



STATE OF THE COLLEGE ADDRESS August 2008

THE YEAR OF CLEAR CHOICES

The Criteria

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the year 1969. Some of this is prompted by my observations and interactions with Unity College students. To try to understand their worldview and state of mind, I flash to the time when I was their age. That was around 1969. What was I thinking about? What was important to me? What did I really care about? What confused me? What inspired me?

In my idealized memory, the late 1960's were a time of hope and opportunity. Many of us really thought we were on the verge of a new era, a time that would be guided by a deep concern for the planet, an expansion of participatory democracy, an era of social justice and economic opportunity. Yet we knew the future was fraught with danger. It was also a decade of great anxiety and trepidation about the days to come.

I know I can't possibly enter the psychological space of a contemporary eighteen year old. Too much has changed. They have challenges and expectations that are very different than the one's I experienced. Our students are entering a world of daunting uncertainty. The economy is unstable. The ecological integrity of the planet is under siege. They are facing an unprecedented debt load on two levels—what it costs to finance their education, and how to mitigate our collective debt to the planet for supporting our consumer pleasures.

The 1960's generation faced these issues in an entirely different way. In retrospect we experienced the "early days" of these same issues. Now (almost two generations later) the stakes are even higher and the prospects even more uncertain.

Still, as different as the world of contemporary students might be, once you unravel the layers of history between then and now, their hopes and anxieties have a similar psychological foundation. Youth are searching for meaning and purpose. They go to college for two essential reasons—to prepare themselves for meaningful careers and to learn more about the world they live in. They are entering a time of choice making and they are looking to us for guidance in how to make those choices. That is the essence of our responsibility as the staff and faculty of Unity College. We have the extraordinary educational challenge of helping our students make informed choices.

By coming to Unity College our students are already making some important choices. First, they are proclaiming their interest in pursuing an environmentally related career. That is a really good thing! Second, they are looking for an intimate, hands-on, meaningful educational experience. Third, they are putting their faith in us to demonstrate that choosing to attend a college is a worthwhile investment. Fourth, they are making a decision to spend some very important years of their life in rural Maine.

How we respond to those choices will play a huge role in determining whether they will have a successful environmental career, if they will become engaged learners, whether they will stay in college, and whether their investment will reap its due rewards, both economically and developmentally.

The student's responsibility is to put his or her very best efforts into taking full advantage of the resources of Unity College. Our obligation is to teach them how to do so.

But there is much more at stake than that. I truly believe that our job as a college is to inspire our students, to give them the courage to have faith in their future, to provide them with the tools to become engaged, service-oriented citizens, to empower them to understand that they are capable of providing good lives for themselves and their families, and that they can serve as constructive agents for meaningful change. More than anything I hope that students who graduate from Unity College will believe in their own future and will do all they can to serve the ecological future of the planet.

I present these ideas to you because Unity College has some very important choices to make about its own future. How do we guide those choices? There is no better criteria for such guidance than to think about the students we serve.

Although this is a very difficult time for American higher education, it's a great time to be an environmental college. We have a vital mission. We are responding to a deep and abiding challenge—mitigating climate destabilization, preserving threatened habitats and biodiversity, and promoting sustainable alternatives. I am compelled by the urgency of these challenges. I assume the leadership of this college out of a compelling need to address these issues. I know that you are as urgently compelled as I am!

Our college must compete and collaborate with other colleges that are responding to the same issues. How do we do so in a way that is uniquely Unity? How do we train a new generation of environmental leaders? How do we provide them with inspiration, empowerment, confidence, and competence? When I think about the choices that lie ahead for Unity, I ask these questions to remind me (and you) as to what matters most. That's how choices become most clear.

Choices and Priorities

My intention is to bring you as close to my work as possible, to describe the issues that I think about on a daily basis, to clarify institutional priorities, and to point out some of the strategic options before us. I have grouped these priorities into five general areas: master plan implementation, academic challenge, retention and selectivity, salary equity and benefits, board development and fundraising.

In my mind these are all connected. Any Unity College issue of importance will meander through each of these priorities. These are the challenges that we all must work on together.

Master Plan Implementation

We now have an excellent Master Plan (Unity 2020) for Unity College. The plan reflects a deliberative, participatory process of open dialogue. We invited all of the college's constituencies to contribute. It incorporates the most deeply held values of the college. It reflects a landscape that emphasizes energy conservation, alternative energy generation, edible landscaping, imaginative art, community living, wellness and biological diversity.

Our aspiration is that the Unity College campus is a sustainability "field of dreams," a living laboratory and classroom for ecologically sound living and learning.

Now we have to figure out how to get there. What kind of support can we generate from philanthropy? How much debt can Unity College afford? What do we build first? What facilities do we need most?

During 2008-09 the senior leadership will work with both the board and the campus to provide answers to these questions.

In the next few months especially, and throughout the year we will need to make important choices around:

- How to maximize academic space and address facility needs through retrofitting and adding to the Student Activities Building (to be initiated in Summer 2009)
- Moving forward with planning for a new academic building
- The role of the arts in campus improvements
- The role of financing, investment, and philanthropy in campus improvements
- How to integrate sustainability goals and objectives into all areas of campus life

Retention and Selectivity

Unity College historically struggles with retention. Currently we are mired in a 55-72% (Over a five year spread) retention rate from Year One to Year Two. Although we have made some minor gains in this regard, we are still below CIC (Council of Independent Colleges) benchmarks for similarly sized colleges. Retention is crucial because it provides (a) the single most secure stream of additional income (b) a benchmark for academic quality. NEASC (The New England Association of Schools and Colleges) is sure to focus on this at our next ten-year review. There are many reasons why students might leave Unity, but most frequently (at least the anecdotes suggest) it's because they are doing poorly academically, they do not feel sufficiently academically challenged or engaged by the first year curriculum, they want to move closer to home, they want to attend a bigger college, or they can't afford to continue. But we need better data so we can really understand how to address the issue.

As we know, retention is also tied to selectivity. At the recent Leadership Council retreat we spent a lot of time thinking about our views as to the ideal Unity student. Who are we trying to attract to Unity College? How do we coordinate our best efforts into attracting and retaining that ideal student?

Improving retention and selectivity is a primary focus for Unity College. In 2008-09, we have important choices to make around:

- Admissions selectivity (what do we mean by this and what measures do we take to insure we adopt relevant criteria?)
- Implementing center-based first year seminars
- Providing more academic choices to first-year students, and for that matter, all Unity students
- Whether and how to reorganize the first-year experience
- Whether to implement some kind of "program of distinction"

Academic Challenge

I'll repeat my mantra: climate destabilization, preserving biodiversity and threatened habitats, and promoting sustainable alternatives ought to inform how we prepare our students. The environmental studies field is dynamic and ever-changing. Our academic programs must reflect both the national trends in environmental studies and our emerging strengths as a college. Any good environmental college should always be thinking about curricular change.

Unity College continues to make great progress promoting its voice as a national environmental college. In 2007-08, we played a leadership role in several national environmental studies organizations, including CEDD (Council of Environmental Deans and Directors), AASHE (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education), we published an exquisite new journal (*Hawk and Handsaw*), and we co-hosted (with *Orion Magazine*) a highly successful summer workshop (Education in a Changing Climate).

This list is actually much, much longer. These types of projects will continue to be an important priority for 2008-09, culminating with a full-fledged series of summer programs and workshops, and other conferences and gatherings.

We are in the first stage of an exciting redesign of our curriculum, linked to five “centers of educational service and outreach.” These centers reflect our current faculty strengths and interests, responsive to the dynamic nature of the environmental studies field. These centers include (names are subject to change) Biodiversity, Sustainability and Global Change, Environmental Arts and Humanities, Natural Resource Management and Protection, Environmental and Experiential Education.

Other aspects of academic challenge include continuing to pay close attention to pedagogical innovation, field-based learning, service learning, and the developmental sequence of instruction.

Moving forward with these centers is a priority for Unity College. We have important choices to make around:

- The specific academic direction for each center
- How the centers are connected to a broader network of career choices, internships, and graduate schools
- How the centers are organized and structured
- How the centers inform program review, majors, faculty meetings, and campus life
- How the centers might be the focus of summer programs and conferences

Salary Equity and Benefits

Although Unity College has made notable strides (over the last five years) in raising salaries, making equity adjustments, and providing a representative benefits package, this year our total salary and benefits package was less than all of us would have liked. This caused some respectful controversy and some understandable dissatisfaction. There are four main budgetary factors that impacted us this year and will probably continue to challenge us: the extraordinary increase in the cost of health benefits, a doubling of the price of energy, substantial commitment to new positions, and the cascading stock market.

Although we can't control all of these trends, we can make some strategic decisions that will allow us to develop some long-term goals for salaries and benefits.

I think we should all feel good about our internal equity relationships. Barry Woods and Kathleen Hale have painstakingly constructed good criteria for pay scales at Unity College. Our priority for this year is to set reasonable external benchmarks that allow us to compete with peer regional colleges.

I encourage everyone at Unity College to become involved in the budget process by asking good questions of the budget committee. They are delighted to explain their rationale for decisions.

Here are some clear choice areas for us to consider:

- The totality of compensation packages including quality of life measures
- Other benefits we can provide our employees
- The role of wellness in campus life and its impact on insurance and other costs
- What is an appropriate Unity College salary package in relationship to peer institutions

Board Development and Fundraising

The Unity College Board of Trustees is currently engaged in discussions as to its function, approach, culture, and role. These important discussions inevitably emphasize the importance of fundraising and philanthropy. It's clear that the long-term success of the college depends on enhanced annual giving, a successful capital campaign, and more philanthropic capacity and skill.

Until the Board of Trustees sufficiently grows its leadership in that regard, the bulk of this work will fall on the President and the Vice President for Advancement. We are prepared to significantly ramp up our efforts this year. The board leadership has urged me to spend over half of my time this year engaged in fund and friend-raising efforts. This is a legitimate request and I aim to comply.

There are many paths to philanthropy and cultivation of prospects is highly strategic and time-consuming. Choices are important in this regard, but there is nothing wrong with proliferation either. You have to be ready for all and any opportunities, but then to quickly assess which are worthwhile pursuing.

For this year Rob and I will make the following initiatives our highest priorities and the basis for our clear choices:

- broaden our foundation networks, determine which are most appropriate for Unity College, and prepare proposals accordingly
- in partnership with the board leadership, continue to create networks of friendships and contacts—determine which people are most suited for board recruitment
- consider the various options for planning a capital campaign and proceed accordingly

- provide support for NSF, NASA and other faculty-related grants, pursue the forthcoming RFP emanating from the Higher Education Sustainability Act, and decide which of these federal programs make the most sense for Unity Colleges
- pursue partnerships and collaborations with third parties that may wish to invest in Unity College
- consider the various ways to use the Unity House to promote the visibility of the college and plan a series of strategic events and dinners

What is a Clear Choice?

Last year I described as The Year of Good Governance. This year I'm thinking of as The Year of Clear Choices.

Clear Choices rely on Good Governance. As we make choices we have to rely on our collective wisdom, open information sharing, constructive conflict (as necessary), and our common aspirations.

Clear Choices also depends on clear thinking. When faced with countless opportunities and many possibilities, you rely on the good judgment of your peers and colleagues, and you remember the criteria that guide your decisions.

I'm sure we all agree that what we share in common is our interest in serving the students. We should always ask: how will the choices we make provide our students with a better education? How will our choices promote sound environmental decisions? How will we train a new generation of environmental leaders?