



September 2009: The State of the College

## THE YEAR OF ROOTS AND WINGS

Lately I've been thinking about the relationship between aspiration and accomplishment. Perhaps I'm doing this because I will turn sixty early next year. Or perhaps it's because I'm entering my fourth year as the President of Unity College. Come to think of it, it's something I've always thought about. Come September, the Lamarckian memory of countless Septembers generates an acquired suite of habits and routines, reduced to a perennial question—who am I and what do I intend to do? Is there a correspondence between the sixtieth year of life and the month of September?

Curiously Unity College is in the springtime of its developmental lifecycle. Does that mean that I have a May-September relationship with Unity College? No matter. Such musings are fun whether or not you find the metaphor evocative!

At last year's Convocation, I suggested that 2008/2009 would be The Year of Clear Choices. I presented the campus and the Board of Trustees with a list of potentials and possibilities revolving around:

*Master Plan Implementation*

*Retention and Selectivity*

*Academic Challenge*

*Salary, Equity, and Benefits*

*Board Development and Fundraising*

I'm pleased to report that in each of these areas the College has made tangible progress. What's particularly notable and even somewhat surprising is that we were able to do so in the most turbulent higher education economy of our lifetimes.

- While other colleges are putting moratoriums on building projects, we still aspire to move forward with a Science Building and/or a Dormitory. Our challenge for this year is to build the philanthropic potential to move forward.
- While other small private colleges are becoming less selective in order to boost their enrollments, we have stayed true to our course of becoming increasingly selective in a way that fits our spirit of opportunity and promise.
- While other small colleges are struggling to figure out how to move their curriculum forward, we are engaged in a truly participative, results-oriented approach to innovative curricular change.
- While other colleges, even the rich privates, are cutting staff and initiating furlough programs, we have maintained all of our current positions.
- While other colleges are having a hard time recruiting new board members, the Unity College Board of Trustees is undergoing a fundamental reorganization, both in terms of membership and meetings.

In each of these areas we made good choices, we stuck with our plans, we acted strategically, we adapted to changing circumstances, and we maintained an open atmosphere of decision-making.

## Unity College on the Road

I won't exhaust you with the hype of our long-list of accomplishments. But I do want to tell you a few stories of some of my road trips this year. I do this as a means of relaying my pride in the spirit, authenticity, and aspiration of Unity College. I'm aware that my stories are just several of many. Multiply them exponentially with all of your experiences, from Nova trips to service projects, from routine classroom encounters to climbing wind towers. These stories are the essence of Unity College. They are also my motivation for describing 2009-10 as The Year of Roots and Wings.

In December of 2008 I went to the annual National Council for Science and the Environment conference. Dr. Mick Womersley and Dr. Aimee Phillippi went as well. They brought six students with them. I remember sitting on the steps of the common area at the Ronald Reagan Trade Center (the conference hub), hanging out with the Unity contingent, when Kaley Sullenger urged me to look at her slide show. It turns out she had spent much of the day traveling around Washington taking as many pictures as she could of the her stuffed animal "Rocky the Unity Ram" in various tourist poses. It was charming, creative, clever and cute but I wondered whether she was taking advantage of the conference. Later that day, it turns out that she and I were in a similar workshop dealing with the importance of natural history collections. She never stopped taking notes! Her attention was steadfast. She was taking it all in. I cannot tell you how I proud I was!

Several months later I attended the Clinton Global Initiative in Austin, Texas with Kayla Bubar, Rachel Mestas, and Jessica Todd-Brown. We spent a lot of time together, cleaning up trash in east Austin, having dinner at a downtown Mexican restaurant, and talking about the conference. I'll never forget Rachel's frustration with one of the workshops. She's sitting with college students from all over the country, some of the best and brightest, comparing what she knows to what they know. Her self-assessment was one of great pride in her Unity College education. She felt that she had a preparation and an applied awareness of environmental issues that was superior to her peers.

About a week later I was at the Camden Conference, a prestigious foreign policy gathering. I brought seven Unity students with me as the culmination of a seminar on Environmental Security. I must admit that although I enjoyed teaching the course, my strategic reason for doing so was to make Unity much more visible in the wealthy coastal communities. What better way to do so than to have student ambassadors running around? Our students were magnificent. My team was Matty Zane, Jamie Nemecek, Steve Swartz, Hannia Candelario, Jake Deslauriers, Jake Harr, and Lisa Nason. Can you imagine a more motley and spirited crew? They were powerfully engaged, asking questions in public forums, presenting themselves in their uniquely Unity way. We had a spirited and refreshing presence at that conference. I'll never forget watching Matty Zane scaling the wall of the Camden Opera House. He epitomized the wild edge of Unity—respectful and engaged while indoors, unbound and free while outdoors!

Finally just a few weeks ago, I went to the American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) summit in Chicago. I traveled with Jesse Pyles, our steadfast new sustainability coordinator. We were a unique traveling team. At the airport I'd go to the bathroom and while washing my hands I'd peer over at Jesse, who is taking a red bandana out of his pocket to dry his hands. I half-jokingly asked him whether it was OK if I used a paper towel. He said, "It's up to you, Mitch!" A few minutes later, I noticed that when he was thirsty, he took his glass Mason jar out of his backpack, filled undoubtedly with Montville well water, and swigged it down. I half-jokingly asked him whether it would be OK if I purchased some bottled water, at least just this time. He said, "It's up to you, Mitch!"

I am spending all of this time telling you these stories for two reasons:

First, this is the narrative of our College and experiences like these nourish and inspire us. Each of you has similar stories and I urge you to tell them. Stories like this are the essence of deep learning and also the basis of good philanthropy.

Second, we are beginning to make an impact in the external world. There is a great buzz about Unity College. We are showing up in different publications. We have an important voice and it's beginning to get heard. OK, we didn't make the Sierra Club List of the twenty coolest schools. But we did rank 38<sup>th</sup> of 155! If our transportation score hadn't been so darn low, we would have been in the top 15! In my view, we are one of the top 10 coolest schools, and a lot more young people are figuring that out!

These stories also epitomize my theme for 2009-10...**The Year of Roots and Wings.**

How will we maintain, solidify, and ground the clear choices we made last year? How will they flourish, deepen, and fly? How will we stay the strategic course, while continuing to adapt to changing circumstances, and explore interesting new initiatives? How will we continue to weather the economic turbulence and the changing demands of higher education? How will we balance frugality with investment?

#### *Master Plan Implementation*

We have many pressing infrastructure needs. We have finished plans for Phase One of a new academic building, and we are working on upgrading our plans for a new dormitory so it will meet at least LEED Gold Standards. Our primary challenge will be to develop the financial capacity and philanthropic support to move forward with both of these projects. There is still much work to be done to determine the financial viability of these initiatives. We will not have a construction timetable until we have a long-term business plan integrating investment and philanthropy. However, the permitting process, the construction diagrams, and the architects rendering for both of these projects will be completed within weeks, positioning us to move forward as finances allow.

#### *Retention and Selectivity*

This remains a crucial priority for Unity College. It's great to see how rapidly our retention numbers are improving. Retention is a team effort and everyone should take credit. However, we have to figure out how to maintain this good momentum. Undoubtedly it's about providing a first-rate education at a reasonable cost. We must continue to work together to provide students with a meaningful and practical environmental liberal arts education. Ultimately, our retention rate is a seminal indicator of both academic and financial viability.

#### *Academic Challenge*

The faculty continues to move forward with a pertinent, interesting, and dynamic curricular revision process, organized around "centers" and liberal learning outcomes. I urge you to be evocative, imaginative, and bold as you proceed. Keep in mind the broader context for our work—training a new generation of sustainability and environmental leadership. The environmental studies field is dynamic, requiring anticipation and responsiveness. How do we prepare our students for service-oriented, environmental careers, while emphasizing the broader goals of "liberal" learning? How do we define the "environmental liberal arts" during a time of planetary emergency? Finally, how do we make sure that our recruitment materials tell the story of the new Unity so that we attract a wide variety of students to the environmental professions?

### *Salary, Equity and Benefits*

Over the next month we'll be closing in on our final budget figures. We'll revise the 2009-10 budget, make some assumptions about 2010-11, and build a strategic budget for the next five to seven years. For 2009-10, despite a healthy freshman enrollment and excellent retention, we will have only a very thin surplus. We had to raise our financial aid packages to recruit deserving students. Our budget challenge is how to create a viable short and long term balance between four competing and interconnected needs—salary adjustments, the need for more cash, making sure we relieve institutional stress points (capacity issues), and new revenue-generating initiatives. We'll try to address all of these needs as best we can. We will do so as part of a sound business plan and a strategic orientation. Like many colleges and universities, our endowment took quite a hit over the last eighteen months. Although it didn't impact our operating budget explicitly, it did dramatically reduce our cash reserves. These must be adequately replenished so our financial viability ratios allow us to take on any additional construction debt. You can be sure that the Board of Trustees Financial Affairs Committee and the Unity College Budget Committee will keep the campus updated.

### *Fundraising and Development*

We are very excited about the relationship between board leadership and the senior staff. We have revitalized board meetings, we're bringing on many new board members, and we are hopeful that the Unity College Board of Trustees will provide the generative leadership and the philanthropic networking to lead the College into the future. We are working hard to find ways of immersing the Board in the story of Unity College so they take it with them wherever they go. The Board of Trustees should embody the Roots and Wings of Unity College—aspiring to fully understand and incorporate our environmental mission, while providing the resources to expand our potential. Among the important tasks that await the Board is a comprehensive and realistic discussion about the future size of the College, linked to the Master Plan and capacity issues, and based on sound financial planning.

### **Why Are We Here?**

I remain deeply concerned about the extraordinary environmental challenges that face our bioregion and planet. Biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation, and climate destabilization are accelerating rapidly, changing the context for our political economy, social relationships, economic justice, and quality of life. This is the local and global context for our work. It situates our environmental college in geographical space and historical time. It is the overwhelming priority for how we think about learning and living—it is the prerequisite for our emphasis on sustainability.

Unity College is making great strides in responding to this challenge. Of course, we have a very long way to go. Our work remains infinite in scope, daunting in its aspirations, but tangible in its results. One of the great things about working on a college campus is that everyday you can observe something measurable. We are, above all, a learning community. When people grow in their environmental awareness, it sets off a spark, and when we observe that spark, we know we have accomplished something.

This will be a challenging year. There will continue to be stresses and anxieties. However, we'll meet them together as a solid community and an organization that encourages learning, wellness, diversity and growth. We'll do as much as we can to balance the hard work, the rigorous journey, and our infinite aspirations, with celebration, fun, and accomplishment. We are living the change!