



**The Year of Roots and Wings
Part Two: The Real Work**

January, 2010

In the depths of winter when the days are short and our bodies are covered with layers of clothing, it's good to take stock of what we are grateful for. I write this in late December nestled in our small cottage, surrounded by the Mondanock forest, sitting next to the wood stove. Outside there is a cold, icy rain. It's slippery underfoot and even Paco won't have anything to do with it. I coax him to take a walk (I like walking in the rain), but he looks at me as if I'm crazy. I savor these days when I have time to think and reflect, when there's an opportunity to step outside the everyday busyness of tasks and responsibilities.

I am sorry that I won't be able to join you for the Spring semester convocation. I genuinely enjoy the freshness and spirit that accompanies a new semester. I take pleasure in the chat and conversations. I relish both the celebratory quality of convocation and also the truth-telling. The point of the "State of the College" gathering is to keep the community up to date on what is happening, but also to further explore the intriguing and emerging narrative of Unity College. What is our story in this moment? In what ways are we changing? Who are we now? I have come to understand that the President of a college is the "narrator in chief."

I am not with you because as you read this I am on my way to Cambodia. One of our fine board members, Eleanor Briggs, for her seventieth birthday, invited several of her close friends to take a conservation tour of Cambodia. Eleanor is one of the premier conservation photographers of Cambodian wildlife. With her collaborator, Colin Poole, the Director of the Asia Program for the Wildlife Conservation Society, she has written a book on Tonle Sap, the extraordinary lake that is the heart of Cambodia's Natural Heritage. Colin will be one of several conservation biologists who will accompany us on this trip. This is the kind of learning opportunity that you just don't turn down!

Hence I'm writing this "State of the College" address as a letter to the Unity Community. I conceive this as a continuation of the narrative from Fall Convocation, "The Year of Roots and Wings." This is Part Two. The story continues. I encourage you to re-read [Part One](#) for full context. In essence, Part One is the master narrative. It plots the big picture over a longer period of space and time. Part Two fills in some of the on-the-ground details.

Here's what I hope to accomplish. I am very excited and proud of some of the exceptional work that is ongoing at Unity College. I would like to point out some of our accomplishments. My purpose is to commend you for your ongoing efforts, to call attention to what you might be taking for granted, and to celebrate the full measure of what's happening at Unity, without being complacent or self-serving, but rather to build confidence and excitement. We all know that we continue to face important challenges regarding infrastructure, salary, and long-term financial viability. Day by day, month by month, year by year, we are building the College so that we can address those inevitable issues. In the meantime, we participate in what Gary Snyder, the great poet, describes as "the real work." I'd like to highlight that real work as I see it.

Academic Master Plan

The most important work that happens at a college is the teaching and learning. Ultimately a college is assessed on the quality of its students, faculty, and curriculum. Although much of our time is structured around the business of the college—making sure everything is running smoothly, finding ways to pay the bills, keeping our buildings and grounds operating and up-to-date, providing good equipment and facilities—the essence of the work is the educational process. At Unity College we have an environmental mission. It's crucial that our programs provide students with the skills and knowledge to provide creative solutions, approaches, and ways of thinking to address challenging environmental issues. This is made complicated by the dynamic nature of the environmental studies field. The pertinent issues are complex and emergent. An alert and responsive faculty must change with the times.

Why are we engaged in an academic master planning process? We do this, in part, to position the College as vital, innovative, and interesting. But we also do it because it is the right thing to do. It is our obligation to provide our students with excellent programs that will help them make a difference.

I spent most of Saturday, December 26th reading all of the new academic program briefs, reviewing the planning and protocol for the Academic Master Planning process, and reviewing the liberal learning objectives. I attempted to read them with “beginner’s eyes,” as an outside consultant who is new to the College.

I came away highly impressed. The entire Academic Master Planning process has been handled with diligence, integrity, vision, practicality, collaboration, and intention. The briefs demonstrate thoughtful planning, based on the strengths of the College, but with a clear-eye towards the future, and a realistic appraisal of what’s possible and what’s necessary.

There is still important work to be done in sorting out exactly which program belongs where, which get incorporated and/or subsumed, what the programs are finally called, how we assess their costs, and how we deliver a sequence of instruction. Yet here’s what matters. Much of the substantive work is in place, tweaks, fine-tuning, and revisions notwithstanding.

We are on the verge of nothing less than an exemplary curriculum, designed systematically and procedurally, highly inclusive, deliberate, but finally action-oriented and forward looking. As an “outside consultant” with years of experience in the environmental studies field, I am encouraged and excited about the programmatic template for Unity College. It will serve the students and faculty well for years to come.

The five centers are a robust conception:

Center for Biodiversity

Center for Environmental Arts and Humanities

Center for Experiential and Environmental Education

Center for Natural Resource Management and Protection

Center for Sustainability and Global Change

The new and revised majors reflect the strengths of the Unity College faculty and the future of the field.

In partnership with admissions, we are attracting higher achieving students from the entire country. This encourages a reinforcing loop of success—challenging classes, engaged students, continued academic success, and great jobs.

I encourage everyone involved with the Academic Master Planning process to take full measure of their accomplishments thus far. And I encourage staff to keep abreast of what's happening. The new Academic Master Plan is crucial to the future of our College. With reasonable alacrity, we are about to significantly change our academic structure and curriculum, while building on our strengths. This is outstanding work with much more still to be done.

Sustainability

One of the interesting new dynamics in American higher education is the extraordinary emphasis on sustainability initiatives. If you follow the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), each week you'll notice as many as fifty interesting notices of these initiatives. Colleges are falling over themselves to grab the public relations edge around sustainability. Sure some of the hype doesn't match the deed. Still, this emphasis is great to see. The field is emerging rapidly and Unity has an important voice in the discussion.

Ultimately what matters most is what we do on campus. From the Platinum-LEED Unity House to the recycling program to the wildflower and vegetable gardens to having a Rocky Mountain Institute Fellow to the barn-building course to the Art of Stewardship and Hawk and Handsaw and on and on and on. We have so many sustainability projects and programs on campus that I can't even keep up with them. For a comprehensive overview (and a way to keep tabs) follow Jesse Pyles' "Sustainability Monitor" and Mick Womersley' Sustainability Blog. That's just to get started. Many of us are also taking very active external roles in local, regional, and national sustainability networks.

Here's the way I think about all of this. There's way more going on than meets the eye, yet there is so much more that we still have to do. What I find most encouraging is that sustainability is no longer the province of a couple of visionary voices. It's now on everyone's mind. And it better be. Why? Because we're not going to solve these issues in Copenhagen or in Congress as important as those venues are. We will only solve these issues through personal and community choices. Unity College has an important role to play here. We are often daunted by the enormity of the task and we don't look around enough and see what we've accomplished. So pat yourselves on the back but don't let up!

Service Learning

If you look at the mission statement of any progressive college it's bound to tout the importance of service learning. We are no different. However, we do it so often and it's so deeply built into the fabric of our community that I think we sometimes take it for granted and lose sight of just how much we do. I suppose people who engage in "service" shouldn't call attention to themselves! You just do it because it is the essence of community building and at the heart of resilient learning.

As the “narrator in chief” I’d like to tell you that the chapters of the Unity College book are filled with wonderful stories of service. For superb documentation of these efforts I refer you to “Good Work” the newsletter from the Office of Community Based Learning. For starters, we’ve got people working on weatherization projects, empty bowls, biological invasions, oral histories, barn-building (again), Veggies for All, elementary school greenhouses, and chromium sediment studies.

The recent Student Conference was further documentation of the exceptionally rich emphasis on service learning. Many of the awards were given to projects that had a strong service orientation, not just because they were excellent, but in response to their pertinence and practicality.

Also of note is the fine Internship Program. Thumb through the new internship handbook and you’ll get a terrific sense of the interesting, relevant, and useful sites that take our students.

The Academic Master Plan, Sustainability, and Service Learning are convergent accomplishments that represent our common aspirations and values. Together they tell riveting stories about a Unity College education.

Student Life

I’m continually amazed at how a small college in remote, rural Maine does such an incredible job of keeping the students busy with interesting, unusual, creative, and off-beat events and programs. Whether it’s a club or a concert, a sporting event or a play, a pumpkin carving or a bicycle Olympics, a movie trip to Waterville or a rock-climbing outing, there is always something exciting happening. It takes talent, perseverance, and commitment to develop such fine programs.

From the fine food served in the cafeteria and café, the outstanding counseling services, the dedication of the Resident Advisers, to the first-rate service provided by maintenance and grounds keeping, dozens of staff contribute to the well-being of the campus community.

It’s easy to take these programs and services for granted. It really does take a community to provide a high quality student life. Nothing more exemplifies the “real work” of a college than the day-today-nurturing of the student body. We have a lot to be proud of in that regard at Unity College.

Admissions, Publications, and Communications

Another great way to assess the “real work” of the College is to check out the various publications. The new admissions brochures are absolutely superb. *The Unity Magazine* should win some kind of award. It’s one of the few such “house” publications that’s actually informative and keeps the hype reasonable. *Hawk and Handsaw* is brilliantly conceived and executed. I always carry these publications with me wherever I go. They are an impressive reflection of the quality of the Unity College experience.

There are many more stories to be told about admissions. They are changing with the College, responding to the needs and interests of a new generation of savvy potential applicants, upgrading our website, expanding the geographical range and venue of our recruitment efforts,

and considering new approaches to branding and marketing that reflect the changing image and content of Unity.

Advancement

The folks in advancement are quietly working away to provide the College with an enduring and resilient approach to fundraising, alumni giving, and board-related philanthropy. They are laying the structural foundation for building annual giving. It's absolutely essential that this occurs in full partnership with the Unity College Board of Trustees (see below).

In the meantime, we are actively building Unity College visibility. In the last six months we've received a suite of helpful grants that underwrite a range of important College activities. These include the Rocky Mountain Institute Fellow, the EPSCOR Sustainability Research Program, Veggies for All, the Nicholas Holt Challenge Scholarship Fund, and an anonymous gift for science lab equipment, to name a few. We are continuing to work with The Unity Foundation and the Kendeda Fund for substantial gifts that are strategic and capacity-building.

Unity is visibly active in regional conferences. We have co-sponsored both of Maine's premier film festivals—Maine International in Waterville and Camden International. We have also co-sponsored the Portland-based Kindle conference, the Camden Conference, and the Juice Conference. Unity College has been actively involved in and recognized for participation in numerous sustainability-related projects and programs. We are prominently involved in regional chambers of commerce to solicit interest from the relevant business community.

The Unity College Centre for the Performing Arts has a revitalized series of programs and events. We are becoming a regional center for the arts. Most importantly, our strategy of becoming ubiquitous and visible in Belfast, Camden, Rockland, and Rockport is beginning to work as we are also developing partnerships with the Farnsworth Museum, the Maine Media Workshops, and other organizations. Through these contacts we are making new friends, resulting in more campus visits. And we are seen as a contributing partner to sustainability, the arts, and environmental studies in the region.

Consider as well the busy array of summer programs that we'll be either offering or hosting in 2010: Maine Arts Camp, Education for a Changing Climate, Maine Envirothon, Outright Youth Conference (LGBTQ), US Forest Service Training Course, and Apogee Adventures. More still are in the works. Please note the strategic and mission-based nature of each of these programs.

Board of Trustees

A lot of important work is happening at the Board of Trustees (BOT) level. We are adding some interesting and exciting new board members. These are people who are active, innovative, creative, and philanthropically savvy. We are working hard, in partnership with the Board, to develop a new approach to meetings and committees. Many of our recent meetings have emphasized the "immersion" experience so that the BOT is actively engaged in the life of the College, and so they can be inspired by our "real work." Similarly, we want our students, staff, and faculty to be inspired by our interesting board members. This is the essence of a resilient board/campus partnership.

The BOT committees are engaged in helpful, strategic work. Of specific note is the revitalized Development Committee that is mapping short and long-term philanthropic approaches. You can't have successful college philanthropy without an active fund-raising board. The foundation for this work is emerging. The Academic Affairs Committee is providing great support in helping us develop long-term strategies for student and faculty retention, innovative program development, and creative approaches to scholarships and financial aid.

The Year of Roots and Wings: Part Three: Dreams and Realities

Whoops!! You'll have to wait for this one. We are collectively exploring some new directions for Unity College, including partnerships with Schoodic and Arcadia Partners, a close working relationship with the Maine Media Workshops, a melding of minds with the Embers Project (formerly Audubon Expedition Institute), the prospects for alternative (low-cost) sustainable building projects, new campus-wide information systems, more support for gifts planning and philanthropy, and other projects and programs.

These are all in different stages of discussion. I'd like to stress that all of these possibilities are just that, approaches to improving the quality of the Unity College experience, building capacity for the future, grounded in what's realistic and possible.

Campus leadership strives to balance an entrepreneurial spirit with transparency and deliberation. We want to spawn new ideas and possibilities but to do so within the realm of possibility. Hence the bottom line for many of these ideas is whether they will provide more revenue for the College.

In my next report to campus I'll discuss these possibilities in more depth, linked to the latest budgetary prospects and philanthropic progress.

*As we launch a new semester, I offer my best wishes, gratitude, and encouragement to the entire Unity College community. Thanks for your fine work and wonderful spirit. Please remember that our work is much bigger than we are! As we excel we demonstrate that it's possible to live modestly, provide an excellent education, and have some fun while doing so. There is no work that's more important than building a sustainable community, providing educational opportunity, and doing so within an environmental studies framework. Everyone's contribution to this effort matters! This profile of "the Real Work" of Unity College is **your** work—the seamless blend of momentum and vision, the melding of hearts and minds in service to the ecosystem and biosphere.*