

Cultivating Student Learning and Success: The Future of New Paltz

Inaugural Address

Thank you, Professor Meyer.

Thank you all for being here to inaugurate the next chapter in the history of the State University of New York at New Paltz, a history dating to the 1830s when students learned the classics in an academy on the banks of the nearby Wallkill River. I am pleased to welcome Chancellor Zimpher, Chairman McCall, Trustees Lewin and O'Brien, members of the College Council, Foundation Directors, students, faculty and staff, alumni, community members, elected officials, college presidents and official delegates, friends, and family.

I am sure that an inauguration is a proud and humbling experience for every college president. But inaugurations are not at their heart about the person who becomes president. Rather, they are about the enduring life of higher education and a college that we love, and about renewing and celebrating our commitments as educators.

To New Paltz faculty, staff, students, and fellow administrators, including those joining by webcast, thank you for taking part in this event. Know how proud I am of your excellent work. Thank you to the international students, student athletes, and student musicians who have enriched today's ceremony.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues, some of whom have traveled from out of state and from institutions where I once served, including my earliest academic appointment as a biology faculty member. You have played key roles in my journey, and I am grateful and honored that you are here. The presence of presidents and official delegates from other colleges and universities reminds us that U.S. higher education is a grand ecosystem extending beyond each of our individual campuses.

I tip my hat to the seven past presidents of the modern college at New Paltz, represented today by Alice Chandler and Steven Poskanzer. We are indebted to you for your hard work and dedication that forged a better institution than each of you inherited. My aim is to build on your legacy and to leave this great College even greater than it is today.

I want to thank immediate and extended family members for joining us, and for your love and support. This would have been a proud day for my parents, and I wish they were with us. I am especially proud of my son Paul and daughter Jenna, and happy they can be here. My wife Sandy has been my love, confidante, and supporter for more than 40 years. She has trekked with me from Michigan to a ranch in the Namib Desert of southern Africa, to Minnesota, Montana, Wisconsin, and now to the wild and woolly lands of New York. She has been patient and unwavering in her support throughout my career. Her willingness to share her great insights has guided me through many challenges.

The Inaugural Planning Committee has focused on activities that celebrate the College and its values. Yesterday, we showcased student scholarly work and the benefits students derive from collaborating with faculty who excel as teachers and scholars. Last night's presentation by Debra Humphreys underscored our commitment to liberal education.

Tomorrow's benefit concert by Vladimir Feltsman, our own University Professor and internationally renowned concert pianist, reflects several key values: the centrality of the arts at New Paltz, our commitment to excellence, and the importance of philanthropy to our future. We began our inaugural events two nights ago with a reception for student leaders at the president's residence, and will close on Sunday with a student barbecue. Bookending our celebration with student events showcases our primary mission and purpose—educating students.

In my remaining time today, I will share my vision for the future of New Paltz. I will weave together four themes: my leadership views and values... the strengths and values of New Paltz... the national context in which we will labor... and my thoughts about student learning and success. Our central goals for the future will emerge from these themes, along with the essential work to realize those goals. I will develop these ideas in a metaphorical frame that will become evident as this address unfolds.

My vision draws on what I have heard from this campus community about what New Paltz means to them; advice I have sought; the observations of our accreditors and others; and my own judgments.

I am unwavering in my commitment to our now longstanding tradition as a selective, high-quality, residential, public comprehensive college. We value liberal arts and sciences **and** professional programs; undergraduate and graduate programs; teaching and learning, scholarship, and service; and we are committed to supporting our

communities and the region. We will advance by building on the vision points that have served us so well the last seven years.

But we also must recognize that public higher education lives in a world that has changed dramatically, will continue to change, and will almost certainly **not** return to the way it was, even recently. A basic tenet of biology is that in the face of environmental change, organisms can move, change, or die. The College is not leaving New Paltz, nor do we intend to disappear. We must evolve to fulfill the promise entrusted to us, and to ensure that New Paltz continues to distinguish itself in the face of economic, political, social, demographic, and global forces shaping the nation and the world.

The 1960s book *The Academic Marketplace* used feudal titles to characterize, with some intended humor, the roles adopted by different academic leaders. In one of my first administrative roles, a colleague referred to me as the Yeoman Farmer, a type described in *The Academic Marketplace* as “the pillar of the university’s workaday program.” I was pleased by that reference, perhaps because it was not one of the less-flattering titles like the Robber Barron, or the Lord of the Mountain Fief.

I was also proud to be called a Yeoman Farmer because I think a lot about the lessons I learned from my uncles and aunts from working on their Ohio dairy farms. These include things like the value of hard work... the importance of cooperation ... of finding reward in both the process of our work and the product ... of recognizing that sometimes a day’s work will include walking through manure, or shoveling it... of knowing to be patient while your crops are growing, but to act decisively when the bull has broken out and is on the loose ...the importance of speaking plainly and truthfully... the realization that our destiny is affected by forces we can control and some we cannot.

These and other lessons serve me well in my professional roles.

This is a good year to think further about the relationship between farming and higher education, as it marks the 150th anniversary of the first Land Grant Act of 1862 or the Morrill Act that established land grant universities. New Paltz is not a Land Grant institution, but I will borrow a line from Chancellor Zimpher in invoking the Morrill Act

here because it speaks to many of our values. The Chancellor has challenged those of us in SUNY to re-imagine the land grant ideal for the demands of a global 21st century. The Land Grant Act explicitly promoted **both** liberal and practical education—a view at the heart and soul of New Paltz and our future. The authors of this act could not have appreciated 150 years ago how we must unite liberal education and practical education if we are to prepare reflective citizens who can succeed in and contribute to a complex, dynamic, global society. A key to our future is making liberal education practical, and practical education liberal.

The Morrill Act recognized the importance of educating citizens of all socioeconomic classes, a new view in 1862 but one at the heart of the longstanding egalitarian spirit of New Paltz. The Morrill Act envisioned a public role for higher education, to support and enrich our communities. Our vision of New Paltz includes serving as a cultural and intellectual hub in the Hudson Valley and meeting regional needs, consistent with the strategic plan for the SUNY system, *The Power of SUNY*.

Our work as educators must be to grow and cultivate knowledge, learning, and well-prepared graduates. Higher education is being challenged to increase the number of college graduates if our nation is to succeed as a democracy in a competitive global economy. New Paltz certainly must grow our contributions to this agenda, in part by continuing to raise our already impressive retention and graduation rates, which are among the reasons for our growing reputation and recognition.

But those who speak about the need for more college graduates are too often silent about **what** and **how much** students learn—that is, the issue of educational **quality**. Large-scale factory farming has emphasized quantity of production at low cost, while arguably paying inadequate attention to quality. In contrast, smaller-scale, community-based farming emphasizes hands-on approaches, sustainability, and careful attention to the relationship between method and a high-quality product. This kind of agriculture is experiencing a resurgence in the Hudson Valley, and connects us most intimately to our history as part of the farming breadbasket of New York City.

We imperil the mission and purpose of New Paltz if we also do not attend to high quality and the approaches that yield it. This is our niche, and we must continue to excel in it while we also respond to the imperative to expand access and completion.

Last night, Debra Humphreys spoke about the outcomes of a high-quality education, such as knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, the ability to inquire and synthesize, to identify and solve problems... to know at least one area in depth...to write and speak clearly... to work effectively in diverse groups...to develop a clear sense of social and personal responsibility.

Collectively, these are no small intellectual feats, yet ensuring that our students develop such capacities is our central purpose. Increasing evidence and many voices raise the concern that too many students graduate without developing these capabilities in sufficient depth and breadth. The most elite institutions in the U.S. are not immune to that criticism, nor are top-tier public institutions like New Paltz.

The authors of the recent book *We're Losing Our Minds* emphasized that meaningful learning is a process of biological change in the brain, resulting from biological work that expends biological energy. Neurobiologists can map, measure, and visualize the learning that produces—and is produced by—changes in the structure and function of brain tissue.

But these authors argue that too much of the “learning” experienced by college and university students is routine, does not challenge the brain mentally and physiologically, and does not produce major biological change. The learning we aim for engages students in deeper challenges like reflection, analysis, and the making of meaning.

We know well the learning experiences that result in such transformations. Along with engaged teaching and learning in all its forms, they include undergraduate research, internships, honors, living-learning communities, writing-intensive courses, service learning, culminating senior “capstones,” and international learning—both study abroad for domestic students and the enrichment that international students bring to our campus. These involve close interaction with faculty and fellow students, and result in

frequent feedback on performance. They demand that students devote time and effort to purposeful tasks, and that they take responsibility for their own learning. They provide opportunities for students to apply their learning in different settings.

These are the experiences that reconfigure our students' brains. Notably, many of these activities are best offered by faculty who are both actively engaged in their disciplines and committed to student learning. Clearly, these are our expectations for New Paltz faculty, and supporting and recognizing innovation and accomplishment at these interfaces of scholarship and student learning will be among our highest priorities.

I will share a conversation I had a few months ago with a New Paltz alumnus from the 1970s, he is now an internationally known professor at a top university. He told me about his experience as an undergraduate student researcher at New Paltz. He had been working on a research problem, had gathered data from published sources, analyzed them, and charted the results. He showed the graph to his professor, who reflected, and I quote, "This is very interesting. I don't think anyone has ever reported such a result before—no one has known this." Decades later, this alumnus recalled this as **the** crystallizing moment when his life course was set.

Life-changing intellectual events such as these often occur in the learning situations I have just described. Such experiences are the hallmark of an exceptional education, and our goal must be to ensure that all New Paltz students have them.

Thus, our single most important challenge is improving the student experience. For New Paltz to continue along the path of increasingly high quality and rigor, and for us to expand our contributions to society, our students and their learning must be the focus of our attention.

We will refine and expand current strengths to create more of these transformative experiences, along with supporting continued innovation in teaching and learning. This work will be led by our new provost, joining us this summer, in collaboration with faculty, deans, chairs, and support staff. Advancing such academic goals will be a

major focus for our private fund-raising efforts, our priorities for investing new tuition revenue, and our support and incentives for faculty work.

We will continue to capitalize on our spectacular advantages of place in the Hudson Valley, with rich cultural, historical, artistic, and natural resources that create a regional classroom, laboratory, and studio. Our proximity to one of the world's great metropolitan areas, itself an international gateway, is a tremendous resource.

Another great strength is our commitment to diversity. In his book *In Defense of Food*, Michael Pollan pointed out the loss of diversity in the replacement of family-owned farms by modern industrial agriculture. The typical Iowa farm of the early 20th century grew more than a dozen animal and plant species, but a 21st century factory farm often raises only two.

The metaphorical farm I have been referring to no doubt carries some nostalgia. But the New Paltz commitment to human and cultural diversity and inclusiveness dates back a century and is anything but nostalgic. Diverse students continue to thrive and enjoy great success here. They come from many nations, different socioeconomic levels, historically underrepresented groups, diverse religious beliefs and political views, and identities that our society has marginalized or made invisible. We aim to become more inclusive and equitable, and to value opportunities to learn from each other. While New Paltz has been recognized for the success of our diverse students, racially charged incidents on our campus this autumn taught us that we—like most organizations in the U.S.—have areas to improve in becoming the institution we aspire to be.

Silos are the skyscrapers in Middle America's farmland where I grew up. The traditional silo is a vertical cylinder used to store chopped alfalfa or other feed for cattle during the winter. As farms have grown, so too have silos—in number and size, but the characteristic has remained that these structures are unconnected to each other.

You've probably anticipated my reference to the metaphor of "silo thinking" or "silo organization," often applied to academe. My conversations with our students tell me that many of them are puzzled and frustrated by the silos they experience here. The silo metaphor often targets academic departments and specializations and their lack of connection to each other. It also captures the limited connection among functions such as academic affairs and student life. And it is reflected in the way that we segregate student learning as in-classroom and out-of-classroom, and privilege one over the other. Silo thinking leads us to forget that we are all teachers. Students learn from **all** of us about how to interact with each other and the world, and we must be purposeful about those lessons. Certainly the notion that all learning is biological should make us cautious about putting mind and body into separate silos.

We must engage this issue by asking and answering the simple question: What is best for our students? The opportunities and challenges they will face are not defined or bounded by discipline or function. Preparing our students for their futures in the best way possible means that we step out of the silos we have built, and work together. This direction is responsive to the advice I was given this past autumn... to demand teamwork of all members of the College. The book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* begins with the following imperative: "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare."

We have great examples of such teamwork... in current interdisciplinary programs, emerging programs at the interface of art and technology, our Chinese language and culture living-learning community, and the actions being taken by several faculty and several student affairs personnel to develop new programs that integrate academics and student life. We are implementing a co-curricular transcript that along with the traditional academic transcript will showcase our students' diverse learning and accomplishment. We must aggressively pursue other ways to work together across the various parts of our mission, and that includes no longer placing liberal education and practical or professional education in separate silos.

Symbolic of this goal of building a more cohesive, shared mission, this autumn we will begin a new tradition. We will launch the academic year with a single gathering of **all** employees and a single State of the College address.

The Land Grant Act explicitly described the role of universities in extending knowledge and expertise to benefit our communities. New Paltz is **the** public university in the mid-Hudson Valley, and I am committed to our public mission and to engaging with and supporting the region. This includes increasing our research on problems of regional significance; using our convening power to generate meaningful dialogue; continuing to enrich the thriving arts communities in the Hudson Valley; supporting economic development; and sustaining our partnership with community colleges. We must revamp our graduate programs and how they are offered, to better serve regional needs.

My maternal grandfather began farming early in the last century. His farms and traditions have now been passed on through three more generations, and I am honored that some of those cousins are with us today. They have been successful at the same time that unrelenting economic and cultural forces led to the demise of many family farms in America. The fortune of good place has helped my relatives, just as it benefits New Paltz. But beyond that, their durability has been rooted in being fiscally prudent, and in attending to daily and seasonal work and challenges, including taking small, regular steps to do things better. This is the routine, sometimes grinding work of “tending the farm.” They also planned for the future and took big, exciting steps—building a new barn, buying more land, making major investments in technology.

New Paltz too must pay attention to multiple horizons, both getting better in small steps and taking on large and long-term initiatives. “Tending the farm” for us will mean evaluating and revising processes and structures that have not kept pace with changing times, and developing new ones to meet new needs. We must do this throughout our organization, in instruction and instructional support, advising, course scheduling, governance, hiring practices, training, personnel development, and technology. This will mean carefully assessing **how** we do our work, indeed which work warrants our focus, time, and energy. Such improvements will keep us focused on our

core mission. They will help us become better at cultivating talent and potential among faculty and staff and leadership at all levels of the institution. This work will demand good ideas, patience, and community. Much of it will not be glorious, and probably some of it will feel like shoveling manure. But it is essential to our continuing success.

To ensure our future, we must diversify our revenue sources and attend carefully to the balance sheet of revenue and cost. We will advocate with state leaders for better taxpayer support for public higher education. Yet every indication for the near future points to constrained public and family finances. As a result, we must keep pursuing ways to be increasingly economical and efficient.

We must seed a culture of giving at New Paltz, and we are in the early stages of a major comprehensive fund-raising campaign. I am excited to undertake this work—to build relationships with alumni and donors, to share my enthusiasm for New Paltz, and to showcase the distinctive ways that we transform students' lives and enrich the region. It is rewarding to meet alumni—including many here in this room—who love New Paltz, have done well in their lives, and trace their success and happiness to their New Paltz education. These are the alums who want to give back so that younger generations can reap the same benefits. This work is very much a process of cultivation. It must start when our students first arrive on campus, so that they know how they benefit from the generosity of friends of the college and generations of students who came before them. Some of this work will bear near-term fruit, but much of it will produce benefits that only our successors will know.

Another way that we look to the future is through campus improvements that benefit our students and our ability to fulfill our mission. The renovation of the Sojourner Truth Library and Wooster Hall, the construction of a new science building, and several grounds projects will occupy much of our attention these next few years. We undertake all such work with a careful focus on sustainability, both in process and in outcome. Our campus environment matters very much for our present and our future, and we will aggressively pursue new facilities to ensure our future vitality, even though the state's economic forecasts are uncertain.

Next year, we will engage in a strategic planning process to guide our future. This process will be consultative, drawing on the creativity and experience of our talented and diverse community. We will **not** begin with a blank slate, but instead our focus will be to refine and operationalize the vision points that have served us so well, and to prioritize our work to achieve the goals I have shared today. I wrote about many of these goals in my letter of application for the presidency. They have been reinforced by all that I have learned since then.

The most critical of these are:

- Grow the quality of our academic and student life and become increasingly focused on students and their success;
- Make our strong programs in honors, undergraduate research, international learning, and other areas even stronger;
- Integrate a major focus on fund-raising into our institutional culture;
- Direct more effort to serving as an intellectual and cultural hub;
- Strengthen leadership development;
- Increase our efficiency and effectiveness;
- Create a campus climate that is increasingly inclusive and equitable;
- Strengthen community, shared mission and value, and integration across the College.

These are the priorities that will help us cultivate student learning and success, the key to the future of New Paltz.

As I near the end of this address, I direct a message to our students. Thank you for being part of today's ceremony. I hope that my message helps you understand the seriousness of purpose with which we approach your education.

The educational vision that I laid out today places considerable responsibility on each of you for your education. I spoke recently with a New Paltz graduate student who came here after earning her undergraduate degree at a private, Ivy League college. She believes that the quality of an undergraduate education at New Paltz is every bit as good as hers. Why? She has seen that students here are encouraged and pushed in so many ways to get involved in the diverse learning opportunities that we offer, **and**

that New Paltz students seize those opportunities. A higher education policy expert wrote recently that **student effort** must be one of the elements in the equation used to measure educational quality. Your effort and your success are proof of that assertion. Keep up the great work.

I will look forward to seeing you at Sunday's barbecue. Cooking and serving food for our students feels like the right way to end this inauguration, a natural extension of today's themes of farming, food production, and higher education.

In closing, I want to convey my pride at being part of such an exceptional college college and dedicated campus community, and of one of the nation's great state university systems. I am grateful to all of those involved in last year's presidential search, and to those who have entrusted me with this leadership responsibility: the New Paltz College Council and members of the presidential search committee, especially Ken Abt, who chaired the search, Chancellor Zimpher, members of the Board of Trustees. Thank you for the confidence you have placed in me, at a very challenging but exciting time for public higher education and for New Paltz. I hope you will join me in the rewarding work ahead.