

Convocation Address to Faculty and Staff

Minot State University:

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Conference Room, Student Union

David Fuller

Welcome

Good morning, welcome, hello to Minot State University faculty and staff. It's really great to be here. It probably sounds a bit folksy and too colloquial and Tony-the-Tigerish to say, but it is indeed "g-r-e-a-t" to be at Minot State University, to have the opportunity to work with all of you.

My move here and my start of work have gone very well. The only real mishap came two days after I arrived. While I was taking a shelf off the wall to make room for our refrigerator, the shelf came off a bit faster than I expected. It hit my head, put a fairly large gash in my forehead, and required an unexpected and fast trip to the Trinity emergency room to get five stitches. When I came to work on the first day, the two television stations visited with cameras in hand, and both reporters and camera people immediately asked what happened to my head. I asked them politely to try to get a shot of me from my right side and they chuckled. I was telling my wife's brother about the accident, and he said, "Now, let me see if I understand this correctly. You pulled a shelf off the wall and onto your head, and you're going to be what at the University?"

Minot State University is an exciting place to be

As I've told all the news media after they got through asking about my stitches, it is indeed an exciting place to be at this point in our history as the University nears its first centennial in 2013, that it's an exciting place to be during a time in which the need for higher education is ever so critical for our students and for our society, at a time when higher education is confronted with many changes and challenges, and at time when there are so many opportunities for Minot State. I'll say it again, it is great to be in North Dakota---one of the most beautiful states in the country---giant skies, incredibly clean air, dramatic seasons, a diversity of landforms, flora and fauna, and people, who are, in my view, some of the nicest and courteous people I've ever met.

Comments about the Transition

It shouldn't come as a surprise that I've organized my remarks today around a recurring theme and mantra that it is great to be here. First, though, I want to address some of you who might be wondering if it is great that I am here. Please understand that I recognize very well what a transition means in the presidency, the many questions, the fear, varying expectations, and the concerns about Dr. Shaar leaving and this new guy coming. His successful twelve years, and Dr. Olson's successful 27 years before that, no doubt, span most of your tenures at Minot State University. When you have such stability and long-term commitments to the institution, and such fine leaders, it is no doubt difficult to think about a change. I know what that feels like and I appreciate your concerns.

I want to assure you that I will do my utmost to make the transition as easy as possible and try to alleviate any fears or concerns. I will work to earn your trust. I can

tell you this now, but I pledge to demonstrate it in the years to come, that I respect people as people, that I communicate openly, that I respect and honor our academic freedom, that I hold personal integrity and honesty as unflinching principles for my personal life and for my life as an administrator. I also believe strongly that it is absolutely essential that we take very seriously and practice consistently our core value of respect---that “respectful people,” as our core value is described in our mission document, “have confidence in their own beliefs and values, and they acknowledge, understand, and support the rights of others to express their beliefs.” That in a nutshell describes what I believe in as well. Respect, collegiality, mutual support, and basic courtesy are qualities I practice and believe are essential for a strong institution. That’s one of the many qualities that attracted me to Minot State University. I met people and read your history and have seen those qualities-- reflecting that core value-- embedded in this fine place.

Anyway, please know that I don’t bite, that I don’t change shapes when night falls, and that there is not any cause to be overly anxious about this transition. I do want you to know too that I am committed to excellence, that I value my right to express my point of view freely, that I value our rights to disagree, that I appreciate well founded and well supported criticism, multiple points of view, and I am a strong supporter of diversity, social justice, humane action, and environmental citizenship. I’ve always been interested in: outstanding academics; curriculum and learning informed by a strong sense of place; international education and global awareness; interdisciplinary studies and experiences; strong liberal arts training; writing; technology; experiential learning; diversity and multicultural themes; an engaging life for students on campus; an engaging intellectual climate; strong student recruitment and retention efforts; athletics and a vibrant campus environment; strong community relations; effective fundraising and resource management; professional development support; and excellent alumni relations.

With my interests and values, I want to build your trust and alleviate your fear about the transition by demonstrating my devotion to the University and its core values over the long haul, to you and your vital contributions to the University’s future, and to our students, their learning, and success.

Our Mission and Core Values

Our mission, to advance knowledge, critical and creative thinking, and the vitality of community and culture” is a powerful one, one that expresses our central role in learning, our responsibility to teach and model critical thinking and creativity, and our ever-present and historical role for service to the community and to our culture.

What makes that mission are the people and their belief in the core values of Minot State. Our core values are not slick marketing terms or statements for the inside covers of view books or catalogues; they are not vision statements, nor wishful thinking. They are principles that hold intrinsic value for people inside the institution. If all of us were asked what makes Minot State University, the core values should immediately come to mind: students first, pursuit of excellence; respect, responsibility, and the acknowledgement of our culture as a learning community. Not only do those values express our intrinsic sense of this place, but those values and our mission guide and direct our decision making, our planning for the future, how we carry on our business on campus, how we teach our courses, how we conduct our research, how we serve the

community, and how we conduct our work with each other. I mention this because I believe it is very important for an institution to take its mission seriously, adhere strongly to its core values, as its people work together for the betterment of the campus and the planning for the future.

I hold very dearly our core value of students first. All of us, from the staff in the post office, to our staff who keep our campus in tip top shape, from administrators, programs directors, budget analysts, to those who recruit new students and provide career counseling, to those who coach our athletes, to those who serve in front-line offices, to the faculty who educate, advise, mentor and counsel our students in the classrooms, and all others keep students first. This doesn't imply or suggest compromising our value in our pursuit of excellence. Students should receive from us, as we should receive from them, basic courtesy. They should receive from us responsible, caring guidance, and they should receive from us exceptional instruction, engaging and meaningful learning experiences, and rigorous and challenging courses and curricula. All of these should be informed, though, by our commitment to students and our knowledge of them, our understanding of their special needs, special challenges, unique intelligences, and development.

I taught writing and literature for quite a few years and did so with a sincere concern for students and their learning. About six years after I began to teach, a colleague from biology and I began to take groups of students on study tours to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota for study-canoe trips focused on various intellectual themes and topics. It was not until I began to see students outside the classroom, walking on portages, sitting around camp fires, and helping with basic chores around camp did I realize that I didn't have the foggiest idea about what interests them and what makes them tick, although I thought all along that I knew them by what I remember about my own experiences as a student. I do recall, however, quite a few comments from my own daughter that went something like this, "Dad, you are really out of it."

Anyway, one night near the camp fire, three students, who did not know each other before going on this canoe trip, talked about parties they attended and laughed at the amount of beer various individuals consumed, and they laughed and laughed. Then they began talking about Three Stooges' movies and specific episodes. One asked the others if they remembered one particular episode and a particular song the Three Stooges would sing. They all nodded, laughed, and proceeded to stand up near the fire and in perfect unison began singing the song, interspersed with various Three Stooges sounds and gestures. This was one of those grand epiphanies in my own life, one that made me realize that I was indeed out of it, as my daughter observed, and that I didn't understand or know my students very well. From that time on, I did not assign lyrics from the Three Stooges, and I did not compromise the rigor and challenge I believed in, but I did think differently about their interests, their own development, and their individuality, which I think helped me become a better teacher.

I'll share with you one other example, too. At one point in my life I was a writing center director and tutor. It was not until I had the opportunity for this intense, personal, and highly rewarding form of instruction-- the pleasure of working directly with individual writing students and understanding their specific styles, backgrounds, and needs--did I realize that those 25 students in my conventional writing class were 25

different students. In the writing center I worked with students with dyslexia, with students with bad attitudes about writing brought on by their years of being corrected and admonished about their writing, with students with extremely low self esteem, and with students with exceptional writing abilities and self confidence, and with many in between. I worked with one student, who hated writing and had serious problems, but who wanted to succeed in college. We worked together weekly through the first year and he continued to come in to the center for help. He went on to do well in college and graduate. Now, I certainly am not taking credit for his success, but without people across campus who were willing to help him, he would not have been able to walk across the stage and get his diploma five years after he initially came to the center doubting if he had the ability to do well in freshman writing, let alone graduate from college. It was through that experience and many others working with individual students did I really come to appreciate what “students first” really means.

Commitment to and Love of Higher Education

It was from those experiences and many others that I have continued to cherish higher education, for its culture, its study, its dialogue and intellectual climate, its competition, and its stimulating environment.

For years I have been moved by a sense of a place---its humanities, its beauty, natural history, its geology, social and cultural history, its literature, insights of its science, the dynamics of its politics, the empowering role of its art and music, its social and philosophical diversity, and the role education plays in knowing, studying, and contributing to its welfare. For years, too, I have loved higher education---its devotion to study, criticism, points of view, its freedom to explore and express, its propensity to share and present, to play and compete, and even its quirkiness.

I think back on my own undergraduate work in the late Sixties and I remember a sort of inner joy and excitement about new ideas, conflicting points of view, discussions with other students and faculty, quiet hours on the second floor of the library reading and becoming engrossed in books, and the anticipation and the exhilaration of the many epiphanies, such as the grand one I had when I, by happenstance, took in my junior year in college a literature, art history, philosophy, and world history course, and it just so happened that each course proceeded on the same historical timelines, dealing with often the same major figures and social movements from different perspectives. The American and French Revolution, Rousseau, Wordsworth, art, romantic poetry, political independence, and so on. Wow! It was if I was looking at those times through multiple and colored lenses, not tracking it literally as a series of chronological events or facts. And while I knew that disciplines were somehow related, it wasn't until that semester did I realize, through an epiphany of sorts, how interrelated the disciplines are, how interrelated our areas of knowledge are and how dependent and influential they are on the history of ideas and on human behavior. The history of ideas and the evolution of our knowledge depend on our art, our science, our literature, and so on, and our ability to show students that their knowledge and understanding of those areas and those interrelationships contribute to what it means to understand, appreciate, and affect life. At that point, more than any other, did I sense and appreciate what it means to go to college. Through that we become critical thinkers, readers, writers, and contributors to

the ethical and moral welfare of our society, contributing measurably and meaningfully to the common good, to the education of our students. That's what this is all about. That's why I like what we do. That's pretty much why I'm still involved in higher education.

Service

In 1913 the faculty of the new North Dakota Normal School at Minot said that what it's all about is service, service, service. Teaching and serving students serves the common good. Founded and supported by the state, we were charged with educating teachers, who in turn would educate students and people in our region, who in turn would contribute to the livelihood of our region and state. That purpose has not changed much in my view. It is still about educating people in our region who will contribute meaningfully to the livelihood of communities. We hear a lot about economic development and colleges' and universities' respective roles. What better way to contribute to the economic development of our communities and state than to educate students in the arts, in critical thinking and communication, in science, wellness, the humanities, in mathematics. As the authors of the state-wide Roundtable initiative understand, education plays a central role in maintaining and sustaining the livelihood of our communities and region. We are not working to change our mission or divert our attention directly from our missions of education; we are, instead, fulfilling our original missions to serve the region through education and support.

We need, in my view, to continue to contribute significantly to our communities and region. It is especially important now as we are experiencing, as so many regional universities in the Midwest are experiencing, a decline of population in their traditional regions. We've got a meaningful role to fulfill our mission and provide the service, service, service that the faculty in 1913 so proudly exclaimed was our purpose.

Minot State University's evolution

It's great to be here at a time when we are as an institution evolving in name and substance. Through our long and successful history, the semantic step to change our name to a university under the leadership of Dr. Olson, our recent efforts in defining and understanding, as Dr. Shaar made explicit, what it takes substantively for a comprehensive master's 1 institution to become a university in the traditional sense of the term through enhanced scholarship and research. In my view, Minot State University's evolution is not and should not be moving toward becoming a university in a conventional sense of that term, although we have certainly accomplished a great deal in traditional scholarship and research as our academic reports make very clear. No, in my view, our role as a university, and our participation in research, is more in keeping with where we've come historically, and that is a university where students come first, where research and scholarship is effective and made more valuable by the extent to which it enhances teaching and learning. Look at so many of our faculty and staff achievements which make it clear that we shine in combining scholarship and teaching, such as our recently announced INBRE grant of 2.6 million dollars, where research and teaching are integrated with student and faculty collaboration, research, and learning.

One can look back at John Henry Cardinal Newman's lecture in the mid 19th Century, "The Idea of the University," in which he provided a compelling argument for

developing the intellect through the study of the liberal arts, and then to a recent 20th Century perspective provided by at Wendell Barry in his “The Loss of the University,” in which he warned us about the risk of our fragmentation, our specialized language in the disciplines, and argued for the integrity of our pursuits of knowledge but also for our need to make sure that our areas of knowledge and disciplines work together in the cause of advancing knowledge and teaching. The liberal arts, their interrelationships, and the unity of our university in demonstrating those interrelationships, not fragmentation and isolation, are those “university” characteristics that will, if we believe and practice them, make us a university in the strongest sense of the term.

As we continue to test and define what the university title means for us and to see what it means to “move toward becoming a university,” the word university, and its sense of wholeness and unity must not be lost. In that sense, then, we have already arrived. I do not believe, however, that the concept we’re after is one represented and modeled in Research 1 institutions. Research is certainly an important ingredient but it is not, in my view, the prevailing characteristic, where teaching and learning play second fiddle to research and scholarship. Without scholarly research, I should quickly add, however, teaching and learning aren’t very substantial. Scholarship, as we know, enlivens us, keeps our materials fresh and current, helps us to take learning to the highest level, and contributes to the advancement of knowledge in our society. Again, our institution-- its history, its development, and its values--is a university in that the disciplines are integrated, that liberal arts and student learning are valued first and foremost, the extent to which we are able to integrate teaching and research and service effectively, dramatically, and powerfully is how we know that we’ve actually become a university---a comprehensive, regional university, serving the students and region and beyond, emphasizing a devotion to place---local and global places, contributing to development, and making our students’ learning experiences without equal in the state---far better, in my humble and slightly prejudiced opinion, than the Research 1 institutions can do, far better than vocational and community colleges can do, and far better than strictly virtual online institutions can do.

Knowing this institution, its mission, its accomplishments and achievements, and its core values, I’d say that we are first rate, first class in so many respects. And my job will be to make that known and work with you to make sure that we continue to strengthen our institution to represent that first-rate classification well. We are not second rate, we are not second class, and while for some we might not be the first choice or thought of as first rate, it is up to us to demonstrate and show people that we are first rate and that we should be should be first choice.

Consider our Antarctica study, magnetic material research, the leukemia research, the survey of female police officers, our Rural Center for Criminal Justice, our North Dakota Center for Persons with Disability, the service learning experience in Guatemala, the study trips to Tanzania, Singapore, Italy and Greece, the many faculty presentations and publications, the many staff contributions and achievements, the INBRE award, and the incredible number of student achievements and accomplishments. This is a first-rate, first class institution, indeed. It’s up to us to keep that going and to make it known.

Beautiful Campus

It's great to see all of you here and to start seeing students arriving for the start of a new year. The campus has been fairly empty since I arrived, but I have had the good opportunity to tour our fine and beautiful facilities, and beautiful they are. Our University has made tremendous strides in creating a physical plant with buildings and spaces of exceptional quality. Goodness, Old Main, the Nicole Nelson Hall, Hartnet Hall, the Science Building, our Dome, the renovated Student Union, Memorial Hall, and the campus proper are beautiful. And the Gordon B. Olson Library, for goodness sake, is gorgeous. No wonder Larry Greenwood walks around with a proud smile every time I see him. The only problem I've encountered so far is when I went to the library one day to get a tour and got lost over behind the maintenance buildings. I realized I was lost, and not to suggest that the new president was lost, I walked back to the administration building appearing resolute and confident but wondering how in the world I could have got lost.

Challenges to Higher Education and MSU

Those accomplishments and our beautiful campus, though, help but do not allow us to just keep going without change and development. There are far too many challenges out there to assume that by merely resting on our laurels and continuing to do what we've always done, that enrollment will remain strong, that our funding base in the state will remain strong, that our role in the state system will remain strong. Online teaching, competition for students, accelerated courses and programs, community college competition and expansion, and of course the declining numbers in our region are issues of concern but not cause for pessimism. Our powerful mission is cause enough to address together the future and these challenges with optimism. Those of you who attended my presentation and heard my response to the question posed to the presidential finalists will remember that I concluded that the future is bright because we are a vibrant, public comprehensive institution, marked by notable faculty and staff achievements, increasing enrollment, an innovative ability to adapt in many ways to challenges. Now nearly five months later and with 49 days on the job, and after countless meetings and visits, continued reading and learning about the institution, I can say wholeheartedly that MSU is indeed a vibrant institution. It will be a great pleasure and honor to work with you to keep the university vibrant, build on its many strengths, address with optimism our challenges and future.

Quality of Life in North Dakota

One other things I've got to mention, and that is about North Dakota and this place in which we live and work.

In June my wife and I needed to go to Kermit, Texas, to visit her brother. Kermit is in west Texas. I was standing outside talking to someone from Kermit. As we spoke, sweat was running down our faces, the air was full of the smell of oil, and the dry wind was blowing dust across the yard, and the person with whom I was speaking, squinting from the intense sun and wind, with large beads of sweat forming on his and my forehead in the 100 plus temperature, and admitting that he'd never been in North Dakota, he asked me why I would want to move to North Dakota. "Isn't it awful cold up there?"

When I was in Aberdeen at Northern State, I attended a local artist's show, and during his reception he made an interesting comment about the stereotypical and

misinformed view that the plains of the Dakotas are dull, uninteresting, lacking in beauty. He said that what drives his art is the immense beauty of the plains---the subtlety of color in prairie grass, the movement and the contrasts brought on by the gigantic blue and changing skies, and the signs of the people. He said that he enjoyed the artistic challenge to counter and refute those misinformed views held by those who haven't learned to observe and see the immense beauty. Annie Dillard, a writer whom I have admired and read for many years, reminds us about the need to look closely and to learn how to observe. From what I've observed over the years and just recently in North Dakota, it is clear that we live in a beautiful place.

Conclusion

I want to say thank you for all your courtesy and support for me and my wife over the past few months and recently with my move and start of the job. You have been most welcoming and kind. I look forward to meeting and talking to all of you and to working together to keep Minot State University strong and vibrant. I plan to be out and about with coffee in hand and be accessible and visible throughout my presidency. I will try my best to work with you to keep the institution going in its positive direction and in continuing to do what we're all devoted to, and that is student learning, growth, and development. What better way to express what we're all about but with this line in our in our statement of core values, "All feel a special connection as a valued member of the community." It is indeed "great to be here!"

Thanks so much for your kind attention.

David Fuller