

BUILDING PASSION FOR EDUCATION

Thursday, September 11, 2008
3-5 p.m. Yellowstone Ballroom, Wyoming Union
University of Wyoming

This is the fourth time I've done one of these and the 11th time I've attended a University of Wyoming convocation. Lucky for me, most of the convocation time is reserved for the President's State of the University message, and there is always plenty to say. But I've been around a few years, and if I've learned anything in my tenure at UW, it's that "short is good and less is more." I'll try and remember that this afternoon.

I want to start with a picture and a thought sent to me by a friend in the Political Science Department.

You've probably all seen this print titled Relativity by M.C. Escher. It's a great metaphor for large organizations like UW. We're a complex operation, composed of many people, with many different responsibilities. We all have our own perspectives and opinions. Too often, if we're not careful, we forget that there are other people who have different and valid points of view. Your perspective depends on who you are and where you are in the organization.

The chair I sit in today, and hence my perspective, is far different than when my chair was in the classroom, or in the department head's office, or in the dean's office, or in the provost's office. My comments today are about the reality and the future that I see for UW. They are shaped by my perspective. They also need to be shaped by the discussions, the debates, the meetings, the e-mails, the phone calls, and the conversations that I have with many of you.

There is no substitute for sustained communication at all levels. It is critical to the success of our enterprise. I encourage you to share your thoughts and perspectives not just with your co-workers, but with your department head or director, your dean, your advisory boards, your vice presidents, and with "Old Mainiacs" like me. At the core of any good university is constructive discourse.

We may not always agree on how best to advance this great institution, but I have no doubt that we all want what's best for UW. Our best course of action will be grounded in the strategies and opinions we shape through our communication. Communication is what our strategic planning effort is all about. It drives our future. Please, get engaged, express your opinion any way, any time, anyhow.

I reread the text of each of my first three convocation speeches, and it helped me gauge the progress we've made together. Make no mistake: the success that UW has recently enjoyed is the result of your collective efforts. It is built on the leadership of our Board of Trustees; the dedication of our talented faculty; the hard work of our staff; the amazing achievements of our students; the commitment of our Foundation, friends, and donors; and the enthusiasm of our alumni. The sustained and generous support we've enjoyed from Wyoming's public officials is a tribute to what you've accomplished.

Rereading previous convocation speeches also helps me assess whether our vision has been clear and focused. In 2005, I emphasized UW's transition. After years of sparse state revenues, we began an effort to address long-neglected needs on our campus, such as faculty and staff salaries, deferred maintenance, and capital facilities. We made great progress then, and we continue to make great progress now.

But as we celebrate the opening of new facilities and the "piles of dirt" yet to come, we have noted and we cannot lose sight of the fact that what is most important is what goes on in the classroom, the laboratory, the studio, the field station, and the lecture hall. It is the great faculty and great students that will make and sustain UW's future.

In 2006, the theme was the same, but I had some fun talking about what UW might look like in 2025. This vision included the long term impacts of the Hathaway Program; the growth and development of our areas of distinction, as well as the School of Energy Resources; a business incubator that nurtures economic development throughout Wyoming; sustainable agriculture and livestock research at the Hageman Center; enhanced family practice residencies in Casper and Cheyenne; and a national-caliber business school reaching out to communities across the state. We're not done yet, but we can take great pride in our progress. These visions have become or are about to become reality. In 2006, I talked about core themes of access, excellence, and leadership. These themes influence everything we do here at UW. I believed it then I believe it even more now.

Last year, I urged the university community to "pick up the pace." And we have worked hard to earn the confidence of so many of new faculty who chose Wyoming to pursue their careers; of students and the parents who send them here to pursue their dreams and build their future; and of alumni, friends, and donors who commit time, energy, confidence, and donations in extraordinary levels. And we have worked hard to build a solid foundation of confidence among state policymakers. While other states develop strategies to reduce support for their public universities, state investments in Wyoming's only university continue to grow.

Although saying so made my vice presidents groan in pain, we needed to "pick up the pace" to continue to merit that confidence, and pick up the pace, we have! Here are some examples. UW's success is reflected in the quality of our faculty, and make no mistake, we have changed from prey to predator in the challenging environment of faculty recruitment. I am still gloating about our latest outstanding faculty acquisitions from some of the institutions that cherry-picked from us during the 1990s!

Wyoming Excellence Chairs are helping to build our areas of distinction. Distinguished scholars in energy are building depth in business, in the sciences, and in engineering. A record-setting \$78 million in funded research reflects our competitiveness in the national scientific community, and a cut of the Nobel Peace Prize is nothing to sneeze about either.

Goldwater and Marshall Scholars, national champions in debate and in theatre and dance, the Wyoming Conservation Corps, student athletes on the all-conference academic team, dramatic increases in students who are studying abroad, and engineering students winning national

recognition for environmentally sensitive design reflect a sophistication and a coming of age for students at UW.

And let's not forget a record \$43 million dollars in private giving this last year. Our endowment has grown to \$300 millionan amount that generates over \$16 million in income each year for students, colleges, and departments and has a significant impact on the quality of our programs across campus. Members of the Foundation Board work tirelessly to keep private giving on an upward trajectory, and we appreciate both their efforts and the opportunities these dollars provide.

For staff members in the audience wondering how all this affects you, let me point out a very significant change in your benefit package that may have gone unnoticed. In July, the Board of Trustees approved a change in policy that expands the credit hours and eligibility of staff to take university courses tuition free, and it removes the proviso that you must "pay back," through additional work, the hours you spend in the classroom. If we are going to preach the gospel of higher education, then we need to make sure that our policies are consistent with our words. Education is good, it is good for all of us, and if staff members want to take advantage of what UW has to offer, they can now do that as part of their job.

I just mentioned our most recent accomplishments. Let me take a few minutes and share a little report card of other achievements with you.

In 2006, the Wyoming Legislature allocated 12 new senior positions for energy-related teaching and research to UW. Of these 12 positions, eight positions have been filled in math, geology, geochemistry, chemistry, chemical and petroleum engineering, and natural resource economics. Importantly, filling these energy positions has also generated hiring in related areas, allowing us to further expand an array of interconnected energy expertise that spans several colleges and has begun to attract worldwide attention.

We also continue to fill the Wyoming Excellence Chairs. To remind you, in 2006, the Wyoming Legislature established a \$70 million endowment for the creation of distinguished senior faculty positions at UW. So far we have filled two of the Excellence Chairs in educationone in literacy education and one in science education. This year we will also welcome our second eminent writer in residence and the Wyoming Excellence Chair in ecology. And we're currently recruiting for senior experts in the fine arts, natural resource law, prion diseases, collaborative resource management, biomedical science, math education, community and economic development, and ecological climatology.

Ten years ago, UW had a host of diversity-related issues. Some serious issues persist, but we've made significant headway. We now have an associate vice president for diversity. We have a permanently funded visiting position in the African American Studies program. There are several new centers and programs, including the Rainbow Resource Center and the Social Justice Research Center. Permanent funding has been identified for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Days of Dialogue and the Matthew Shepard Symposium on Social Justice. Through its relationship with the National Center for Atmospheric Research, UW has begun to establish partnerships with historically black colleges and universities.

We now have core research facilities in place such as the Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center, the Stable Isotope Facility, the Microscopy Core Facility, the Macromolecular Core Equipment Facility, and others. And let's not forget the emerging Berry Center for Natural History and Conservation.

Our scholarly infrastructure now extends beyond our own institution: UW has cultivated highly visible partnerships with the National Center for Atmospheric Research to locate its new supercomputing facilities in Wyoming and with industry giant General Electric to build a gasification test facility to study clean coal technology. And important to those generation Xers and Yers and the Millennials (all those "communication revolution" terms that academics are struggling to define), we have made colossal improvements in computing infrastructure and bandwidth.

In the life sciences, UW has a newly-revamped core curriculum at the undergraduate level and new cross-college doctoral programs in ecology, neuroscience, and molecular and cellular life sciences. In science and technology, UW has fostered programs in computational science, Earth and energy sciences and engineering, and materials science.

In cultural endeavors, the arts, and the humanities, we now have a master of fine arts in creative writing, a position for an eminent artist in resident, and an eminent writer in resident. The Art Museum is more engaged than ever before with UW students, with its public, and even with elementary school students. And while we're finally fixing some physical problems with the Art Museum's permanent home, you just may have noticed some pieces of the museum's newly-installed invitational sculpture show. Jacques made sure I added that.

For professions and issues critical to the region, we have made a concerted effort to prepare students to enhance the workforce right here in Wyoming. In elementary and secondary education, there is an emphasis on STEM—that's science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education along with an emphasis on scholarship in literacy and English as a second language. We just launched a statewide completion program in elementary education through a cooperative venture involving the College of Education, the Outreach School, and Wyoming's seven community colleges.

In health care, UW offers an accelerated second bachelor's degree in nursing and an option for online completion of both a degree in nursing and a bachelor of science in nursing. In business, there is an executive M.B.A. and a heightened emphasis on entrepreneurship and sustainability. Recognizing the critical role that oil and gas production plays in Wyoming, UW recently reinstated the baccalaureate program in Petroleum Engineering (the first graduates crossed the stage this past spring), and the Enhanced Oil Recovery Institute is nationally recognized for its work in getting the most we can out of old oil reservoirs.

UW now offers a bachelor's and master's degree in environmental and natural resources. The College of Law and the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources have joined together to offer a joint J.D. and master's degree, and the Haub School is increasingly connected to the School of Energy Resources. The College of Agriculture is also playing a major role through its Community Development Initiative. Comprised of educators and specialists across

Wyoming, this effort will increase the capacity of communities, enterprises, and families to create a sustainable future. And Ag also has strong academic initiatives in reclamation that are critical to energy development and Wyoming's special environments.

We have a great deal of which to be proud. But today my message differs from my urging that we "pick up the pace." My message is this: UW's commitment to education has to be a shared passion shared not only across all sectors of this institution but beyond the university community as well. As educators, we already know how important education is. It is our responsibility, and it is our time, to instill our passion for education in others. Our reach has to extend across Wyoming and beyond, to our public schools, to our community colleges, to our businesses, to our towns and cities, and most of all, to our children.

Our political leaders are doing their part. Today the state of Wyoming invests more money per capita in education than any other state in the United States. As direct beneficiaries of this support, UW and our sister institutions around the state have a tremendous responsibility to share a passion for learning and discovery with every citizen we can reach. I am concerned when I read reports of disturbingly low college readiness scores among our high school graduates. I am even more concerned that only three out of four Wyoming students finish high school and of those who do, only about 50 percent choose to pursue some form of post secondary education or training.

Don't think for a minute that this is a K-12 problem. Let me remind you that UW loses one in every five of its first-year students, and our six-year graduation rate is somewhere around 60 percent. Let me also remind you that we educate a significant percentage of the public school teachers who populate our K-12 system. We must be a big part of creating and implementing the solutions.

Our nation spends more for education than any other nation in the world, yet we now rank 10th among developed nations for educational attainment and we're losing ground. We are unable to produce an educated workforce of sufficient size and scope to meet our needs, and projections indicate this situation will only worsen. This is not acceptable, and it is our responsibility to step up to the challenge. Wyoming's size gives us an advantage. We can serve as a model for the rest of the nation, working cooperatively with our colleagues in the community colleges, and partnering with K-12 to fix the problems spread across our educational system.

We've started this effort with the creation of the Wyoming P-16 Education Council, designed to bring educational professionals together to confront our collective challenges. But this alone is not enough. If we're going to "talk the talk," we have to "walk the walk." Stepped up efforts to create seamless transitions between layers of education and a stronger more fundamental commitment to education of all types and flavors in our schools, our towns and communities, and our families is something we must work harder to accomplish. We have to change the prominence and perceived importance of education in our state, and we need to do it now.

As I said before, I am concerned that only about half of Wyoming's 5,700 high school graduates choose to continue with some form of post secondary education. I am equally concerned that only about half of these 2,800 students choose to attend the University of Wyoming. And I am

doubly concerned that only about half of them make it through. The pipeline is too small, and it's leaking like a sieve. Not only do we need to plug our leaking pipeline, we also need to make it bigger much bigger. Anyone who studies enrollments in higher education understands that we need to do more for first generation college students, students of color, students whose communities lack a tradition of emphasis on higher education, and students with other special challenges.

And let's not forget the site bound and non-traditional students. Today, 40 percent of UW's students are 25 years of age or older. And we will need all of these students, young and old, resident and nonresident, site bound or mobile, to build the future. Again, I call for the state to consider implementing a program, like the Hathaway Program, that will provide for Wyomingites who are not newly minted high school graduates, but who still want to further their educations and their life opportunities. We need them all. It shouldn't matter how old you are. I intend to make specific recommendations to the governor and the legislature later this fall for such a program.

Non-traditional students are not the same as 18-year-old college freshmen. Their life experiences and situations are different, as are the family and financial situations that challenge their attendance at UW. I've said it before I'll bore you now but I'm going to keep saying it: we are not the University of Laramie, we are the University of Wyoming. As the only public university in a huge geographic region, we have a responsibility to work with our community college counterparts to ensure that higher education is available to everyone in Wyoming who needs it and wants it. That responsibility is as profound and significant for the 35-year-old single site-bound mother in Wright as it is for the 18-year-old on-campus freshman from Kemmerer. This past year, I met with the trustees of each of our Wyoming community colleges, and I can assure you that the community colleges are ready to work with us to build the partnerships we need to be successful across Wyoming. Let's seize the moment, let's make this work. We are a statewide institution with statewide, national, and international responsibilities.

I am concerned, like all of you, with America's energy future. And like you, I am disappointed in the inability of our national leadership to articulate any vision more sophisticated than what can be contained in a 15-second sound bite. Wyoming is ground zero in America's energy future. Our School of Energy Resources, done right, will place our academic departments and colleges center stage in higher education. We need to face the fact that we are currently a nation unable to build strength and a passion for excellence in STEM subjects among our children. And we need to face the fact that addressing America's and Wyoming's energy future will require expanding our research programs, building depth and sophistication in our classrooms, partnering with industry, and injecting real substance into efforts that too often seem best characterized as turning off the light bulb before the tidal wave hits.

I am also concerned about the quality and scope of graduate education at UW. When I compare UW to our competitors, it is clear that we need to strengthen and build our graduate studies. We need to push ourselves for timely degree completion, we need to bolster graduate student stipends from any and all sources, and we need to consider thoughtfully the breadth and quality of graduate studies on our campus. Strong and diverse graduate programs not only strengthen the quality of the environment for our undergraduates, they also bring to Wyoming the best and the

brightest from around the world, many of whom will stay and work and build a future in our state. As a proud graduate alumnus, I'd like to see UW become an international magnet for graduate education to complement our long tradition of excellence in baccalaureate education.

For years, like many other states, we have complained about the loss of our graduates to out-of-state jobs. Being good Wyomingites, we characterize the glass as half empty. Let's cut that out! National data show that on average, we attract more students than we lose. That's not to say there isn't work to be done, but let's stop focusing on the outflow when we're a net importer of talent. The glass is more than half full, and our job is to fill it up.

One thing UW already does is work with Wyoming employers to place our students in internship programs around the state. In this year's supplemental budget request, we have asked for one-time funds to provide a stipend to students participating in these programs. Our goal is to show our students what wonderful opportunities exist in Wyoming, and to show Wyoming how wonderful our students are.

And finally, I am concerned that we not lose sight of the forest for the trees. The task of the university is to build a better, more productive, more balanced, comprehensive future for ourselves and our communities. We are a public research university that offers baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral education. And we are one of the best in the nation. But we won't hold our position or gain ground if we don't build balance into our future. We must maintain and build strength in our social sciences, our humanities, and our fine arts, right along with the strength we build in agriculture, health sciences, business, engineering, law, and education. The time to do this is now.

Let's look a little more closely at the fine and performing arts. At UW, these programs do more than educate students; they improve the quality of our lives, and they bring the vibrancy and creativity into our communities that make us attractive to business and industry. Our fine and performing arts programs have gained national prominence, their enrollments are growing, and their programs have cultivated an environment of excellence, but their facilities are woefully inadequate. Just as science and the professions are important to Wyoming, so, too, are the fine and performing arts. For this reason, they are a fundraising priority for our institution, they are a capital construction priority for our institution, and I encourage you not only to support their efforts, but to enjoy their performances.

When you think back to the highlights I mentioned earlier, you can see that we already have a passion for education. The trick now is to spread that passion everywhere: throughout our homes, throughout our community, throughout the state and region, and, ultimately, throughout the nation and the world. We may not be able to do it all, but we can start and we can start today!

I know there are many things that I've not covered in my comments this afternoon, and there are many of you in the audience whose efforts and contributions deserve recognition and praise that I have failed to acknowledge today. But let me take you back for a minute to that M.C. Escher drawing. UW is a large and complex organization with endlessly moving parts. Good things are happening faster and with more intensity than any one of us can fathom. It happens in the lab, in the classroom, and in the library. It happens on the playing field, in the conference center, and in

the business incubator. And it happens in Lusk, and in Wamsutter, and in Cheyenne, and in Powell. If we are to build the passion and generate the momentum to do something truly unique with this opportunity, it's going to take all of us out there, all the time, working hard and touting the benefits of this great institution and what we do.

Thank you and please join me for a reception with some food, some drink, and hopefully some conversation next door in the family roomright now!