

Chancellor James C. Schmidt
State-of-the-University Address
Blugold Breakfast
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Aug. 26, 2014

“The Next-Century University”

When I think back to just a year ago to our first Blugold Breakfast together, I shake my head. There was so much I didn't know. Now, after literally thousands of handshakes, introductions, meetings, conversations, visits, speeches and eyeball-to-eyeball conversations, I realize this is not the university I thought it was when I arrived. It's so much better!

I knew this was a campus with a reputation for excellence, but after meeting with every single academic department and most of the others on campus this year and hearing from you about what you do with and for our students, I know that reputation is just a shadow of the reality.

You saw the slides on the screens during breakfast. Pictures of the countless ways in which we create a learning environment that is extraordinary.

- Our Blugold Seminar in Critical Reading and Writing has received national accolades for transforming how we help our students become confident writers.
- This has been another year of national championships for our sales and forensics teams, a WIAC championship in hockey and a second-place finish in the national tournament for the men's indoor track and field team.
- And of course, this year we introduced a new way to talk about all that we do: the Power of AND. I think it perfectly captures the energy, confidence and creativity that is UW-Eau Claire.

My biggest challenge this year? Sharing all the stories about what you are doing in our classrooms, on the field and stage and in the residence halls that illustrate the Power of AND.

Last July, I had an idea that this university was a leader among our regional peers, but I had no idea what that meant until we captured the largest single award in the UW System's economic development incentive grant program. Our College of Nursing leads this \$3.2 million, statewide initiative to support more nurse educators.

But that's not all. We also received an incentive grant for our Responsible Mining Initiative, which has already produced additional, privately funded scholarships for our students, and almost half a million in

funding was awarded for an interdisciplinary Geospatial Education Initiative. This kind of leadership demonstrates not only our commitment to excellence, but to innovation as well.

Last August when I stood at this podium, I knew that UW-Eau Claire was working hard to create new kinds of partnerships, but I had no idea that this year I would be standing here having just announced the record-breaking \$10 million donation from the Sonnentags, which will make possible a new event and recreation center in Eau Claire. Because of John and Carolyn Sonnentag, who met and married here as students, and thanks to our partnerships with students and our community, we will be able to create a facility that will benefit our entire region.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention our Confluence partnership. This has certainly been a roller-coaster year, and it's a good thing I didn't know everything that would happen with that project when I stood here last August. We saw two successful referenda votes, thanks in part to the efforts of our Student Senate and alumni like Justin Vernon and Zach Halmsted, support from our Governor during a recent visit, and last week, the endorsement by the UW Board of Regents to work with the state on funding. We are moving forward.

This year I got to know our students and continue to be amazed by their engagement in big ideas. This summer I got a note from Abby Nygaard, one of our newest graduates. She wrote to tell me that she will be "forever grateful for the incredible people who touched my life and for the invaluable lessons I learned as a Blugold." You make this university a place where students like Abby can truly soar.

What I didn't know last August, what I could not have known, was how right it is to be here at UW-Eau Claire. How inspired I am, every day, to be your chancellor and to be part of this amazing university and of its future.

What does this future hold for us? In just two years we will celebrate our 100th anniversary. We will celebrate that milestone in fitting style — a committee is already developing ideas — but today I'd like to take a few minutes and look past 2016 to the next century of our existence. What kind of university will we be for our second hundred years? What kind of university must we be?

Certainly, the next century for UW-Eau Claire holds both challenge and promise. Challenge because higher education is changing so rapidly, much more quickly than we may be comfortable with. As I mentioned at my inauguration, higher education is now seen as a private benefit, not a public good. State support is dwindling, burdening our students with higher debt and threatening our financial sustainability. Demands on our time are escalating. I've heard from so many of you this year that you are stretched thin, at the mercy of countless demands.

At the same time, the next century holds amazing promise for UW-Eau Claire. We enter our second century confidently. This is an institution that has been a leader since 1916 and must continue to be so. We have extraordinary talent within these walls, and we have our alumni and friend network that is powerfully and noticeably transforming our community.

Our work over the coming year will be to define the vision that will shape our future together. This year the University Planning Committee will help me begin the conversations that will lead to a new plan for our next century. We will ask, “What defines the heart of a Blugold degree? What kind of university do we want to be and how can we best fulfill our mission to provide a transformative liberal education, even in challenging times?”

I’m looking forward to those conversations and to the vision for our future that will result, but in the meantime, I’d like to share with you some ideas for what a “next century” university could look like.

There are lots of books out there describing the university of the future. Lots of good jargon: The *communiversity*. The *re-engineered university*. The *innovative university*. But I like to keep things a little more direct. I see the next-century UW-Eau Claire as a YES university, an AND university, and a WHAT IF university.

Let me elaborate.

UW-Eau Claire has one vital value that is at the heart of everything we are. Lose that value, diminish it, and we will falter. What is that value? It is our singular commitment to our students, to helping them thrive.

Every university claims it is student focused, but colleagues, you need to know UW-Eau Claire is different. Our focus on our students is real here, and it permeates every classroom and every office. We may complain about the red tape in our lives or the meetings we need to attend, but ask us to help a student and we’ll drop everything gladly.

We must never lose this singular focus. The university of the next century that gets this right will succeed.

How do we strengthen our student focus? By making sure our first job is to say YES to our students.

“YES, we will do everything we can to help you succeed.”

“YES, your future is what matters most to us.”

“YES, your needs, not our rules and regulations, come first.”

Here’s what that feels like. Jeff Vahlbusch, who heads our Honors Program, shared a story with the Chancellor’s Cabinet last week. He told us that when he arrived as a tenure-track professor, his colleagues in the languages department said “YES” to him. They told him that now that he was part of their department,

they would do everything they could to make sure he made tenure. It wasn't a question of sink or swim. He knew he had allies who would do everything in their power to help him.

That's the kind of student focus that must define our next century.

The YES university is a place where ALL students are welcomed, valued, respected and supported, inside the classroom and out. A thriving and diverse campus is critical to preparing our students to be ready for the world. This means a campus community that is attractive to diverse faculty and staff as well as diverse students. We cannot offer less if we believe in a true liberal education.

Colleagues, we must not fail our students and ourselves in this regard. This past year we saw again the devastating impact that racism and ignorance can produce. We are all responsible for making sure our campus is an inclusive and safe space where our students, faculty and staff can thrive.

I ask every one of you here today to join me in holding ourselves to the highest standards. I echo Thurgood Marshall's call to dissent from indifference, fear and apathy, to dissent from hatred and mistrust. Let us model the critical thinking we demand of our students by confronting ignorance with knowledge and working to create a true community. Let's say YES to one another and to all of our students. Let's say YES this year to a truly equitable, diverse and inclusive community.

Just as we already have the foundation for the YES university of the next century, so too we already have the building blocks for the AND university. The AND university is connected — integrated internally and directly linked to our community and the world.

Surely the Priory, the Confluence and the new event and recreation center are wonderful examples of what we are already doing to partner, but the next century must see even more collaborations like these.

For the second year in a row, CASE will partner with Service-Learning, Orientation and Advising, University Centers, and Housing and Residence Life on the "UW meets EC" event, where more than 800 new students converge on downtown Eau Claire to learn how to be involved in this wonderful city. There is nothing like the energy of our students to connect us with our community.

We will also need to increase internal connections. This year some interdisciplinary programs have a new home in Hibbard Hall, making possible new learning connections for American Indian studies, Latin American studies, the Watershed Institute and women's studies.

We are expanding opportunities for high-impact practices, the perfect example of AND. This year four out of five of our graduating students participated in at least one high-impact practice — undergraduate research, internships and learning abroad. That's 80 percent of our graduating students — an amazing achievement. I know we can make that 100 percent in our next century.

This year we took a giant step forward when the University Senate passed and I signed the proposal for our new liberal education core. This is worth celebrating! The discussion over liberal education has engaged us in thinking deeply about what our students need to learn to be prepared for 21st century careers and to contribute as citizen leaders. It offers a truly transformative pathway for our students and the potential for us to amplify our message that a liberal education can be life changing AND also return a thousand-fold their investment of time and treasure.

We must not be bashful about letting people know the value we offer. This year we were recognized nationally as one of the top three universities in Wisconsin and Minnesota (public and private) for our educational quality, affordability and post-graduate success.

Let's spread the word.

This year, I would like to challenge all faculty to shape our future by contributing to the implementation of our new liberal education core. This opportunity will help us continue to lead this state in the student learning outcomes our students can expect.

As I look ahead to our future together, I see a university that is focused on our students. We say YES! We make connections, living out the power of AND. We also ask, "WHAT IF?"

I mentioned earlier that we're facing some challenging times. The next decade won't be kind to institutions who refuse to change. State funding will not return to past levels. As a tuition-driven university, our students are now our largest source of revenue. How do we survive financially without burdening them with more debt?

WHAT IF we faced the challenge head on? WHAT IF we had the courage to make choices instead of struggling to preserve the status quo? WHAT IF we created a next-century university that was entrepreneurial and unafraid to try new ideas?

That's pretty audacious — a favorite word of mine, you might remember from the inauguration. Constantly asking "WHAT IF?" is necessary if we are to steer our own course through the winds of change.

WHAT IF we lifted some of our workload burdens so we could say YES more often to students? WHAT IF we figured out how to work more efficiently so that we could translate savings into better compensation? WHAT IF we fixed what we know is broken?

In our next century we must be much more flexible or we will get left behind. Let's not wait until 2016 to fix what we know must be changed now. This year, I will support efforts to do our work more effectively and efficiently — whether in the office or the classroom.

Some of you are already doing this. For example, LTS and our enrollment units teamed up to streamline communication with prospective Blugolds to improve the enrollment experience. I ask you to help

me identify the areas in which we can make significant change. As I did last year, I will invite your suggestions on my chancellor's blog. I look forward to hearing from you.

We are also launching a brand new program, championed by the Leadership Fellows and supported by the Foundation. It's called "Fast Fix", and there's a card at your place setting describing it. Here's how it works: You identify an improvement that you think can be fixed quickly, cheaply and easily. Every month a committee will refer all suggestions to the people who have the ability to make your "fast fix" happen. They will let you know what they have done and why. Fast Fix recognizes that sometimes it's the little annoyances that rob us of joy. Let's get those pebbles out of our shoes this year!

The next-century university isn't just more effective, it's also financially sustainable. This past spring I convened a task force, led by math department chair Alex Smith, composed of faculty, staff, a student and a community member. I asked them to answer this question: WHAT IF we took charge of our enrollment and determined what the size and makeup of our student body should be? Since student tuition now provides almost three-quarters of our general operations budget, getting our enrollment right keeps the lights on in our classrooms and across campus.

Over just the past three years, for example, our enrollment has declined by almost 250 full-time students. This deprives Wisconsin of strong Blugold graduates and has a direct financial impact on us of more than \$2 million dollars. That's a big hit, on top of a tuition freeze and a major state reduction this biennium. Combined, we are now facing a structural deficit of several million dollars — a deficit that will only grow if we do not take steps to recruit more students and manage our expenses closely.

So I asked the task force to look ahead 10 years and make recommendations that would help assure a strong, sustainable university. Their report, which is available on my website now, is audacious. It describes a university that is growing, even in the face of greater competition. The report describes a campus where every one of us takes responsibility for helping to recruit students. It's the number one priority.

The report describes a student body that is much more diverse: We have more than doubled the percentage of incoming students who are underrepresented minorities.

But the report's most audacious recommendations focus on the heart of our commitment to UW-Eau Claire: the success of our students. The report asks, WHAT IF we got really serious about helping our students succeed and graduate? In fact, the report calls for a four-year graduation rate in 2024 of 40 percent (that's 10 points higher than we are today).

This report takes seriously the trust our students give us to steward their time and resources, and to assure them a quality education without crippling debt.

I want to hear what you think about these recommendations, and I will be hosting meetings this fall to discuss the report and also our budget situation. I'll ask you how we can best shape our future together.

But let's not wait to improve student success. What can we do now, as a campus, to address the indebtedness burden that faces too many of our students? WHAT IF this year we move the needle on student attainment? We know that only about 3 in 10 of our students graduate in four years. But many more are able to do so in just four-and-a-half or five years.

Students are taking one or two more semesters to graduate, but that costs them a lot. Staying just one extra year costs students almost \$60,000 in tuition, room and board, and lost wages. We must be sensitive to that cost burden, even as we encourage students to explore and take advantage of all we have to offer.

So WHAT IF we could help more students graduate just One Semester Sooner? The answer is impressive: We would sail past that 40 percent goal.

How can we make a difference? We can encourage One Semester Sooner by helping students create an academic four-year plan so they take the right courses at the right time and also participate in high-impact practices. We've already seen increases in the numbers of departments actively working with students to develop their four-year plans and actively advising students to help them follow the plans.

We can promote One Semester Sooner by encouraging students to take 15 credits a semester. Do the math. If you want to graduate in four years, you need to take 30 credits a year.

Let's not encourage students to aim low, even as freshmen.

We can promote One Semester Sooner by encouraging students to take Winterim or summer session classes so they have the flexibility for internships or study abroad. And we can promote One Semester Sooner outside the classroom by helping students we know make good choices about how they invest their time. Those of you who employ students, can you help them plan their time here to graduate One Semester Sooner?

This isn't rocket science. One Semester Sooner can make a difference for our students and for the health of our university. Will you make this a priority this year?

I've shared a lot of my ideas with you this morning. I hope they have sparked some ideas of your own, because I want to continue this conversation about what we want for the next century of UW-Eau Claire. I believe our next century will hold great things.

- We can become a YES university — united in a singular mission to help every student succeed and graduate. Let's start now by making this a more welcoming and inclusive campus for faculty, staff and students alike.

- I believe that we need to be an AND university — distinguished by the liberal education we offer and by the connections and partnerships that enrich our learning and our community. Let's start now by using this year to bring our new liberal education core to vibrant life!
- And I believe that we need to be a WHAT IF university — unafraid to make choices that will keep us strong and healthy. Let's start now by fixing the things that hold us back and by helping our students graduate One Semester Sooner.

YES ... AND ... WHAT IF? Oh yes, I forgot one more. I want our next century to be a JOYFUL one!

I was so pleased to hear that many of you took me seriously last year when I asked you to think about creating joy in your work. You pulled me aside as I was walking across campus to tell me about the joy you feel in our new Centennial Hall — it is such a wonderful addition to our campus. You talked to me about the joy you experience seeing your students wow a conference audience when they present their research. You told me about the joy you have working with great colleagues.

Last year Dean Hoadley in the College of Business started a “You’ve been caught!” shout-out where faculty and staff write handwritten notes to coworkers to recognize an achievement or kindness that brought joy. They share the notes at college meetings. What a great way to foster joy with one another.

In the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, Dean Young put out a blue and gold pail and challenged faculty and staff to write down the daily experiences that bring joy. Here’s what they wrote: “Supporting students through tough times,” “A new Nursing advising center,” and here’s one I particularly like: “Having a job I love where I can make a difference.”

The truth is, we find the most happiness when we are doing something important. Something that will create a university worthy of our second century.

As Gandhi once said, “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.” That’s my challenge to you for the coming academic year. Let’s joyfully shake our world so that we’re able to say YES, create ANDs, and ask WHAT IF?

Welcome to the new academic year!