



President's Twelfth Annual Convocation

California State University, Northridge: A Place of Abundance

**Jolene Koester, President
Oviatt Library Lawn / August 25, 2011**

(Prepared text for remarks)

Let me begin by introducing the campus leaders on stage today – Provost Harry Hellenbrand, Faculty President Steven Stepanek, and Associated Students President Amanda Flavin.

Let's also welcome our new faculty members here today. (Please stand and let us welcome you.)

Seventy-six faculty members were tenured or promoted this past year. Let's congratulate them!

We have new members of the University's administrative team who I'll ask to stand. Some are new to the campus.

- Stacy Lieberman, Associate Vice President, Marketing and Communications
- Deborah Wallace, Associate Vice President for Financial Services
- Shelley Ruelas, Associate Vice President for Student Life
- Mark Stover, Dean of the University Library
- John Briar, Senior Director of Information Systems
- Sky Daniels, KCSN Program Director

Others have taken on new administrative roles.

- Jill Smith, Interim Associate Vice President for Human Resources
- Cynthia Rawitch, Vice Provost
- Bill Whiting, Senior Director, Academic Personnel
- Elizabeth Adams, Senior Director, Undergraduate Studies
- Patty Lord, Director of Admissions and Records
- Chris Xanthos, Director of Administrative Services
- Deone Zell, Director of the Faculty Technology Center
- Dwayne Cantrell, Director, Student Outreach and Recruitment

I have titled this, my 12th *and last* convocation address, "California State University, Northridge: A Place of Abundance."

Perhaps you are confused or even bemused by this title since we are again this year grappling with major budget reductions. But I am intentional in this choice because, despite the constrained fiscal environment, what I have experienced here at Cal State Northridge and what the next president will experience is *a place of abundance*.

In my eleven previous convocation addresses, I used the occasion to lay out strategic issues for our future, describe the work to take place during the coming academic year, and celebrate recent accomplishments of individuals and groups in the campus community.

This 12th convocation speech adheres to that template, but today is also a formal and public opportunity to reflect on the past 11-plus years and appreciate and reflect pride in Cal State Northridge as a place of abundance.

I'll begin by describing the similarities of the California State University, Northridge I was introduced to 11-plus years ago with the California State University, Northridge of today. I'll then describe what I think has changed. Third, I'll briefly outline the strategic challenges in our future, and yes, that I believe that the next Cal State Northridge president will face. Finally, I will close with my hopes for how you – members of this campus community – will receive a newly appointed president.

The CSU Board of Trustees announced my appointment as president of Cal State Northridge in November 1999 and I assumed the role in July 2000. Even before accepting the appointment, I began to understand that this University is a *place of abundance*! The core of what makes Cal State Northridge excellent today was already present when I arrived.

As I considered the presidency of Cal State Northridge, I sought information about the University from folks across the CSU. They responded with consistency, almost uniformly. “Yes,” they would say, “it’s a university with excellent faculty. The program at Northridge in ... geography, or music, or marine biology (to name just a few) ... has national distinction and recognition within that discipline. But the Northridge faculty is *quiet* about how good they are. Despite being *very good*, the campus just goes about its work without a lot of fanfare.”

Another characteristic I found imprinted on the University’s institutional psyche was an ability to pull together to overcome great adversity. I found a campus where, whatever the challenge, people jumped in to respond.

I already knew that the campus physical plant was devastated by the 1994 earthquake. What I didn’t know until I was officially appointed, was the spirit of “we can find a solution, we’ll get it done,” that permeated the campus culture.

I learned of this first through the earthquake recovery and I learned more about this spirit as folks talked about offering new academic programs. I observed an ease around the addition of new disciplines and new kinds of faculty expertise that I hadn’t experienced before. Change happened here as faculty and staff simply took on the challenges of what they knew needed to happen.

I've seen this institutional characteristic again and again as we've tackled various problems and goals – General Education reform, assessments and accreditations, graduation rate improvement, the campus master plan, strategic enrollment management, and the launching of new programs to meet the needs of our region. In all of these, the campus was on it.

From my earliest days here, I also found our faculty and staff to be intently focused on students and on student success. Students were *important* as folks went about their work, and that has persisted as the University has responded to improve retention and graduation rates and embraced its role as a learning-centered University.

Every year I take time in my convocation address to celebrate some of the achievements of our students under the direction of our faculty. There are always too many to list, but here are a few from last year:

- Social Work student, Ryan Grady, nominated by our campus for the William Randolph Hearst/CSU Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement, was named the highest-ranking Hearst scholar from the 23 CSU campuses and received the \$10,000 Ali C. Razi Scholarship. (Ryan, please stand and let us congratulate you.)
- Under Professor Kristen Walker, our business students' consulting project took first place at the Small Business Institute national conference.
- The California College Media Association recognized six of our *Daily Sundial* student journalists with three first-place, three second-place, and three third-place honors. The paper's faculty advisor, Melissa Lalum, was named "Educator of the Year" by the California Journalism Education Coalition.
- Our Model United Nations Team won an Outstanding Delegation Award and an Outstanding Position Papers Award, a "first place" award placing our students in the top 3-5 percent of delegations among hundreds of universities and thousands of students.
- Four Cinema and Television Arts students and department chair Jon Stahl took top honors at the Broadcast Education Association's Festival of Media Arts, a refereed national exhibition for faculty and student creative work.
- Our men's and women's cross-country teams were recognized by the NCAA for their demonstrated commitment to academic achievement with multi-year Academic Progress Rates for both teams in the top 10 percent nationally among cross-country teams.
- Funded by a \$1.6 million grant from the California Institute of Regenerative Medicine, ten Northridge biology students each year for the next three years will conduct research within the CSUN-UCLA Bridges to Stem Cell Research Program.
- Mechanical Engineering student teams received major awards last spring with their senior design projects – including first-place and overall grand award at the national Intelligent Ground Vehicle Competition.

And our faculty and staff continue to bring excellence to all our work, making meaningful contributions to our region and for our students. Other notable achievements of the past year, again too many to list:

- Last year saw the largest freshman class in our history, with 5,200 new students. More than 10,300 students were eligible to walk in May's commencement ceremonies, also a record.

- Cal State Northridge was named by Forbes as one of the best U.S. undergraduate institutions for quality of teaching, affordability, graduation rates and career prospects for graduates.
- The College of Business and Economics made the *Princeton Review's* list of “Best Business Schools” for the fourth consecutive year.
- Professor Regan Maas in our Center for Geographic Studies took the lead in preparing the Valley Industry and Commerce Association’s (VICA’s) community of interest report for the California redistricting process.
- We hosted our 26th annual International Technology and Persons with Disabilities Conference, the largest of its kind in the world.
- Cal State Northridge was named a Laureate in the 2011 Computerworld Honors Program for the CSU Virtual Information Security Center.
- Our Valley Performing Arts Center was recognized for its green design and construction with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (or LEED) Gold Certification by the U.S. Green Building Council.

These accomplishments are but a sample. The point is, today the very core of our abundance remains the same as I encountered nearly 12 years ago:

- Strong academic programs
- Exceptional and committed faculty and staff
- Focus on students
- Strong capacity to anticipate, respond to and deal with problems and challenges.
- And resilience – tested and proved strong – that allows Cal State Northridge to respond to external forces and continue to fulfill our mission.

But there also are considerable differences in the Cal State Northridge at the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year as compared with our University back in 2000.

It’s easy to begin with the physical campus. When I arrived the University was “birthing” earthquake recovery plans set in motion by President Blenda Wilson and her team. Today we enjoy a beautiful campus – a place of abundance – that says to students, faculty, staff and visitors that the University’s physical environment is designed to help one learn and grow as a student and as a professional.

We have completed construction of new classroom buildings, parking structures, and residence halls, and renovated other campus spaces including the student union and bookstore. We enjoy new and renovated food and gathering places. This January the new Student Recreation Center will open. And, of course, we added new instructional and performance space through the completion and opening of the Valley Performing Arts Center.

While students have always been important to our faculty and staff, we now more intentionally focus on student success. This deliberate focus has brought the campus community together in our work with students. Retention and graduation rates have improved and, critically, the

graduation rates of freshmen from previously underrepresented groups have drawn much closer to the graduation rates of other students. This is an improvement in which I find great pride.

There are many specific examples to show how Cal State Northridge continues to carry out this focus. For example,

- A \$3.75 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to pair faculty researchers with students from underrepresented communities who aspire to be research scientists.
- Our Educational Opportunity Program was awarded a \$1.1 million grant to allow the University to admit 140 more students who are low income or the first in their family to attend college.
- And when our faculty recognized seven of their peers last May for outstanding teaching, counseling, librarianship, scholarship, creative activity, and community service, they chose faculty members who have built their achievements on the engagement and success of their students.

Our University, my friends, is a *place of abundance*, where student success reigns supreme.

We have also now a sharpened focus and understanding of our regional mission. The University in all its 50-plus years has made programmatic decisions consistent with our regional mission, but now we understand and celebrate that mission in new and important ways. Another way of saying this is that Cal State Northridge now believes in itself. We have embraced the regional mission. We are regionally focused with national recognition for the excellence with which we achieve our regional mission.

We have also over the years learned to do and depend on “intentional planning.” Our uncomplicated but focused set of efforts has served us well during treacherous budget times.

Another manifestation of the “belief in self” is the growing sense of identity and pride experienced by so many in this campus community. For me, the reactions of so many of you to the Valley Performing Arts Center bring strong support to this growing identity. I’ve heard many of you in the lobby, in the courtyard, and in the Great Hall exclaim with pride that, “this Center is on *my* campus, *my* University!”

The whole is beginning to be greater than the sum of its parts. People in the San Fernando Valley now understand how consequential Cal State Northridge is for the area’s economic, cultural and intellectual life. People in Los Angeles now understand the strength, quality and educational consequences of what we do. People in Southern California now know what this University stands for. We are quiet no longer. Rather, we have become “loud” and in the future will need to become “louder.”

Once a campus where students were more likely to be seen wearing clothing with the name of other universities, today students proudly wear Cal State Northridge gear. As further evidence of a new sense of campus pride and spirit, this fall we will unveil the Matador statue, on the same day we host the Freshman Convocation, September 8.

One benefit of being loud – of being willing to tell of who we are – donors come to understand our efforts and want to contribute. Recent years have seen notable gifts to the University because such donations are an investment in the future. This year is no exception, with gifts like

scholarship endowments to the College of Engineering and Computer Science from Pradip and Rehka Choksi, and to the Physical Therapy program from Dodger legend Roy Campanella, which also prompted the Dodgers to partner with us, establishing Major League Baseball's first physical therapy student internship.

Our willingness to be "loud" has allowed us to obtain funding in support of our students and their learning. A few examples from last year include:

- The Maurice Amado Foundation's \$500,000 award to the College of Humanities for an endowed professorship in applied Jewish ethics and civic engagement.
- Our Michael D. Eisner College of Education shares with five others in the CSU a \$3 million Workforce Investment Act grant to help at-risk students earn degrees and become teachers.
- A Next Generation Learning Challenges grant secured by math professor Katherine Stevenson to develop a technology-enhanced hybrid lab course model to improve completion in core math courses.

Finally, just as important as any other change has been the nurturing of a campus culture that is transparent, driven by the values of collaboration across all parts of the University and across all constituencies that care about Cal State Northridge. Respect is the preferred communicative posture for members of this community. Outstanding evidence of this maturation of campus culture is the chosen theme of last June's staff service award event: "We Are One: Celebrating Collaboration, Connectivity, and Character." It is in these characteristics of our campus that we find our greatest wealth.

Clearly, California State University Northridge *is a place of abundance*.

To sustain this abundance, let me turn to the third part of this speech, which identifies the key areas of the University's strategic future.

In these convocation addresses, I have been consistently preoccupied with the University's future. This address continues that tradition.

During the past decade we were guided first by four priorities and then by five areas of strategic focus. This past spring the Cabinet identified the major strategic areas for the University's next ten years. Amazingly, we found the five strategic priorities that have guided us in recent years to remain remarkably applicable, but with some important changes.

I lay these out for you today to assure you that Cal State Northridge is in a strong and positive position. During this academic year these areas will remain my preoccupation and the focus of our efforts.

- Academic excellence

This strategic focus remains critical. For the future, we must work to sustain our academic excellence through hiring new faculty with technological savvy and a capacity

for interdisciplinary work. We must look for faculty members who, like our current faculty, are student-focused and learning-focused.

- Student engagement and success

This has been our focus for the past decade plus, and it is imperative to sustain this commitment. We believe, and research tells us, that student engagement in academic-related and co-curricular activities supports higher levels of persistence and achievement of academic goals. Here at Cal State Northridge we've made great strides, but more needs to be done to better our students' graduation rates and close the achievement gap.

Our future resides with students from all demographic groups because the prospects of California and the future of the nation will be determined by whether all have the opportunity to choose their future and to succeed in it.

- Administrative efficiencies and exemplary service

As a new president, I articulated a priority to make the University more "user friendly." Today, that phrase is outmoded, not sufficiently encompassing to capture our needs for the future. Instead, we must focus on administrative efficiencies coupled with exemplary service.

As Cal State Northridge moves forward, we must accomplish and display seemingly contradictory characteristics – we must be efficient, yet with exemplary service to our students, to each other, and to the community.

In order to accomplish this strategic focus, the University will need to build the workforce of tomorrow, and transmit our organizational values and commitment to the University's mission and priorities.

- Comprehensive resource planning – planning for a changing financial environment.

As a new president I also set a priority to increase fundraising. Later we articulated a strategic focus on resource enhancement. We recognized the need to broaden our resources beyond state funding.

For our future, we must assume continued disinvestment by the state in public higher education. We must also assume a business cycle at the state level that is out of sync with our decision-making for budgeting and enrollment.

Our future financial model must include revenue generation, expenditures, and other sources of funds. It must focus on planning for the resources we have, and devising new ways to achieve financial resources sufficient to accomplish our mission. We must view non-state resources as core.

- Regional mission

As a University community we have prioritized community and campus collaboration. Today we're positioned to broaden this with a more intentional and strategic recognition of our regional mission.

The future is ripe with opportunity to use the intellectual capacity of the University to benefit the region. Applied research must be the star and will distinguish us from other universities. We must as a University make choices about which regional issues and solutions we want to commit ourselves to.

- Identity and reputation

I mentioned earlier the University's growing belief in self, the growing sense of identity and pride experienced by so many who are part of this campus community.

We must seek out and celebrate the recognition and the engagement of our faculty, alumni and community. Our more than 200,000 alumni, active in the region, California and the nation, are among the vanguard of leaders – confident, resourceful, optimistic – committed to personal and professional success. We will find evangelists among our alumni who with pride will credit the University as contributing to their success and vocally announce their association with our University. The Valley Performing Arts Center, our athletics programs, and especially our excellent academic programs will bring recognition to the University, and our identity will be a whole that is far more than the sum of its parts.

Last year a group of eighteen alumni volunteered their time and talent as the Special Task Force on Engagement, resulting in a report, *Engaging the Future of California State University, Northridge*, which identifies ways the University can engage alumni and the community in support of our future.

Finally, let me turn our focus to the coming academic year, and then share with you my hopes for how the campus will receive the future campus president.

This semester will be a busy and focused semester for me as I complete my work in serving as this University's fourth president. I will visit for the last time your departmental offices to greet, say thank you and learn what is happening on the front lines. Again, the full-time faculty of the University will be invited to have coffee. We will ask them to let us know what is important to the faculty that I communicate to the future president about Cal State Northridge. Likewise, I will gain further insights into what should be passed along about the needs and current experiences of our students.

I will prepare briefing materials for the next president to help facilitate a smooth transition. I do this remembering that the real core of what makes Cal State Northridge *a place of abundance* was here when I arrived.

This fall we will have our final WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) visit of this accreditation cycle, focusing on our Educational Effectiveness Review. I will continue to focus on the smooth functioning of the Valley Performing Arts Center, as well as work across the University to initiate the recommendations of the Special Task Force on Engagement. We will complete IT Vision@2015, our campus 5-year master plan for information technology. Human Resources will take the lead in an effort to grow our exemplary service. We will continue to implement the new communications platform. The vice presidents and I will continue work on a ten-year resource plan and by December will have established a framework for the next decade. The vice presidents will continue this work during the balance of the year.

And the campus will receive a new president. He or she will know only *some* of what makes this University – this *place of abundance* I now know so well – so special. Certainly the personality, the experience, the strengths and weaknesses of the next president will shape the University’s future. But a key part of that president’s work and efforts here will be shaped by how this campus community receives and helps the new president.

As I close this, my final, convocation address, I offer my hopes for how you in the Cal State Northridge community will receive and support the next person lucky enough to be your president.

We at Cal State Northridge – including faculty and student leadership and our staff – have had a wonderful spirit of collaboration, transparency, dialogue, respect, and civility. In short, we at Cal State Northridge have given each other trust and respect.

Receive this new president with the warmth, trust, collegiality, collaboration, and commitment to students and mission that characterizes our campus culture today.

Receive this new president with the kind of responsiveness for which this great University has come to be known.

Receive the new president with an understanding of our abundance of opportunity, abundance of talent, abundance of differences, abundance of energy, and abundance of transparency.

Allow this new president to experience the abundance of collaboration, respect, collegiality and commitment on this campus.

Then this *place of abundance* will continue to thrive.

There will be other moments in the coming months when it will be appropriate for me to let you know what it has meant to me to be part of this campus community.

Today our focus is the start of another academic year, another year in which we focus on students and serving our region, in this *a place of abundance*.