

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Blugold Breakfast

Chancellor James C. Schmidt • August 24, 2021

Good morning Blugolds!

It is so great to be together again! What a morning to celebrate a new semester and new academic year! Thank you for being here or joining remotely. A special welcome to our faculty and staff at Rice Lake and Marshfield.

I want to begin by acknowledging that the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire occupies the sacred and ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples and that our histories are forever entwined. While we gather, we reflect the storied gatherings of Native people beneath the oaks by the river. We honor that tradition of civil exchange and the meeting of minds.

We extend our respect and recognition to the earlier and the present citizens of the land of the Ojibwe and Dakota Nations, on which our campuses stand.

I am so grateful that we are able to come together, despite 18 long months of pandemic. Colleagues, I'll be honest with you. Sitting apart in Zorn with to-go breakfast waiting outside wasn't what I'd hoped we'd be doing this year. We had plans right up until three weeks ago for a full sit-down breakfast at long tables in Ojibwe, as in years past. But as my mother used to say as we gathered around the dinner table, the important thing is we are all together!

Eight years ago I spoke at my inauguration and offered you three guiding ideas that I hoped would mark my time as your Chancellor. I've talked about them since then, but they seem particularly important now, as we look forward to another year at a time that holds so much uncertainty. The pandemic continues. We're back wearing masks – for now. Enrollment patterns have been upended. State support for higher education runs from tepid to antagonistic.

But I believe that those inaugural ideas can still be a guide for us. And, as I've thought about them again, I'd like to add a fourth idea that will help us think this year about who we are as a learning community.

The three guiding ideas from my inauguration were:

- Public good
- Audacity
- And joy.

Certainly the past year was a case study in the impact that our University had on **the public good**. Thanks to federal support, partnership with our health departments and your volunteer hours, we were able to offer comprehensive testing, open our doors to safe instruction, and provide community-wide vaccinations, a role that only an institution such as ours could have

provided. Thanks to our many partners – especially our Nursing faculty and students –we became the nexus for community health and education in the Chippewa Valley and Rice Lake, offering 15,000 vaccines at Zorn and our drive-through site. THAT’S our public good mission in action. THAT’S the value of strong partners. Thank you, colleagues, for stepping up and making such a difference for Wisconsin.

That kind of action in the face of a rapidly changing pandemic took leadership and also some audacity – the ability to think big, even in times of crisis and testing. I submit to you that my next word – **audacity** – was also in play last year as we collectively dared to look beyond the Covid crisis to our future. We had the audacity to imagine a bigger, bolder future for our university in 2025. We didn’t think small, but instead created a collective vision for our future that has audacity at its heart.

In a nutshell, our 2025 plan asks us to find ways to distinguish ourselves nationally for the innovation and excellence that has always defined us. To step up as a leader in health and wellbeing. To go beyond talking about EDI to making it a defining focus for our learning, our research and our community life. To elevate undergraduate research and sustainability as core to the Blugold experience.

That’s an audacious vision and it’s one I’d like you to keep by your laptop or near your workstation.

This week you’ll receive a 2025 Plan card to remind you that while higher education has been shaken, and our strength tested, our audacious vision will power us forward. And, I’m hoping this card might spark some ideas for how you can help UW-Eau Claire be 2025 ready.

Eight years ago, I closed my inaugural remarks with a final idea that I hoped would mark my tenure with you: that word is “**joy.**” Not a common academic term to be sure, but one that I hoped would be an outcome of our work together.

It’s been hard to find joy this past year, I know that. Frustration, yes. Fear, at times. Confusion, often. Even anger. I don’t want to minimize how challenging the past year has been. But if joy has been illusive, it has not been absent.

The joy I was talking about wasn’t just about being happy at work. Joy is not superficial, fleeting happiness. It happens when we connect to what really matters. It’s about having the opportunity to think — and do — big things. It’s about taking risks, confident that your colleagues have your back.

I know you’ve felt that kind of joy this year. You’ve felt joy as you helped a student find the money to enroll, despite her family’s hardships. You’ve felt joy creating new kinds of relationships with colleagues working from home. You’ve felt joy watching our student researchers share their work during virtual CERCA.

I also think that we've found *collective joy* in meeting the challenge of the past year, together. Proving to ourselves that we CAN overcome adversity. We CAN try new ways to teach, learn and mentor so our students can succeed. We are Blugolds, and there is joy in our mission, no matter how under siege we may be.

So today, in the fall of 2021, I offer to you again the three guiding ideas that I propose should be our mantra for the coming year.

Public Good. We have a continuing role to play in helping our communities recover and keep our university community healthy and safe. To start, please take the time to record your vaccination status in your "MyUW" portal – the UW System website where you record your time and absences. Your information is not shared, but will allow us to learn what percentage of our employees are vaccinated. We know many of you have gotten your shots and knowing that would provide assurance to your colleagues. You can find instructions on how to enter your information in the Blugold FYI email every Tuesday.

This year, as part of our commitment to public good, we will continue to follow the CDC and the science and to work closely with our health departments. That will guide how we stay safe this year. No doubt we will need to continue to pivot – our recent mask and testing requirements are an example of that. I ask your patience and understanding when we do. PAUSE

But our commitment to public good is about more than helping address the pandemic. Deep in the DNA of this University is a passion to partner. To reach across disciplines and divisions. To find collaborators in our communities and corporations who can help us do more and be more. Those partnerships make our public good mission possible. We ARE better together.

This year we must continue to seek ways to reach out to ALL communities, especially those historically excluded or neglected. We must live our goal to be more inclusive, both on our campus and in our community, for that is public good.

We have an opportunity this year, as we launch our new Center for Racial and Restorative Justice and continue to participate in Eau Claire's Transformation Project, to join hands and lead change – to become the anti-racist institution we aspire to be. To do that, we must all rededicate ourselves individually to be active change-makers.

I was inspired several years ago when Psychology professor Mickey Crothers said she asks herself at the end of each day what difference she has made toward creating a more inclusive campus. That is work that begins with each of us and happens one-on-one as we have opportunities to support and mentor our students. I'd like to challenge each of you to look every day with discerning eyes at our own institutional practices and habits so that we can remove long-standing or invisible barriers and truly be a community for all.

That individual and collective work is integral to our mission for public good. And it requires **Audacity**. This year I invite you to continue to think and act with audacity. I believe that the

pandemic has impacted students tremendously, especially in how they learn and what they need from us as educators. This will challenge us to re-invent the Blugold experience in exciting new ways. For the sake of our students, we cannot think small this year. We must, as Apple would say, “Think Different.”

Every student we admit has demonstrated the ability to succeed with us. It is our moral duty to do all we can to help every one of our students find their place here, become engaged and to accomplish all they can. To do that in a meaningful way we must be much more creative about how we foster a sense of belonging and help students find their passion – one student at a time. It’s audacious to think we could retain 90% of our students, but that is the challenge we must take on this year.

We must also be audacious about our future. I don’t have a crystal ball, but I can pretty confidently predict that we will experience continued financial challenges. That’s why growing our enrollment is so important because it provides us with additional financial flexibility. Regardless of state budgets, I know that this campus can tackle tough choices – because we’ve done it before. And we will continue to do it, together.

As demographics continue to shift, we must look beyond Wisconsin’s borders for new students to help us grow. That will require us to be bold in carving out new areas of distinction, and refusing to be a quiet campus, a well-kept secret. We have help in this regard: strong civic, corporate and alumni partners who can help bring more resources and national awareness to what we are doing here in Eau Claire.

Leading in health and wellbeing and in EDI will not be easy. But for those of you who are energized by opportunity, for those of you eager to bring new partners into our work, this is the year and this is the campus for you. We need you to step up to make a difference and to tackle big ideas. We CAN BE audacious and hold our own as a university for the future.

And our third idea: joy. There WILL BE collective joy this year. Together we will continue to preserve the tradition of excellence for our students, no matter what awaits us. That is a joyful task and we will celebrate it.

And, we will have the rewarding and joyful task of taking our vision of distinction and bringing it to reality. This year, ask yourself how you and your department can contribute to our 2025 vision.

- Ask how you can put flesh on the bones of our ideas for more opportunities for undergraduate research. Consider helping the team getting ready for NCUR in 2023 – it’s coming fast! That’s when we’re hosting student researchers from across North America. What an opportunity for our campus to shine! Catherine Chan in ORSP would love to hear from you!
- We need you to find ways to collaborate across departments and disciplines to energize our health and wellbeing programs. We know the value of the arts and humanities, business

and education to health and the health sciences. We can help our students make the connections that will prepare them for future careers.

- Together we can find new ways to build a truly inclusive campus with no gap in opportunities for all our students. We have set an ambitious goal to engage and retain 90% of our students – ALL our students. Let’s make this the year when there is no gap in the opportunities, the experiences and the outcomes for all our students.
- And we can all adopt more sustainable practices in all we do. This fall, for example, University Centers introduces the Oh-zee [OZZI] dining program that provides re-usable containers instead of single-use disposables, eliminating waste, and saving 25% in water consumption. Look for the big black boxes in the Marketplace at Davies to pick up your sustainable dining containers. It’s just one initiative out of many that will help us make changes that count!

Public good. Audacity. Joy. These have and should continue to guide our work together.

And this year, I’d like to add a fourth idea. A word that I believe needs to be part of who we are and what we owe to each other as members of UW-Eau Claire, Barron County and Marshfield. That word is “Care.”

If COVID has taught us anything it is that we cannot thrive alone. And yet, in a world that’s turned upside down and full of uncertainty, it can be difficult to keep connections. We hunker down and just try to get through. We become impatient when others don’t share our ideals or goals. We are less tolerant of mistakes, by our students and our colleagues.

But this is precisely the time – even with masks on again – when we MUST put our care for each other in the very center of our work.

Care starts with our students, who come to us with strengths and weaknesses, experiences that empower or hold them back, students eager to learn or struggling with how to make their way in this world.

I predict that this year a student will again post something racist or hurtful on social media. We live in a racist and homophobic society and we are not immune from our history and the injustice around us. But we can do our best to prevent such actions by collectively living our EDI values. And, when such incidents do happen, we can come together with care – to instruct, admonish, support and restore our community.

This year, I also ask you to care for your colleagues. Look around this arena. Think about your colleagues in every building on our campuses. Every one of you shares a commitment to our students and to our mission, no matter your job or job classification.

One of our most beloved Chancellors, Leonard Haas, once described UW-Eau Claire as a community of people interested in one another and dedicated to the pursuit of learning. I like

that description a lot. We're a community, drawn together by our shared love of learning and united by our mutual respect for each other. Let's live that respect this year.

Our 2025 plan calls for us to make wellbeing not only part of our academic priorities, but our university priority as well. This summer my leadership team has been working on a wellbeing initiative that will help us find new and better ways to support all our employees.

We've formed advisory groups to help us identify the greatest needs and we'll be hosting two wellbeing fairs, starting this fall, so you take advantage of the many resources available to you and to our students. In fact, the first fair on September 22, will introduce you to the Marshfield Mobile Clinic that will be on our campus weekly this year, offering physical exams and lab work. It brings health services right to our door and is available to everyone on the Eau Claire campus as well as your families. You'll be getting more details soon.

So let's add "**care of each other**" this year to our commitment to **serve the public good, act with audacity** and **find joy in our work together**. Those four guiding ideas are worth remembering as we look forward to doing what we do best: preparing our students — and each other — to change the world.

Thank you. Let's have a great academic year. And go Blugolds!