

Opening Breakfast Remarks August 28, 2009

Welcome to USM's annual Opening Breakfast! For those of you returning from your summer breaks—filled, no doubt, with some quality family time, good reading, travel, and research projects—best wishes at the start of a new semester. For those of you who have been laboring in the fields of USM over the summer, this is a moment to pause and reflect on our work ahead.

I'd like to start by thanking two of my staff, without whom today's event would not have been possible: Joshua Gates, the newest member of the President's Office staff, and Sharoo Wengland. Sharoo and Joshua, would you stand?

MY FIRST YEAR

My first year as president of USM has been a significant learning experience. I have discovered so much about this institution by getting to know faculty from virtually every department, as well as countless staff members and students. I've met with local, state, and federal officials; with Maine high school students, teachers and guidance counselors; with business and community leaders; and with extraordinary Mainers from all walks of life.

I have come to know well an institution that is counted on by the community to educate its future artists, businesspeople, lawyers, nurses, public servants, scientists, and teachers. I have listened to the pleas of civic leaders in central and southern Maine that USM serve as an economic engine and cultural resource for these regions. I have also heard the dreams and aspirations of this academic community, which seeks broader recognition of its efforts.

OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over the past year, we accomplished much:

- We raised a \$1.16 million dollars in the annual fund.
- We secured a \$1 million dollar endowment gift from Bernard Osher.
- We completed a new strategic plan.
- We established a new major in sport management, a pre-pharmacy program, and post-baccalaureate programs to help our students prepare for medical and veterinary school.
- We hired: the new faculty and staff highlighted in the Opening Breakfast newspaper, a new provost, a new vice president for advancement, four new deans, and a new executive director of facilities.

- We put into place fiscally responsible measures for accountability, and we reenergized the university's performance management system.
- We began a schedule development/curriculum management program to improve course availability for students.
- Finally, we created student success centers for the opening of the new academic year, which will help ensure that more of our students leave this university with a degree.
- Speaking of student success, did you know that a School of Music graduate performed as a soloist with the New York Metropolitan Opera? Or that an undergrad computer science major won a competition at the World Congress on Evolutionary Computation?

- Finally, we balanced the budget, and we should feel a particular sense of accomplishment in our efforts to right our finances, even as we faced additional cuts to our budget by the State.

OUR VERY REAL CHALLENGES

The list could continue. It reflects people's hard work, support for USM, and belief in its promise. But, in truth, it would be reckless to congratulate ourselves.

We can no longer operate on the assumption that we have weathered last year's fiscal storm and can continue functioning as before. In fact, our beloved institution is now located in the eye of the perfect storm:

- We budgeted for flat enrollment, and we have not achieved this goal—either on the graduate or the undergraduate level.

- Our state appropriation continues to shrink. Investment income is weak.
- Our inattention to retention and graduation rates continues to have serious monetary consequences for us and more dire implications for students. Last spring, when I spoke of monetizing retention, I tried to emphasize the financial importance of retaining existing students. When students leave without a degree, and the number of credit hours decreases, our budget takes a wallop, not to mention the personal impact on the students involved.
- Decentralized decision-making has led to proliferation and continuation of academic programs that, in some cases, are poorly enrolled, out-of-date, and unconnected to what students want to study and this State's needs.

- We haven't marketed ourselves effectively because we have no consensus about who we are.

The facts are straightforward. We have decreasing revenues at a time of steadily rising expenses. The course that we are on, without radical and comprehensive change, is not sustainable and threatens to defeat even the most optimistic of us.

Our financial condition confirms that we are well past maintaining business as usual. I am reminded of Edgar Allan Poe's remark in "Imp of the Perverse:" "We stand on the brink of a precipice." And, like Poe, although our academic "reason . . . deters us from the brink," we nevertheless cannot help but look into the chasm and contemplate a creative leap. We must summon the courage and the will to make that leap, to rethink and revitalize our academic enterprise. Otherwise, the State, our supporters, our students, and

their families will judge us intellectually impotent and organizationally ineffective.

THE PATH FORWARD

Our path forward is clear:

1. First, we must embrace a sustainable business model in which expenditures are balanced by revenues, one that allows us to:
 - restructure and reduce our debt;
 - build new sources of revenue through retention and graduation of existing students;
 - increase enrollment of traditional age and adult students;
 - and
 - develop new programs that draw students to USM.
2. Second, we must build academic excellence by raising our research, scholarly, and creative profiles; by developing

programs known for their rigor, relevance, and originality; and by graduating increasing proportions of our students and launching them into professional careers or further graduate studies. USM must embody an ethos of success that encompasses not only our students and our researchers, but also our scholars and our teachers.

3. Third, we must then communicate a consistent, coherent message that describes our excellence and serves as our brand in higher education, an academic identity that will draw students, faculty, and funders to USM and that distinguishes us from our peers.
4. And finally, we must identify, pursue, and receive new resources on the basis of the excellence of our programs, research, and intellectual capital.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES USM?

I have been asked over and over by people across Maine and beyond: what is it precisely that distinguishes USM? What does this institution do that separates it from the pack, not only in the University of Maine System, but also regionally and nationally?

I find myself offering a less than compelling answer. USM, I say, is Maine's only public comprehensive university, with a range of programs from the liberal arts and sciences to the professional, an emphasis on applied research, and an acute awareness of the role we play as both a resource and an economic engine for the communities we serve.

But that answer is generic, and frankly uninspiring. It defines a whole stratum of institutions across America. The great actress and acting coach Uta Hagen once said that "[w]e must overcome the notion that we must be regular . . . it robs you of the chance to be

extraordinary and leads you to the mediocre." I think she captures precisely what we face.

So what is it that people think of first when they hear our name? The Law School? The Muskie School of Public Service and its expertise in public policy? The School of Music? The nursing program? Our Maine Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health? Our Stonecoast MFA program? The new Osher Map Library?

We must ask ourselves: What is our identity today beyond our walls?

More importantly, what do we want it to be?

I want to propose a structure for answering these questions, five pillars of a distinctive university, each drawn directly from the goals of our new strategic plan:

1. A compelling public agenda
2. Success in graduating and launching students into productive careers and professions
3. A clear research identity
4. Programmatic distinction in selected areas
5. And finally, fiscal sustainability—the ultimate demonstration of the viability of our approach to public higher education.

We have an opportunity to transform this university. The possibility of remaking a university comes along, perhaps, once in three generations. And this possibility is here, now, right before us. Sure, the budget situation is driving us to be increasingly strategic, focused, mission-driven, and frugal. But it also delivers to us the rare opportunity to build a university around a realistic core of excellence—really no more than three or four areas—that will fix us

in the public higher education firmament and the imagination of the broader public.

A CORE OF EXCELLENCE

If we identify those three or four areas, will we drive all our resources to these areas, thereby discontinuing all other programs? Of course not. Does it mean that those other programs are not good? No, but it does mean that we build a broad institutional identity around distinction that draws students to us, helps us recruit faculty and staff, informs our research, interests donors, and appeals to businesses while capturing state—and national—attention.

EMBRACE REORGANIZATION TO REVITALIZE

Over the course of this next academic year, I will be asking you to engage in the hardest task you've confronted in higher education. I will be asking you to embrace and act upon the need to restructure

USM in order to revitalize our academic enterprise. This will require you to take off your local and departmental hats. I will ask the professoriate to reimagine its work by thinking of what a 21st-century university needs.

In fact, we are remarkably well-positioned for this work:

- We have a strategic plan in the first year of its implementation, with a newly formed Strategic Planning Steering Committee—made up of representatives from different units of the university as well as leaders of the faculty, students, and staff—to keep us focused.
- The work of the System's *New Challenges New Directions* task forces is being consolidated and synthesized into a single report prepared by the Chancellor that will commit the System to saving money, achieving efficiencies, and deepening both access and

opportunity for students throughout the state. As the System's second largest campus and only urban comprehensive university, USM will play a leading role in the implementation of the System's reorganization plans.

- We also have our upcoming accreditation process through NEASC, a critical opportunity to reflect on what we do, how we do it, and in what ways we must do it better.
- And now we have the white paper prepared for us by Dean Betty Lou Whitford, former Deans Devinder Malhotra and Brian Toy, our Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan Cambell, and the Task Force's chair, Dean John Wright.

THE WHITE PAPER

When you get back to your offices, you'll find email announcing the white paper's publication and providing a link to it. It will be

accessible both on USM's home page and within the President's Web site.

Last semester, I charged this Task Force with thinking deeply about our academic and organizational structure and developing a series of scenarios—again, scenarios, not recommendations or proposals—that could help us imagine USM in a variety of ways. I thank the participants for providing us with these 'conversation starters' for the hard work ahead. Their work is completed. Yours has just begun.

This is not my white paper. The contents do not reflect my ideas. And it does not incorporate some of the most recent changes that have already been put into place. For example, inspired by Goal 2 of the new strategic plan, I asked Susan Campbell, with the collaboration of Craig Hutchinson and Joe Austin, to create student success centers on each of our three campuses, and I asked Susan to take charge of enrollment management.

This white paper offers a variety of scenarios, some of which will be controversial because they imagine repositioning or collapsing programs and even schools or colleges within new organizational structures. Once again, I want to emphasize that none of these reflect proposals; none of these reflect my thinking, plans, or intent. They are truly 'conversation starters,' designed by the Task Force to help us begin thinking about how we might reorganize.

For instance, while the Law School is not affected by any of the white paper's scenarios, I envisage deepening the conversation between it and our other colleges and schools in ways that enrich and extend its role within the university. I also certainly do not endorse the idea of repositioning Lewiston-Auburn College within USM. On the other hand, I am intrigued by the administrative changes suggested for my senior staff, and I will consider them carefully even though they do

not address the problem of disproportionately-sized portfolios among my staff.

Just as I have, you too will find aspects of the white paper that you like as well as aspects that you find objectionable. However, the great service that John Wright and his colleagues have done for us is to provide us a springboard to real, substantive conversations about our future. Their work was not easy, but they were courageous, bold, and inventive. They deserve our most sincere thanks.

During the fall semester, we will weigh their scenarios as well as develop others that arise from our discussions. I will host three town meetings—in Gorham on October 26th, Portland October 27th, and LAC October 28th—and an all-faculty meeting in Portland on October 29th. I also hope that the faculty will consider meeting in broad disciplinary groups: the creative and performing arts, the humanities, the social sciences, the STEM disciplines, and the professions. I

encourage you to think boldly, think interdisciplinarily, to put aside personal or departmental interests and think about the success and future of USM holistically, about how to differentiate and distinguish ourselves in an increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment.

Concurrently, I hope the staff will meet in divisional situations on each campus and will also have the opportunity to meet in smaller unit-based groups. At these meetings you will analyze the scenarios and discuss others that will, no doubt, emerge from your conversations. Each of these groups will have the opportunity to report back to me the results of those sessions, providing indispensable counsel in this process.

These will be the most important community meetings of our university's history, and I look forward to them and the opportunity to continue to discuss the future of USM with you. Will they challenge

us? Yes. Will they involve easy discussions? No. But we simply have no choice. The university's business plan and academic structure needs revising, updating, and solidifying, or we will find ourselves an increasingly weakened institution unable to fulfill its mission or the dreams we have for it.

George Bernard Shaw once reflected that "[w]e are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future." Over the course of the fall semester, I will seek your best advice, and then in the winter after I have heard from you and digested your counsel, I will make a decision about the future of the university keeping Shaw's insight firmly in mind. That's a sobering responsibility, but one that I pledge to exercise with a deep and profound sensitivity to your concerns as well as our university's best interests and greatest potential. At the beginning of the spring

semester, I will report back to you, and we will then spend the spring semester developing an implementation plan.

Today I ask you to join me in rolling up our sleeves for the hard, but potentially exhilarating work ahead. It is time to think broadly about our identity, about what kind of university we want to be, about what our State deserves, and about what our students depend on us to deliver. It is time for us to build a university of greater distinction, using the eight goals in our strategic plan as guideposts, the System reports, and the Task Force's white paper to inform our deliberations.

Times like this inevitably arouse our deepest insecurities because we begin without knowing where we will end up. The very structure of higher education—the separate and competitive colleges, schools, departments and programs—resists change and makes radical innovation grueling. This is understandable in a culture devoted to contemplation, analysis, and thoughtful response. We do not want to

make mistakes that can reverberate across the lives of ourselves, our colleagues, and the many students whose futures are entrusted to our care. I understand that reluctance and respect deeply the impulse to act deliberately, cautiously, and intentionally.

However, we have an opportunity to transform this university. We must seize this moment. I honestly believe that we must heed the counsel of Shirley Hufstader, the American jurist and first Secretary of Education, when she said: "If you play it safe in life, you've decided you don't want to grow anymore." It's time for USM to grow. This is our moment to rise to the challenge before us and to dream ambitiously. USM is poised for greatness if we have the courage to dedicate our hearts and souls to empowering its potential, to growing instead of limping along, and to embracing this opportunity for transformation.

Thank you so much for being here today. I have great confidence in USM and in all of you to bring your best, most principled thinking to the challenge before us. Now I'd like to answer your questions about the process that will consume us this fall.