

Faculty Convocation

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Good morning and welcome. It is a great honor for me to address the faculty today in such an historical venue. Stockbridge Hall, named for the fifth president of this institution, was erected during one of the great building booms in the history of the campus, during the first two decades of the previous century. This auditorium, built in 1914 to honor William Henry Bowker, a member of the initial class of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, who went on to become president of a fertilizer company and a trustee of the College, was the principal performance space on campus. There may be some who see an intimate connection between university administration and fertilizer, but I'll leave further speculation on that topic to you.

This august building has stood the test of time, and when I found out that I was going to deliver a speech in it to the faculty, I assumed that this tradition dated to the era of Bowker or Stockbridge or some other celebrated dignitary from the early years of the institution. Imagine my surprise when I learned that the "annual faculty convocation" did not even date back to the twentieth century! I suppose the conclusion that I draw from this experience is that it is never too late to begin a venerable tradition.

Despite the brief history of the faculty convocation, I am indeed honored to extend its longevity initially by one year. Indeed, I hope that my remarks today will be the first of many times we will get together to celebrate the campus and its outstanding teachers, scholars, and researchers. I am grateful and pleased to be here as chancellor of this fine institution and fully cognizant of the great responsibility I have for assisting us in moving toward even great accomplishments in the future.

I was told that the chancellor's address was intended to be a sort of "state-of-the-union" summary. Since I've been on campus exactly six weeks, it will be difficult for me to give you as full a summary as you deserve. Instead, I am going to recount for you my initial impressions of

the campus and suggest to you some of the areas I believe need attention if we are going to move the flagship campus forward to greater prominence in higher education in the state and in the nation.

First my impressions. Perhaps the greatest asset I've found on this campus is its faculty, and in my initial contacts with faculty members from various disciplines, I have been impressed by their accomplishments, their dedication to their work and to UMass, and their positive outlook on the future. Many of you may have heard me speak of excellence in research universities, and in doing so I often cite Clark Kerr's perspective from 1968. He stated: "If you make good decisions on your faculty, and every other decision is made badly, you have a great university. You make every other decision well, but badly choose your faculty, you've a poor university. The quality of a university is the quality of its faculty." I am convinced that Kerr was correct in his assessment, and I have worked hard over the years to make certain the parameters are in place for recruiting and retaining the best faculty. I plan to do the same at UMass.

A second positive impression I have gained comes from the student body. It is active and engaged, and best of all it is getting better all the time. This year, as you probably know, we had the most applications in the history of the campus: almost 29,000 individuals applied for admission, and as a consequence, we were able to accept only 64% of the applicants, the lowest percentage in several years. It is also the best class we have ever attracted, if we assess it by the traditional academic indicators. The class of 2012 has the highest SAT scores and the highest grade point average of any cohort in our history. Yet it is among the most diverse classes in the recent past, containing 22% minority students. While numbers never tell the whole story, I am delighted that the reputation of the University allows us to select and enroll such outstanding students.

A third favorable impression involves construction, although I have to admit it has not always been an unmitigated positive for me – or probably for many of you either. On my first day walking to work, I found myself suddenly confronted by a ditch. Undaunted and refusing to retreat to a safer path (and also ignorant of how to find another route to my office), I took a few steps back and leapt from the precipice, across the abyss, to safety on the other side.

This ditch, in which a conduit was being placed, no matter how much angst it caused me on my first day, is a necessary part of improving the campus. Indeed, any campus that does not have cranes, construction crews, mud, and open ditches is moribund and unprepared for the future. I know that we have spent several hundred million dollars on construction and renovation over the past few years, and I was tremendously gratified to learn during my first month here that we will have several hundreds of millions more to expend on vitally needed projects over the next decade. We are thus in the middle of a boom in construction that rivals the days in which Stockbridge Hall was constructed and Bowker Auditorium was the gathering point for culture at the MAC.

I have had many other positive impressions during my first weeks.

- I have found a dedicated and talented staff that make innumerable contributions to the welfare of the campus
- I have met members of the local legislative group who are tremendously supportive of UMass and will continue to fight for the Amherst campus
- I have been introduced to a governor who appreciates public higher education and shows his support with dollars and not just with words
- I have gotten to know alumni and donors who are proud of the institution and want to participate in its prosperity

These initial positive impressions have been most gratifying for me. They reinforce the oft repeated claim that our campus is the foremost public research university in New England. In turn, all of us in this room should be proud of this achievement. But we should not be content with it. I believe – and I hope that you share my belief – that the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts should be more than a regional power; it should aspire to the upper echelon of national public universities.

Thus I come to areas in which I believe we must make progress, sometimes substantial progress, if we are going to assume our place as one of the premier public institutions of higher education in the country.

- Research activity is one of the standard measures of academic excellence in universities aspiring to national prominence. If our departments are to gain a higher profile against their peers, they must attain new and higher levels of published research and scholarship, as well as grant activity. In the areas in which we compete for grants from federal agencies, it is essential that we position ourselves appropriately. Especially important is the building of interdisciplinary research teams, and our ability to take advantage of campus resources, as well as resources in the UMass system and elsewhere in the Commonwealth. We have a tremendously productive faculty, and it is important that we in the administration provide support for them, so that they continue to improve and succeed in their research and scholarship.
- Fundraising is a second area of great opportunity for us to improve our national status. We should be very pleased that in the turmoil of recent years we have maintained and even increased our annual totals. We do, however, have room for significant growth. A renewed and concerted effort is therefore needed in fundraising, and although a successful search for a new Vice Chancellor for Development will help considerably, we will need the assistance of many offices and individuals on campus, and off campus, if we are going to build an excellent fundraising operation at UMass.
- It came to my attention that we have not communicated well what we do, who we are, and why we are a good investment. In the minds of many, there is confusion about our identity and mission. We must clarify these matters quickly and decisively as part of a broad communication strategy that will enhance our profile with donors, with the legislature and other government officials, with the general public, with alumni, with other institutions of higher education, and with individuals and groups on the campus. We have a great story here, and making sure our key constituents know our story, and support our university is a critical factor in our future success. To this end I have appointed Tom Milligan to be our Executive Vice Chancellor for University Relations,

and he has already begun to rethink how we communicate on all levels and to help the campus use its resources effectively to reach its goals.

- I have been examining our administration and our administrative structures at the central campus level. First let me say that I view administration as a facilitator of teaching and research, not as an end in itself. Administration exists primarily for the sake of faculty and students, and we have value only insofar as we enhance their activities. To be a more effective administration, I believe that we should undertake a number of modifications in our present central administration, either to emulate best practices of the finest public research institutions in the country or to align units for greater effectiveness.
- From the visits I have made to the colleges I believe that graduate education needs attention. At present we are not always attracting the best graduate students owing to the level of our stipends. Many of our graduate programs are smaller than they ought to be if we are going to improve our standing among public research institutions. As you know, there is no outstanding public research university that does not have a fully developed and vibrant graduate school. We need to make certain our programs support our enhanced vision and mission.
- At the same time public institutions have an obligation to educate undergraduates and to do it well. I have seen and heard a great deal about our devotion to undergraduate teaching. But I do note that we have things we can do better. As a flagship public institution there is a natural propensity to have large introductory courses in the first year; yet we have no program in freshman seminars, which can balance the alienation of the large lecture venue. We have first-class research occurring on campus, and in many instances undergraduates participate in the process; yet I find on the web site devoted to Research Experience for Undergraduates only a handful of programs. I have heard some discussion of general education on the campus; yet when I have examined the requirements, I found them to be traditional in their scope and content. Today I call on the faculty to seek an innovative, comprehensive approach to general education, one that will put us in the vanguard of college campuses. You can be assured of my assistance in your efforts.

- I have stated already how impressed I have been at the construction boom of the past few years and the construction that is currently in the planning or funded stage. Still we need to do more. I have been touring the colleges over the past six weeks and some of the space I have seen is simply unacceptable. We need to develop plans for projects already funded, but also for projects not yet conceived. We will never achieve our goals while first-class faculty members have to work and teach in substandard laboratories, offices, and classrooms.
- Finally, I come to what has been called “faculty renewal,” which has been closely associated with a program known as Amherst 250 over the past few years. I fully support efforts to increase the size of the faculty, but now that we have distributed positions that address the most desperate instructional needs, we must consider how we are going to progress. Faculty positions are perhaps the most precious items a university possesses, and if we are going to accomplish the goal of moving this campus to the upper echelon of public institutions of higher education, we must proceed strategically. I would like to see us grant positions in areas in which we do or can excel, where we can become a national power. I would like to see us become the national center for a given topic, or the place that the best faculty and students studying that topic congregate. I would not like to see us simply add positions to reach a numerical goal. Thus I do not understand this important initiative as mere “faculty renewal,” which suggests a continuation of what we have always done, but as faculty reinvention.

I have mentioned eight areas in which I believe we need to improve and act with strategic vision. I hasten to add that other dimensions of the campus are extremely important to me, and if I have not mentioned them specifically, it may be because we have already devoted considerable attention to them in the past few years. With regard to diversity and inclusion, for example, we have done a remarkable job with recent faculty hires, and, as I mentioned earlier, 22% of our incoming class is from minority groups. Our undergraduate population is thus approaching – in terms of percentages – the composition of minorities in the Commonwealth. We must continue along this path, making certain that access for all prospective students is a guiding principle of our campus. In contrast to the private institutions of the state, UMass Amherst must always be

the pathway of opportunity for students no matter what their background. We are proud of this role and will always embrace it as the essence of our institutional commitment.

Similarly, as the land-grant institution, we must continue our efforts to provide service for the citizens of the Commonwealth. We should pay special attention to the communities in which we reside, and to the region in which we are situated. I am heartened that we already have an entire array of connections with the city of Springfield, and I hope that we can continue to develop initiatives that bring benefit to both the city and the campus.

Becoming a premier public research university is not easy, and when I have broached the topic in various meetings over the past few months, I have occasionally been met with skepticism or with reasons why it is unlikely to occur. “The system does not give us enough funding,” someone claims. Another tells me that we are too far from the center of things in Boston; a third blames politicians, who customarily ignore the flagship campus. Still others regard the deprecation of higher education in the Commonwealth as an insurmountable barrier.

My response to these comments has been that we must leave the past behind: we cannot bemoan the selection of the site of the medical school or the formation of the five-campus system or our location 90 miles to the west of the capital; these are facts, and, contrary to some opinions, they are not uniformly disadvantageous to us. We must seek to use our location and our constitution as a flagship to our best advantage.

Emblematic for what we must do and the spirit we must regain is the crew team from our campus that competed in July of 1871 in a regatta against the purportedly superior squads from Harvard and Brown. Our entry engaged in a fierce training regime, overcame enormous odds, ultimately scoring a major upset, and, in doing so, established a new record time for the course. Evidently the President of our ancestor institution, William Smith Clark, was so excited about the victory that he plunged into the Connecticut River to greet the triumphant crew. Later he drove his team of horses back to campus in a frenzy to announce the astounding news.

The spirit and determination of those young men is what we must recapture as a collective if we are going to be successful in our aspirations. Like a crew team, however, we must act in a coordinated fashion, all pulling in the same direction with the identical purpose. My words and direction may assist us, but only with the activities of the entire campus and its many friends can we achieve our desired place among the finest public institutions of higher education.

When that day arrives, I will be delighted to celebrate our collective triumph with a dip in the Connecticut River and an announcement to the campus from atop a frenzied stallion. I might even try to jump that ditch on horseback.

I therefore invite you to take leave of past grievances and misfortunes, to engage in the teaching, scholarship, and research that will move us forward, and to work with me in the coming years to achieve greatness for the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Thank you.