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## Convocation : 2003 : 09 : 24 : Paige Mulhollan, "A Matter of Choice"

Paige Mullhollan

Karen A. White

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PAIGE MULHOLLAN "MATTER OF CHOICE"

September 13, 2003---5th draft, USF Convocation---approx. reading time, 21.5 min.

It is fitting that an institution of higher education begin its academic year with a convocation, particularly one that brings together its faculty, students, administration, Board of Control, and citizens of its community. It is also fitting, and doubly so in your case, that convocation provides an opportunity for congratulations from those outside the institution and a renewal of pride and commitment from those within. In less than 40 years, you have brought this campus from a very modest center offering limited extension courses to a major campus with over 4,000 students enrolled in a wide variety of courses and programs. Some of you have been aboard for the entire ride.

For the veterans among you, as well as newer arrivals, convocation should include remembrance of your origins: your community, the City of St. Petersburg, brought you into existence and has nourished you in the years since. The phrase "A great city

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deserves a great university” had practical meaning for city leaders, and it is fitting that you have remembered some of them in naming your endowed professorships.

There seems to be general agreement among you that the first era of your history is ending and a new one beginning. You have chosen new campus leadership after a year spent seriously considering your future goals. You enjoy new, though not fully defined, autonomy within the University of South Florida. In the words of one of your recent publications, you seem “poised to become a great metropolitan university campus with a distinctive identity”. Nevertheless, I think that few of you would argue that you have truly “arrived” at where you are going; in some respects, your work has just begun.

The history of development on branch campuses in the United States is not very comforting. I noted that in the many discussions of separate accreditation during the past year campus leaders and

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media alike have mentioned the absence of a true example of your situation. While Arizona State University West has been cited, it has not been widely accepted as a valid model. I think it is in fact much more similar than you think, with some problems you will do well to avoid and some successes you might well emulate.

I was Provost at ASU when serious consideration of a branch on Phoenix's west side began, and the Arizona Board of Regents assigned me the task of conducting a feasibility study for such a branch. During the course of our study, it became clear to me that Westside legislators and civic leaders from sizable suburbs such as Glendale and Peoria demanded a branch and that the population in the area and its distance from the main campus justified a campus. Nevertheless, a majority of the Board of Regents initially opposed a branch, many if not most of the ASU faculty opposed it, the University of Arizona opposed it—it seemed some days that nobody really wanted a Westside campus. It ultimately happened because the community demanded it, and the political

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representatives of the area successfully brought legislative pressure on the Board to approve its establishment. By that time I was Executive Vice President of ASU and now received the “additional duty” of serving as ASU West’s first Chief Operating Officer. At the time I wasn’t certain it was much of an honor. The branch started life in unused public school buildings, using main-campus faculty on overload, and offered only an unrelated group of upper-division courses in order to avoid competing with the nearby community college. During the first year we recruited a Campus Dean and a charter faculty, contracted for and completed a campus master plan, and won a separate appropriation from the legislature to insure west campus support from ASU. In the early years, ASU limited Westside autonomy wherever it could. It even prohibited using a logo that said “ASU West”, insisting that all references to the branch say “ASU West Campus”. But the Campus Dean proved tough and able (I had moved to WSU by that time) and community support remained resolute. Today, ASU West enrolls

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more than 7,000 students, has an independent statutory budget, and is separately accredited by the North Central Association. During the past two years, it is the only unit of ASU (which now also includes an Eastside branch) that has successfully met its tuition targets. For a number of years ASU West has enjoyed substantial autonomy in personnel decisions, but that independence was not made statutory and may now to be threatened by a recent change of leadership at the parent campus.

Most of ASU West's history should be good news for USF St. Petersburg, but despite its many successes ASU West has not yet achieved its own distinctive identity. So far as I'm aware, no specific West programs have achieved recognized excellence. In other words, in common with most branches elsewhere, ASU West does in a different location pretty much exactly what the main campus does. And you aspire to much more than that.

Again, you are entitled to congratulations! Your planning process during the past year has produced a new statement of mission,

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values, and goals, as well as a designation of priority programs intended to give your campus its own identity through achieving excellence. One can read your material and actually know what it is you intend to do—do you know how rare that is? Despite being advised for at least a half-century by academic gurus of all persuasions that institutional success depended upon developing an institutional niche within which one could be judged, very, very few institutions have actually done so. The missions of most American universities could easily be interchanged without much notice—all of them intend to be all things to all people.

Of course all institutions seek excellence, and most probably achieve a few areas that qualify, but what you seek is recognized institutional excellence and national and international prominence in some clearly-designated priority programs. What does that really mean—and how will you know when you get there? “Excellence” is an illusive concept among higher educational institutions. Unfortunately, the frequently used ranking systems

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are not very helpful. The University of South Florida is properly proud of its position as a Research I (or Doctoral/Research Extensive) institution within the Carnegie classification scheme. But that classification was never intended as a ranking methodology and is solely quantitative, based on federal support received (not even just research) and numbers of PhD's granted (not other doctorates). These criteria are terribly unfair to newer institutions and branch campuses, particularly to those whose principle support is—and should be—primarily local. It is instructive that other rankings that claim to be qualitative, such as those found annually in the US News and World Report, continue to list many Research I institutions, recipients of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal support, in the third- and fourth-tier of national universities. While the US News methodology is seriously flawed, its wildly unrealistic rankings have made that issue the largest-selling of the year, and they are not about to

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change it substantially. Think of how many parents and students are misled each year!

One of the best analyses of rankings of institutional excellence I have ever read was written in 1980 by George Callcott, a history professor and former Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Maryland.\* Callcott understood that institutional rankings were really based primarily on reputation for excellence, and he found that the published rankings between 1925 and 1977 were strikingly similar. In other words, history seemed to be the most important determinant of institutional reputation for excellence. Rankings published during the past 25 years have continued the tendency—institutions are considered excellent because they have always been judged excellent. Such a finding has to be discouraging to the new and aspiring, and Callcott looked for other factors that might qualify as legitimate determinants of excellence, as well as a recognition of that excellence.

Money is certainly a factor in achieving excellence but is not sufficient in itself. A few institutions with great resources have indeed moved up the ranking ladder during recent decades, but it is also true that some institutions whose faculty salaries rank in the top ten nationally have never even had a department among those ranked at the top. Money won't buy excellence—but it helps!

Leadership is another factor that counts, but it hardly seems to be a primary determinant of excellence today. The days of presidential giants appear over. Since 1950 few, if any, university presidents have achieved national recognition for moving their institutions upward in esteem (Theodore Hesbergh at Notre Dame may be an exception). Unfortunately in my view, the modern president must often be more a mediator than a bold leader.

Callcott also looked at mission emphasis, undergraduate student ability, size, curriculum, and variety of programs without finding a key to changes in an institution's reputation for excellence. Even management efficiency counted for little, since excellent

institutions, while they don't waste money, do take risks and sometimes spend boldly in ways that panic the typical bureaucracy. Callcott concluded that two intangible but very real factors ranked with history and financial strength as determinants of institutional excellence: morale and will.

Morale means an institution's belief in itself, its self-image, its pride. An institution that believes it is better than it is is halfway to being there. Morale is the pride of past achievements. It benefits from accepting able leadership. It flourishes more in small institutions than large and sometimes thrives on hardship. When institutions are divided by controversy, however, morale disintegrates. Morale is more than the self-esteem of salary and professional recognition. It lies in the confidence that one is serving a cause larger than one's self. For the teacher, it means genuine belief in the utility of teaching. For the scholar, morale derives from the honest search for truth because of the belief that

one's discipline is worthwhile. The abundance of such feeling within an institution is a measure of institutional excellence.

The will to excellence means a determination to succeed and a willingness to pay the price. The majority of us who embrace the principle of greater excellence are not in fact willing to pay the price for it. Taxpayers, alumni, parents, and students must pay the obvious dollar costs, and they must tolerate institutional change.

Many of them will conclude that any change is for the worse, particularly if it costs more or, in the case of students, raises standards. Faculty and staff, too, must pay a price.

Since most faculty and staff are average by definition, some will find their status threatened by higher standards. In some departments, they will have to appoint new members better than themselves; they will have to help develop new fields different from their own; they will have to acknowledge rewards to others than themselves. As a result, wise academic leaders must temper

the will to excellence with moderation and insist on taking into account factors of human sensitivity.

But despite the problems with achieving and being recognized for excellence, you should not be discouraged or deterred from the path you have set for yourself. Callcott mistakenly dismissed one determinant that can be the key to your success: he discounted mission as a factor because when he was writing, at least among the institutions with which he was familiar, mission statements were normally meaningless. But a few institutions were just beginning to experiment with a niche mission within which they could compete constructively and in which they could earn and be recognized for true excellence. Possibly without knowing it, your campus was one of them, and it has remained true to that mission throughout its history. The mission has been called by a variety of names, but it is best described by the one most often used in your publications: the metropolitan university. In its simplest definition,

the metropolitan university mission means a commitment to utilize the institution's academic resources in teaching, research, and professional service to improve the quality of life in its own community. Your new campus Vice President understands this mission perhaps better than anybody else now active in higher education. She was literally present at the creation of the metropolitan university movement and a principle author of the article that remains its best published definition.

From its beginning, USF St. Petersburg recognized this opportunity. A previous campus dean once described your purpose as "to create community collaboration and partnerships". Your distinguished John Hope Franklin Professor of History, Ray Arsenhault, has described your community as a "larger, public classroom". A commitment to the metropolitan mission appears in the second sentence of your new mission statement; it appears in your list of values; and, it is the opening statement of your vision.

Despite its parochial sound, the metropolitan mission is not a limiting one. Over 90% of Americans live in metropolitan areas. Solutions you find to issues in St. Petersburg will have relevance in many other locations. Solutions tried elsewhere can be validated or discarded for their relevance in St. Petersburg. Students taught in such programs will be employable and will be prepared to make important contributions to their community.

And there is no limit to the work to be done. Our problems for the 21<sup>st</sup> century are metropolitan problems: promoting regional economic vitality, bringing minority populations into the mainstream of society, developing political leadership, training ethical business leaders, restoring effective public education, delivering high quality and affordable health care, providing for the homeless and the elderly, and determining how to sustain and protect our environment. While not exclusively so, all of these—and more—are mainly metropolitan problems. And although leaders from our major research institutions have

occasionally called for greater attention to such problems, few—if any—traditional institutions have responded with full institutional commitment. And they are not going to. But other institutions—perhaps 100 or more—are finding success in the metropolitan mission. Many are similar to USF-St. Petersburg in that they were literally created by community demand during the expansive days of the 1960's and 70's. Many have organized their resources to respond to community needs from their beginning, just as you have. Now, however, they are finding their identity and gaining a well-deserved reputation for excellence based on their accomplishments within that mission.

You can and should be in the forefront of these institutions. You start with significant advantages. First, you are part of a large and successful research university. Such a position could be limiting, but I sense that in your case it's empowering: don't fight it, nurture it. Second, you are within a vibrant and successful

community with a tradition of valuing your work. Finally, you have already selected priority programs, all of which are consistent with the metropolitan mission and all of which require a combination of disciplines and skills that can provide meaningful participation by a wide variety of faculty and students.

You may find two caveats helpful. First, remember that not everybody in St. Petersburg is accustomed to seeking your help or aware of your capabilities. For these people you must lead as well as respond to community needs—and you must demonstrate your worth. Encourage imaginative initiatives by faculty through incentives and awards. Most importantly, take some risks—including the risk of dollars; you have sufficient resources to make such investments possible, and you will be amazed and gratified at the community response when you offer to help with both your intellectual resources and financial ones. But don't take on the financing of new initiatives alone except in truly unusual cases—

remember, it's partnerships that work, and the other partners also need to have a financial stake in the success of the enterprise.

Second, be true to your philosophy. Genuinely cooperate with your community partners without attempting to dictate or dominate them. Trained faculty usually have strong ideas (frequently correct) which may run contrary to traditional thinking among leaders in the community. These leaders will be receptive, particularly as they gain confidence in the partnership, but will recoil if they get the impression that you see your role as telling them how to do it. The best way to gain the community's lasting confidence is to produce measurable outcomes, and all cooperative projects should have such results as their goal. But don't be afraid to fail—if you only undertake sure things, you won't undertake very many worthwhile projects. And sometimes unexpected outcomes also represent success.

Internally, being true to your philosophy means truly rewarding the types of activities performed by faculty in community partnerships,

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notably applied research and professional (as opposed to institutional) service, while at the same time continuing to provide full opportunity to those faculty whose disciplines or personal inclinations lead them to choose more traditional activities.

The new era USF-St. Petersburg has begun. You have prepared with unusual insights and intelligent choices. You need only to continue and enhance a rich tradition of serving your community effectively. In order to realize the excellence you seek, and ultimately to find recognition for that excellence, you only need to do what your plan says you intend to do. William Jennings Bryan, who never achieved the political success he so avidly sought, nevertheless said it well: “Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not something to be waited for, but rather, something to be achieved.”

**GOOD LUCK!**

\*George Callcott, “The Costs of Excellence”, excerpted in “NASULGC Green Sheet”, pp. 10-13,

September 30, 1980.