

“The Journey to Student Success”

**Remarks from the President’s Seventh Annual Convocation
President Jolene Koester
California State University, Northridge**

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Introduction

It’s an honor for me to share this platform with the faculty, student, and academic leadership. Joining me today on stage are the faculty, student, and academic leaders of the university: Jennifer Matos, Faculty President; Adam Salgado, Associated Students President; and Harry Hellenbrand, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

New faces in administrative roles in our campus community are:

- Hilary Baker, Chief Information Officer
- S.K. Ramesh, Dean of the College of Engineering and Computer Science
- Jim Sullivan, who returns to the university again in the interim role of Vice President for Administration and Finance, and
- Rick Mazzuto, Director of Intercollegiate Athletics

Familiar faces on campus taking on new responsibilities include:

- Barbara Gross, Chief of Staff in the President’s Office
- David Moon, Interim Dean in the College of Arts, Media and Communication
- Bill Jennings, Interim Dean in the College of Business and Economics
- Mary Ann Cummins-Prager, Interim Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, and
- Maureen Rubin, Interim Director of Undergraduate Studies, and
- Chris Stewart, Director of Governmental Affairs

It’s not just the faces of administrators that have been changing. So, too, have our faculty. In the past six years, about 250 of our tenured faculty have retired, and we have hired 316 new tenure-track and tenured faculty. This academic year we have 56 new tenure-track members of the faculty. Think of this change proportionally—we have a total of about 750 tenured and tenure-track faculty at the university; therefore, in the past six years the faces of our faculty have changed by about 40 percent.

But while the individual faces of this great university are always changing, the strength of our mission, of our collective goals, and of the university’s impact on this region remains strong,

vibrant, and powerful. The community certainly appreciates the incredible physical metamorphosis that we have undergone, but what truly has been awe-inspiring is the increasing recognition of the university for the quality of our students, faculty and staff, and our contributions to the community. There is growing enthusiasm for Cal State Northridge—within the San Fernando Valley, the greater Los Angeles Basin, the nation, and beyond.

It is from this wellspring of growing support for our university that I speak to you today about our “Journey to Student Success.” While the theme is straightforward and simple, the actual journey is challenging and complex. My remarks this morning will be in three segments: first, I describe the nature of our journey these past six years and the territory we will navigate during this coming year. Second, I will return once again to the theme of student success. Finally, I will close with some verbal highlights—postcards and snapshots if you will—from our journey in this most recent year.

I. The Journey

First, the journey. Six years ago we began a journey together here at Cal State Northridge to change key aspects of how we work with and for our students. While the university’s mission and vision have remained the same, we set out to change how we achieved that mission. We identified the importance of improvements and new capabilities—what I have called the “four priorities.” Along the way we determined that we should move to become a more learning-centered university. Along the way we were buffeted by external forces, such as serious budget reductions, that affected our ability to stay on course.

Trustee policy calls for a comprehensive review of a president in her or his sixth year. This past year was that year for me and for Cal State Northridge. The review process is very thorough and culminates in a letter from Chancellor Charles Reed to the campus community that has recently been posted to the University’s web site. While the review is certainly about my work here, it is fundamentally a review of the efforts and focus of the entire campus community. Using the four priorities as the framework, let me provide you with a few of the review’s highlights to underscore what we have accomplished together.

Remember the priority to strengthen the University’s connections to the community? The review concludes that we have increased the public profile of the university and that community relations in the San Fernando Valley are strong and are growing stronger.

Remember the priority to improve the private fund raising capabilities and successes for the University? The review also cites a major increase in donor gifts to the university. From the end of 2000-01 we have almost doubled the private gifts given to this university in reaching in 05-06 \$23 million in pledge payments and new commitments.

Our third priority was to create a more user-friendly campus. Praised in this review are the enhancements to the physical aesthetics of the campus and our efforts to make it easier to navigate. Not surprisingly, our work to build more parking structures and to improve information technology was noted positively.

Fourth, and most importantly, we embraced the priority to improve the graduation rates of our students. The review commends us for identifying and implementing numerous initiatives to improve student retention and graduation rates. It also acknowledges the work of our faculty for major revisions to our general education program.

We should celebrate how far and how well we have traveled, but we must also recognize that for each of these priorities we have additional territory that must be covered.

We have traveled this far on our journey because we have a shared commitment to the mission and to the changes we have sought in how we accomplish that mission. Planning for this journey of change, improving, and building on our strengths has been a preoccupation for many in this campus community.

While we have accomplished much, it is now time to turn attention to strengthening our planning process by broadening and improving the planning process itself. While the four priorities remain constants, it is now time to engage the campus community more fully in determining all the elements of our road map for the future. Why do we need to re-define and refine the “how” of our planning? To borrow a beautiful phrase from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “let me count the ways”:

- First, while we successfully completed a very detailed campus physical master plan last year, that plan was really the easy part! We’ve identified many buildings that will need to be constructed, but additional planning is required to ensure that future academic and student support programs and their needs drive the configuration and characteristics of the proposed buildings.
- Second, tighter resources mean more difficult choices. You remember the analogy of the university as a car that is made increasingly smaller and less luxurious as the state of California’s resources become more constrained. While the state budget for the university has rebounded for now, we are still in that very small car and it is quite clear that we are going to have to continue our travels within a proportionately declining resource base. Consequently, an agreed-upon and publicly-presented plan will allow us to make choices consistent with institutional priorities.
- A third reason is that we have made a commitment to transparent budgeting. To accomplish that, we must continue to make explicit the links between planning and budgeting.
- We also need to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive fundraising campaign, which the university will undertake in the years ahead. That can’t happen without a university-wide plan that describes our hopes and dreams as well as our needs.
- We must also plan for a new generation of students who expect different services and innovative pedagogies.

- We will need to continue to look to new technologies that give us the ability to deliver instruction and student services in creative ways, but these don't appear by magic and without new problems.
- And, finally, our accreditation agency, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) expects us to be intentional in achieving an agreed-upon and publicly-defined mission.

In sum, Cal State Northridge needs to engage in more systematic planning.

This more formal planning process has already begun. Last year within Academic Affairs, Provost Harry Hellenbrand asked the college deans to begin work on college-level vision statements. Concurrently, Vice President Terry Piper also began work within Student Affairs on their divisional plan. The Division of University Advancement already functions within annual and five year plans. The other divisions of the university will join this more formal and enhanced comprehensive planning process as their new leadership comes on board and is acclimated to the campus.

Provost Hellenbrand is the lead on this renewed planning process. He will be working with his vice presidential colleagues, the deans, and the University Planning and Budget Group to mold the planning efforts within the various parts of the university into a whole. The timeline for the completion of this new plan is the end of this academic year.

We have another compelling rationale for moving our planning efforts to a greater level of comprehensiveness. This year we begin what is about a five-year commitment to demonstrate to our accreditation organization that we are worthy of their continuing accreditation. WASC has moved away from their previous approach that relied on inputs—i.e., how many faculty, how many books in the library, how many resources—to an expectation that we demonstrate that we have clear institutional goals and that we have evidence of the extent to which we achieve them.

Associate Vice President Cynthia Rawitch will steer our WASC efforts. She and those working with her will lead us to answer two questions: What does a Cal State Northridge degree say about the students who earn it? And how do we determine the accuracy of our claims about the value of these degrees? The answers we give presuppose that we are intentional about the outcomes we want our students to achieve and we have evidence to support our claims. Evidence—pay attention to this word because as we move forward with our planning and WASC efforts, evidence of success and failure will be the key.

This year we will also do some specific planning work in one of the university's functional areas—that of enrollment management. Changing demographics, increased competitiveness, and uneven demand for programs across the university all are signs that tell us to look more carefully at how the university manages its enrollment. Therefore, this year we will study, plan and implement a comprehensive and strategic approach to this critical function.

To be successful, faculty, staff, and students will all need to be active participants in the university's planning efforts.

II. Student Success

Last year I asked you to envision California State University, Northridge's future through the eyes of our students. After all, the reason we are on this journey is because of our students. In particular, I asked you to focus on individual beliefs and actions as the basis for assuring the success of our students and a strong future for our great university.

This year I am again compelled to return to the centrality of student success as an imperative for our work. But while asking you to sustain your individual actions, I am also emphasizing the importance of campus wide intentional, systematic efforts, which rely on evidence, to assess our accomplishments. I begin with what is most important: students and their success at this university. Six years ago we committed ourselves to a journey that would improve the rates at which our students graduated. Without sacrificing the strong quality of our academic programs, this campus community embraced the priority wholeheartedly. Numerous changes were made to remove institutional obstacles to graduation and to improve the likelihood that our students will stay and graduate. The complete array of what we have undertaken is impressive and in previous convocation addresses and university publications we have identified and celebrated them.

I referred earlier to the complexity and challenge of our journey, and certainly improving graduation rates and the success of our students is among the most complex and challenging. Measurable improvement is even more formidable when we understand that the changes we have begun implementing are incremental and will accumulate only over a period of time. Currently, most of the students affected by the recent changes could not yet be expected to have graduated.

Despite all of these complexities and the long time frame within which we should see evidence of change, there are some signposts that tell us that we making progress.

Last spring, as part of the mandate from the Board of Trustees to improve graduation rates, Cal State Northridge was visited by our academic peers from other CSU campuses. They came for the purpose of evaluating our efforts at encouraging graduation. This visit by our CSU colleagues affirmed the directions that we have taken. In particular, the strategic emphasis on first-year experiences was lauded, and the focus on improving freshmen retention was celebrated. The overall assessment of our efforts was summarized in the opening comments of the team leader at the exit interview when he said: "I would send my kid to Cal State Northridge."

In addition, to this qualitative evidence, we do have hopeful quantitative indicators. For each of the last three years, we have increased the retention of freshmen to the sophomore year. Similarly, we have also increased the continuation (retention) rates for transfer students who have entered the university. To quote from a recent analysis by our Institutional Research Director: "The same general pattern is evident...a gradual upward trend in CSUN's continuation and graduation rates, which reflects slow, but steady progress in these areas."

Vigilance to systematic, collective efforts is still required, however, to continue these improved trends. You will recall that last year we kicked off two initiatives crucial to student success: improved communications with our students, and improved advising for our students. Both are issues that students repeatedly and still today tell us are problems for them. There has been substantial progress on the part of those in the university responsible for these functions. Yet in both areas, the university must still improve its services and support of students. These issues are still paramount on my personal travel itinerary (*a.k.a.*, my “to do” list) for this coming year.

Two additional efforts are also underway for the year directed at improving student learning and success. First, is a major push to improve the way in which students connect with the university technologically. Specifically, our Cal State Northridge student portal will be improved so that students find it easier to use, with increased functionality, and with the ability to tailor the information to an individual’s needs. This is so important because the student portal web pages provide the launching point from which our students can gather information relevant to them about all aspects of their study, work, and engagement here at Cal State Northridge.

The other new effort is a course redesign project with the goal of converting high-demand, often multiple sectioned courses into ones that are more effective in enabling students to learn better and more efficiently, and without additional resources.

Last year I asked you to add to our institutional efforts your individual attitudes and actions. I asked you to focus on your personal role in assuring that every student is able to graduate and in making CSUN a place where students have positive experiences. I asked you to reflect on the direct and integral role you play in student learning. I asked that we start from the assumption that all students can reach our high expectations and graduate. Such an outlook is contagious! I asked, and ask again, for your help to make this assumption a reality. At every opportunity during the past academic year, as I visited with individuals and groups around the campus, I carried this message of the importance of individual actions to students’ success. I carry the same message to each of you today.

There is one group in the university, the First Year Experience Committee, that I want to use as an example of rising to the challenge and translating words to actions. This group developed a presentation to explain the role that staff efforts play in improving students’ experiences. This presentation is now included in the university’s orientation for all new staff. The group has also gone on the road, visiting numerous parts of the university to talk with staff about their role in student success. This committed group received the 2006 Award of Excellence at the recent employee recognition event. Would the members of the First Year Experience Committee please stand up: Melissa Billeter, Laurie Walton, Jane Santoro, Sharon Kinard, Chantay Brown, Marine Lousparian, Jesus Alvarez, and Judi Gomez. Please join with me in celebrating the work of this group of inspirational individuals.

Campus efforts directed at improving graduation rates and improving the chances for student success at Cal State Northridge have occurred because, six years ago, we formally, systematically, and doggedly set out to accomplish change in this critical aspect of institutional

performance. We were and will remain purposeful, intentional, and systematic in planning our priorities for the university.

III. Postcards and Snapshots from the Past Year

In every journey, it is important to pause, to take in the sights, to experience the scenery and people encountered. So let me turn to another important but sometimes unexpressed ingredient in student success: the pride we should all have in our university. I urge you, as I have done in the past, to recognize the incredible number of indicants of the quality of this university; how our faculty and their academic programs are recognized in their disciplines; and how extraordinarily well our students perform in various ways. I urge you as well to take pride in that excellence and to link these many individual accomplishments to the quality of the university as a whole. Each year in this convocation address, I enjoy sharing with you some of the ways faculty, staff, students, and the university as a whole are recognized for their accomplishments. So, onto some highlights or—as I said earlier—some verbal postcards and snapshots of our journey this past year.

- Postcard from the *Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* magazine: Cal State Northridge ranks in the top-ten among U.S. colleges and universities in bachelor's degrees awarded to Latinas.
- Snapshot from the National Science Foundation: The university ranked fifth in the nation among master's-level colleges and universities by preparing 128 undergraduate students who later earned doctoral degrees in science fields between 2000 and 2004. Northridge again ranked first in the nation among master's institutions in preparing future psychology doctoral degree recipients.
- Postcard from professors in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Psychology: Led by Biology Professor Maria Elena Zavala, our faculty received a \$7 million grant from the National Institutes of Health for research that will study various aspects of health.
- Postcard from the Michael D. Eisner College of Education and the College of Business and Economics: Teaming with the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce to create "Project Change," to produce educational leaders in K-12 schools.
- From the Fulbright Foundation: Three university professors were awarded prestigious Fulbright grants. Geological Sciences Professor Gerald Simila, English Professor Robert Chianese, and Mathematics Professor Carol Shubin will share their intellectual expertise around the globe.
- Matador athletics concluded its 2005–2006 season with an assortment of honors. The men's soccer and women's outdoor track and field squads won Big West Conference championships, and soccer coach Terry Davila and track coach Don Strametz received coach-of-the-year recognition. And for those of you who follow men's soccer, this past

weekend Cal State Northridge's men's soccer team played UCLA—the fourth-ranked team in the nation—to a draw on their home field.

- From the Department of Music: Graduate music student and opera soprano Ani Maldjian won first place at the Metropolitan Opera's western regional auditions in Los Angeles in October. Maldjian became the tenth CSUN student vocalist through the years to win first place in the western regionals.

Now on to some postcards from those who provide the university private support:

- Pioneering inventor Ernie Schaeffer has pledged \$2 million for the College of Engineering and Computer Science. The founder of Schaeffer Magnetics has endowed a center named in his honor to promote innovation and entrepreneurial skills among CSUN students by engaging them directly with inventors and entrepreneurs.
- Last year, Cal State Northridge raised almost \$10 million in outside gifts and pledges to help us realize the long time dream of a Performing Arts Center for the San Fernando Valley.
- And last week, the University announced a magnificent \$10 million gift from music icon Mike Curb, which will be used to support both the College of Arts, Media, and Communication and our new Performing Arts Center.

The evidence is both clear and overwhelming: Cal State Northridge has come a very long way in the past few years to become what we now are: the crown jewel of this region. Yet with your intelligence and hard work, I know that the best part of our journey is still ahead. To continue to be successful, Cal State Northridge needs both of these attributes from each of you. The University needs your intelligence to plan, to work smart, to anticipate, to invent alternatives, and to prepare ourselves for the many challenges ahead. This university needs your hard work to create, to build, to alter our collective journey so that it further improves our students' experiences while attending this learning community and helps them to become successful and timely graduates. In sum, what we accomplish this coming academic year will occur only if we provide three qualities: systematic efforts at planning for our future; a focus on student success; and collective efforts combined with individual actions.

The Cal State Northridge voyage has and will continue to be a remarkable one. And, so we start another year of this journey to student success.