School. They represented what some called “The Eau Claire Spirit” — a bold confidence that education was key to the future.

Today, the school that began with only 17 faculty members is among the top comprehensive universities in the Upper Midwest, known for our quality, leadership and service. The spirit of boldness that was ignited in 1916 is alive and strong.

What amazing changes and achievements we have made over the past 100 years!

As Susan Harrison described, we will take this year to mark the contributions of the thousands of individuals who helped to make UW-Eau Claire one of Wisconsin's most distinctive universities. I hope you'll proudly join me at our celebrations this year, to honor all those who have gone before us.

From the beginning, we have been connected to this community.

We were founded as a “people's college” to serve the families of the Chippewa Valley and of Wisconsin, especially working-class families who wanted more opportunities for their children. From the beginning our mission was clear: We would advance the public good.

I am so proud that our mission has never changed. At 100 years, we remain as dedicated to the public good as the day our doors opened. And we have done so in the face of constant challenge.

Those of you who have read Bob Gough and Jim Oberly's new history of UW-Eau Claire probably smiled when you read the description of the first 25 years of our history: “Eau Claire State Normal School faced a series of ordeals during its first quarter century. ... Financial support by the state was usually inadequate.”

Some things never change.

We faced that challenge again last year — the most difficult time of my career, as I know it was for many of you. I remember standing here last August asking you to hang in there with me as we chose “Path 2” — the difficult path to our future.

I was sure we could come through the challenge, but I'll be honest with you: I spent a lot of sleepless nights last year: Worrying about the strain the year took on all of us. Worrying about the level of disruption and added work burdens as we lost valued colleagues. The year took a heavy toll.

But today, I am grateful that I can stand here and tell you that together we have come through the dark days and we are moving forward. Our budget is back in the black and we have eliminated our \$12.2 million deficit.

If that was all I had to share with you today, it would be a great achievement. Eliminating a \$12.2 million budget deficit is a major feat. But like the founders before us, your bold spirit has accomplished much, much more:

- Thanks to you, and to the dedicated efforts of our Admissions and Integrated Marketing and Communications teams, we will welcome the largest incoming class since 1988, with the highest number of applications in five years. Our Blugold degree continues to be in demand!
- Even with a 10 percent increase in the freshman class last year and another 3 percent this year, we have maintained (and even made a small tick upward in) the academic profile of our students. We are not lowering our admissions standards — we continue to attract highly qualified students AND we are keeping them! While final numbers are not yet in, our projections show that last year our second-year student retention increased another 2 percent to almost 85 percent — on our way to our 90 percent goal. Your commitment to supporting students is working!
- And the new class includes the largest number of multicultural students in our history. We are up by 10 percent in the number of multicultural students in just two years AND we have the second-highest retention rate for multicultural students in the UW System.
- And the four-year graduation rate? In just over a decade, we've DOUBLED it. We are projecting a 36 percent graduation rate this year, another two percent increase from last year.

Colleagues, that is what a radical dedication to students looks like. Because we stayed true to our mission, we have strengthened our university's health.

When we put our students first, we all succeed.

Such enrollment progress would be the envy of many institutions, but we didn't stop there. At the same time, we have been transforming how we support each other.

- We consolidated more than a dozen service units into three centers that not only are saving resources, but also improving our ability to serve students, faculty and staff more efficiently.
- The new Advising, Retention and Career Center, now open on the second floor of Old Library, will be serving all our incoming students. By the way, if you need to locate any of the staff who have moved this summer, check our web directory first and then look for the signs. And don't be afraid to ask for directions!
- Blugold Central, on the first floor of Old Library, opened for Orientation in June. It includes Financial Aid, the Bursar, the Registrar, Veteran Services, Parking and Continuing Education.
- And the Administrative Support and Knowledge Center has been serving colleagues since June. You can find them now in Brewer Hall; later this fall they'll move into permanent quarters on the second floor of Schofield Hall.
- In addition, we consolidated creative services from across campus into Integrated Marketing and Communications and also brought together all the Facilities Maintenance and Planning functions.

At most universities doing just one of these projects would take several years. Amazingly we have done all five in about eight months — a tribute to the dedication and hard work of the staff and faculty involved.

If you have been part of these five improvement projects — Blugold Central; the Advising, Retention and Career Center; the ASK Center; Integrated Marketing and Communications; and Facilities (including LTS, which helped with the physical moves) — please stand so we can recognize your contributions to this university. THANK YOU!

We're also undertaking many physical changes to help us stay competitive. As part of our centennial, we will be planting 100 trees to create a campus arboretum. Schofield Hall has a new facelift to return it to its original 1915 glory.

We recently received approval to move forward with the Garfield Avenue redevelopment project. Yesterday we cut the ribbon on the new Haymarket Landing residence hall.

In October we will break ground — finally! — on the new Confluence Arts Center. What a great partnership:

- \$15 million from the State of Wisconsin;
- \$5 million from the city of Eau Claire;
- \$3.5 million from Eau Claire County; and
- more than \$14 million in philanthropic gifts.

Speaking of partnerships, over the summer we've been laying the groundwork for the new Sonnentag Event and Recreation Complex on Menomonie Street. Our partners include the YMCA, Mayo Clinic Health System and Visit Eau Claire. All these projects represent innovative new ways to partner with the UW-Eau Claire Foundation and with our community so that we *all* benefit.

UW-Eau Claire, you have demonstrated again that you are not afraid to be audacious in service to the public good.

This year we met our budget challenge head on. But we also looked ahead, to what we want this great university to be in our second century of service. Hundreds of you participated in discussions and open forums to help create three new plans to guide our next century.

There are few other institutions that would undertake a University Strategic Plan, an Academic Master Plan, and an Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity Plan — all at the same time. But that's exactly what we did.

I'd like to thank the members of the Academic Master Plan Committee, the University Planning Committee, the Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity Implementation Team, the vice chancellors and the deans of our colleges for the thoughtful and collaborative work that they have done this year. Will you stand so we can thank you?

Today, on your tables you have a handout that summarizes the major goals and strategies that our three new plans lay before us. We asked ourselves: What future do WE want to create and what path will lead us there?

As the noted philosopher Dr. Suess once said, "Only you can control your future."

UW-Eau Claire, only we can create the future we want. And what is that future? A strong and resilient university that prepares students for the future — in ways they can't experience anywhere else.

Four goals help us measure our progress to that future. On this handout, those goals define our horizon. You've seen them before, they shouldn't be a surprise. They are the mountains we must climb:

- 100 percent of students participating in two high-impact learning experiences;
- 90 percent of our entering students retained to their sophomore year;
- 50 percent of our students graduating in four years;
- 20 percent enrollment of students of color and elimination of the opportunity gap.

Our path to those mountain summits is not an easy one. But then, Blugolds have never taken the easy path. Not 100 years ago. Not last year. And certainly not for our next century.

Our three new plans point the way forward. You will have the opportunity to review all plans this fall. While they differ in the actions they lay out for us, they are unified in the direction we must take.

All three plans put our students foremost.

All three plans build on our strong history of providing a rigorous education with high-impact experiences.

All three plans mandate a deep dedication to equity, diversity and inclusion.

And all three plans require our individual, personal commitment.

I can hear you asking: "We have to do ALL THIS — on top of all the change initiatives already underway?? Are you crazy?"

Don't worry, our vision for the second century doesn't need to be completed by this December. We are already working — and making progress — on many of the strategies the plans describe. Let's continue those efforts.

This really is about The Power of AND. This year, each of you will find different parts of our plans to make your own and to support. At the same time — here's the AND — all of us can share in one goal, a campuswide priority. This year, let us all make improving our campus climate our shared responsibility.

Equity, diversity and inclusion have been part of our Centennial Plan since 2008. We have made incremental progress and I want to recognize the dedicated work of so many of you who labor daily to create an anti-racist culture here at UW-Eau Claire.

But colleagues, we can do more. We must do more. And we must all do our part.

This goal is personal for me.

Over the past year I have met with many faculty, staff and students who told me about racist, sexist or homophobic comments and behavior in our classrooms, in the residence halls, among colleagues.

The stories break my heart.

Even when the actions are not intentional, they are real. They tear at the heart of our mission and undermine our ability to prepare all our students to thrive in a multicultural, global world.

Such stories are difficult to hear and painful to experience. But they are not someone else's problem. They happen here, at our university. And that hurts all of us.

The reality is that we are not the equitable, anti-racist university we want to be, inclusive and welcoming for all. Our core mission to serve our region and the common good demands that we do better. It is our moral and educational responsibility.

It is our responsibility to create a campus where the growing numbers of students of color in our local public schools (now at 20 percent) can thrive.

It is our responsibility to prepare all our students for a world in which communities AND employers demand cultural competence of our graduates.

I know I am not an EDI expert. I have so much more to learn. But I invite you to join me on our EDI journey. Our EDI plan lays out some important first steps for all of us.

This fall we will pilot professional development opportunities for faculty, staff and students so that we can all understand together our challenges and the change we need. I will ask shared governance to adopt the EDI plan and to make contributions to equity, diversity and inclusion part of every person's evaluation. Collectively, we will look at ways to retain and attract more faculty and staff of color. And I will continue to encourage vital conversations about systemic racism, equity and social justice to inform our future.

At my inauguration I spoke about the joy that we find in serving our students and each other. What greater joy can we find this year than to unite in this shared purpose: To create together a university where all are welcomed, all can thrive and all can engage together in the difficult work of creating a community where racism, sexism and homophobia have no part.

Let us make that our shared goal.

You know, when I first came to UW-Eau Claire I was attracted by your reputation, then by the beautiful campus. But it didn't take me long to learn that the bold Eau Claire spirit doesn't come from our buildings or even our curriculum. That spirit is in you.

The joy we find in our mission comes from faculty and staff who work together to make this a special community. Our ability to excel in our second century depends on you — on supporting and unleashing your talents and energy.

And so I'd like to conclude this morning by looking briefly at the foundational goal of the University Strategic Plan. This audacious goal says that in order to continue our commitment to excellence we must invest in our faculty and staff. It's as simple as that.

Our students thrive because of what you do in our classrooms and across our campus. But as the faculty of 1916 knew well, state support is seldom adequate for this task. Indeed, over the past decade, you've experienced:

- higher benefits costs;
- stagnant wages;
- increasingly non-competitive salaries; and
- the loss of colleagues.

I want you to know that as long as I have the privilege to serve as your chancellor, I will continue to advocate with our governor, legislature and civic and business leaders for support for this institution.

This spring and summer I traveled the state — from Wausau to Madison to Milwaukee — talking about the grave threat to quality that state disinvestment produces. I am encouraged by the response I received, and by our governor’s recent statements to restore the \$50 million lapse from the first year of the biennial budget and to invest additional resources in the UW System in the upcoming budget.

At the same time, however, we need to recognize that today the state allocation to our general fund represents only 20 percent of our total general fund budget — 20 percent. This is a result of decades of disinvestment by the state of Wisconsin under both Democratic and Republican administrations and legislatures.

The remaining 80 percent that supports our academic and co-curricular programs is comprised largely of student tuition and fees. In a nutshell, this means our ability to retain and attract students who will thrive and graduate as proud Blugolds is entirely in our control.

We truly can create our future.

Our four mountain-top goals — the 100, 90, 50 and 20 — aren’t just for us; they are for our students.

- We want more engaged and prepared students.
- We want them to stay and succeed.
- We want them to graduate and be part of a strong Wisconsin.
- We want all of them to be ready for the world.

When we focus on those outcomes, we serve Wisconsin, we serve our students AND (this is the powerful part) we ALSO sustain this institution and the people who make it prosper.

Through the strength of the Blugold degree and our commitment to student retention and success, we also address a vital need: to compensate faculty and staff fairly. This is about grabbing our future and taking control.

So I propose that we use strategic enrollment gains to fund an institutional compensation plan.

Over the next three years we plan to restore our enrollment to 2010 levels — a modest increase of about 840 student FTE achieved by improving retention of the students we serve. This is a goal we would seek regardless of the financial outcomes.

If we are successful, we will be able to do two things: First, we can begin to remedy the salary inequities and compression that keep many faculty and staff at less-than-competitive pay levels. And second, we will be able to provide an institutionally funded, multi-year compensation plan that will provide for modest merit increases for faculty and staff. This investment will be in addition to any pay plan that is provided by the state.

I also want to remind you that UW-System’s one-time give-back of \$813,000 has been earmarked in its entirety to address course availability and provide bridge staffing for the fall and spring semesters.

Twenty-eight tenure-track positions are being searched this coming academic year, based on highest department need and student demand, across all colleges.

Next week the provost and I will convene open meetings to review our plans and provide more detail about the proposed institutional compensation plan. I hope you’ll attend.

What a year we've had.

What a century we can celebrate!

And what a future lies ahead!

You probably wouldn't expect me to quote the 1960s writer and gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson. But he once said that "anything that gets your blood racing is probably worth doing."

When I look at the year ahead, my blood starts to race. I am excited about the path ahead and how much is worth doing.

We can take charge of our future.

We can put our students first.

We can invest in each other.

And we can re-commit to creating a more equitable, diverse and inclusive university.

The path forward is a daring one.

But the dynamic Eau Claire spirit that has energized our past 100 years will continue, proud and strong. Blugolds, let's get our blood racing and make 2016 a bold step forward to our second century of excellence.