

“Envision the Future of Cal State Northridge”

Prepared Remarks for the President’s Sixth Annual Convocation

President Jolene Koester
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California State University, Northridge

What a pleasure it is to see so many of you here today, as we officially begin the 48th year of Cal State Northridge’s indispensable service to the people of this region.

Let me begin by acknowledging the people who are seated on the stage with me: Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Harry Hellenbrand, Faculty President Ron McIntyre, and Associated Students President Chad Charton.

Next, I would like to introduce those new to the campus in administrative roles:

- Jerry Stinner**, Dean, College of Science and Mathematics;
- Geetha Thomas**, Assistant Vice President for Resource Management/CSUN Foundation CFO;
- Mark Stevens**, the new Director of University Counseling Services; and
- Diane Ryan**, returning as the Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships.

Plus we have members of the campus community who have taken on new administrative assignments:

- Cynthia Rawitch**, the Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies;
- Mary Ann Cummins-Prager**, the Director of the Center of Disabilities; and
- Ann Morey**, Director of the Career Center.

Many of you are now veteran convocation attendees. This is the sixth time I have gathered with you to talk about the state of the university and to share the challenges before us. In each of the preceding convocation speeches I identified new institutional initiatives to address our priorities and respond to national forces affecting higher education. Today I am going to do something different. Today I am going to ask you to envision the future of our university through the eyes of our students – past, present, and future. I am going to ask you to focus through the lens of the many initiatives underway on individual beliefs and actions as the basis for assuring a strong future.

My message is simple: the elements of this university’s future are present today. To assure that we realize this future, I will not ask for numerous additional initiatives but instead will request that you affirm and support the efforts already underway. I begin by articulating this university’s core mission, now and for tomorrow, which is to sustain an institution committed to student learning and achievement. I am going to address this topic at length. Next I envision current and

future financial realities. Third, I focus on the physical nature of the campus. I conclude by envisioning the future of the university's reputation and capacity for private support. In each of these four areas, I ask you for individual actions to assure a strong collective future.

The heart of what happens here at Cal State Northridge is, of course, about students and learning. Over the past several years we have been involved in numerous initiatives directed at continuing and improving how we engage students in the learning environment. These initiatives allow us to envision a future for the university that includes the continued excellence of our academic programs. But they also help us to see how we must change our taken-for-granted learning practices.

Five years ago we began an examination of our practices and policies as they affected the ability of students to graduate. We did this because our graduation rates were, simply put, too low. Neither then nor now are we talking about lowering standards; rather, our focus is on practices that impede the ability of students to make progress to their degrees. In focusing our priorities on improving the graduation rates of our students, we anticipated the forces of accountability that are now scrutinizing the graduation rates of universities across the country. Close to home, our Board of Trustees has been examining the graduation rates of campuses within the California State University system and it has said that these rates are too low. With high expectations, the Board has identified 20 changes they expect to see in campus practices and policies, which should result in greater student success and higher graduation rates. For instance, they have asked us to require declaration of majors by the sophomore year, to build class schedules that reflect student academic plans, and to change campus practices on student advising. The Trustees expect, as do I, that as students advance to their degrees, we will maintain our high standards while eliminating unnecessary obstacles.

Over the last five years, all of you have addressed this challenge with utmost seriousness. Numerous changes have already been initiated that will improve graduation rates and the ability of our students to achieve success. Most notably, last spring the Faculty Senate completed a year-long study of our General Education program and recommended changes to improve it by reducing its complexity and number of required units. I agree wholeheartedly with those changes, and we are now moving to implement the new program. Please acknowledge with me the members of our faculty committee, chaired by Professor Jennifer Matos, who devoted themselves to this effort.

Two years ago we added a new dimension to the campus conversation by recognizing that simply focusing on graduation rates wasn't enough. Rather, the forces of accountability and our desire to improve our students' educational experiences required us to re-think how learning happens here at Cal State Northridge. There is much we still need to do to change how we value, assess, and award credit for learning. Changing our understanding of the relationship between faculty, students, and what we define as learning will be critical to our envisioned future. In the past, we have used traditional definitions of learning: the accumulation of a certain number of credits, achieved in specified subject areas, and measured by a grade point average. Each unit of credit was based on 15 hours of "seat time," regardless of students' prior knowledge or rate of learning. Also, in general, there has been little overall assessment of whether our academic

programs – not just individual courses within those programs – are successful in helping students achieve specified learning outcomes.

We have made progress in becoming a more learning-centered university. Marilyn Filbeck and the Academic Affairs Assessment Committee, for example, have made major headway in establishing program-level learning outcomes. The national project initiated by the Carnegie Corporation, which is known to so many on campus as Teachers for a New Era (or TNE), is also creating a model in which there are clear and specified learning outcomes for our teacher preparation students. TNE seeks to establish direct evidence of the success of our work with student teachers. Most importantly, a strong partnership exists between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, which is directed at transforming Cal State Northridge into a university firmly grounded in the new concepts, understandings, and expectations of learning in higher education. Underway are numerous projects supported by the Learning-Centered University grants, in which student learning is being designed, assessed, and evaluated differently. The departments within Student Affairs continue with their groundbreaking work of focusing their services directly on student learning.

These initiatives allow us to envision a positive future. Yet all of this work will not be sufficient without one additional contribution. To assure a sound future for Cal State Northridge – a future that is committed to student learning and achievement; a future where all students can graduate; a future where all students define their experiences here as positive – there is an additional change that we must all fulfill. That change is in our individual expectations of students. Today I want to underscore and recognize the integral and direct role we play in student learning. So today I am asking that you embrace, in your daily work life, our commitments to student success.

Let's start from the belief that the students we admit will graduate, and let's work to make that a reality. Let's start by setting high expectations for our students, and then let's help them and hold them accountable for reaching these goals.* The research is very clear about what distinguishes those universities with above-average graduation rates: a shared belief in the collective responsibility for student success is what really makes the difference, and this finding is true for universities both large and small. In short, individuals – not just good institutional processes – make the difference for students. Let's start with the realization that all of us have a role to play in helping students to achieve their educational objectives, regardless of our designated work-role on the campus.

We don't need a new initiative here, and no tasks forces and committee reports are required. Instead I am calling upon you to act on the belief that our students can succeed when we set high expectations, and that it is our responsibility to help them do so. What I request from you can be done immediately, as you leave this gathering and repeatedly over the next days, weeks, and months. What I ask is for each of us – individually and collectively – to take responsibility for the success of our students here. Put more colloquially, I am asking you to embrace the

* The following publication served as a reference for many of the ideas and terms contained in this part of the President's address: Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., Whitt, E.J., and Associates (2005). *Student Success in College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

significance of your individual contributions in setting high expectations for student success. I am asking each of you – consciously, purposefully, and regularly – to find ways to be more helpful to our students, to assist them whenever and however you can, and to empower them to take ownership of their own academic success.

We also have underway two critical initiatives to improve students' progress to graduation. The first addresses what students consistently define as a major concern here at Cal State Northridge: advising. We must be sure that various offices on campus provide consistent and accurate information about policies and requirements, and that our students know where to go to get the right information.

The second initiative relates to how the various offices, departments, and services of the university communicate with students concerning the many steps that are part of the student experience. A student receives communications from academic units, from Admissions and Records, from the financial aid office, from housing, the health center, and many others. These communications must be clear, integrated, consistent, and free of technical language. Communications to students must be timed and sequenced in a way that makes sense to them. Students tell us that sometimes they have difficulty even recognizing that these communications come from Cal State Northridge! The feedback to us is clear; our messages to them must be more understandable, consistent, and with an obvious Cal State Northridge identity.

Because both of these issues – advising and communicating with our students – have been so persistently identified as major areas of concern and confusion for students and their parents, we have been studying them. First, we know that all of you involved in the efforts related to both of these areas are working hard and are doing good work. Instead, the problem is in how the university functions cohesively. Said another way, the university needs to speak and act as a more integrated, coordinated, and effective organization. Let me sum up these problems by using an analogy of a musical group. Imagine that in the advising process or in the communications processes, all of the offices, programs, colleges, and even divisions at Cal State Northridge are musical instruments, each played very well by competent and dedicated musicians. But also imagine that each of these musicians is playing a different part of the tune, or that some of the musicians play one rhythm or tempo while others play another. Cal State Northridge seems to our students to be a cacophony of discordant sounds. We all need to play from the same sheet of music. We have allowed our size and complexity to reduce our efficiency and undermine our effectiveness with students. Certainly the size and the breadth of our programs necessitate some level of decentralization, but during the next year we will be working to coordinate and sequence that decentralization.

As we envision the future of Cal State Northridge, I ask you to recognize that you are part of a team working on behalf of our students. So I ask each of you to be open to new ideas, to share your ideas and comments with others, to work collaboratively with people from other parts of the university, and yes, to set aside the fierce territoriality that so often drives organizational decisions. This is not about more resources but about the challenge of coordinating and integrating our work better. I am confident that we will meet this challenge.

But as we all know, resources are important. So let's talk about the fiscal elements of our envisioned future. Those of you who attended this convocation two years ago may recall the example I used then, of our university family on a journey. Over the years, we have been asked to squeeze into smaller and smaller vehicles in the form of reduced state budgets. There is nothing about our present circumstances that has caused me to re-think the saliency of that analogy; at least for the foreseeable future, the State of California will not provide us with a vehicle large enough to encompass the needs of our family. While we will continue to advocate for more resources from the state, we must also recognize that those resources are unlikely to be provided at the levels we believe we require. Our challenge – and indeed, our only recourse – is to fundamentally rethink how we do our work. As we move to envision our future, we need to re-examine how the administrative, support, and academic endeavors of the university take place, and some of the old metrics and processes must be changed.

The positive financial news for this academic year is that, for the first time in four years, we do have net new resources. Certainly these dollars aren't enough. But given the condition of the state's overall fiscal circumstances, the new dollars and the absence of reductions are positive. I must remind you that, because the baseline reductions in fiscal year 2004-05 were so substantial, our campus decision was to spread those cuts over several years. So each of the divisions this year will still experience some belt-tightening.

Nevertheless, the positives are tangible. For the first time in three years, all of you will be eligible for salary increases from a 3.5 percent compensation pool. I do wish to offer my appreciation to everyone. You have worked tirelessly for this university without our ability to acknowledge your work with salary increases. I am relieved that this year is different, and raises will occur.

The campus has also received marginal cost funding for the new 590 FTES enrollment that we expect this year. In the spring, the Provost approved recruitment of 35 new faculty during this academic year. Because of the centrality of new tenure and tenure-track faculty for this university's future, I have allocated to Academic Affairs an additional \$1 million from the reserve to support an additional 12 new faculty hires. In the year while we are searching for these new faculty, Academic Affairs will use the \$1 million to refresh computers in instructional laboratories across campus and to add about 20 new smart classrooms to our inventory.

Now, I want us to envision the university's future physical environment. Can anyone not be moved by the beauty of this campus? It is obviously no accident that I have chosen the word "Envision" this morning.

During the last 15 months, members of this campus community have developed a master plan for our campus – Envision 2035 – that provides the planning framework for the next 30 years. Chaired by Dr. Bill Jennings, this group of faculty, staff, students, alumni, neighbors, and leaders in the San Fernando Valley has outlined the elements of our physical future.

Envision 2035 has been a vigorous, inclusive, and public process to shape the design of the physical environment that will support the educational and learning process. The Envision 2035 process was designed to consider if and how the campus could grow to a 35,000 full-time-

equivalent student enrollment while providing sufficient academic space, parking, green space, and campus/community gathering spaces. In addition, the committee was asked to develop a plan that would allow us to build much-needed faculty/staff housing, add additional campus space for student housing, and preserve some flexibility to respond to opportunities currently unknown.

I am also delighted to announce that we have begun Phase 1 on a North Campus development project that could include as many as 250 faculty/staff dwelling units, a combination of for-sale and rental. We anticipate breaking ground in late 2006 with completion in 2008. Also, over the next 10 years we plan to increase student housing by 2,000 beds, nearly doubling the number of students who can live on campus. Envision, for a moment, a Cal State Northridge campus where numerous faculty and staff are able to live on the campus, along with 4,000 students, creating a different kind of campus climate.

The new buildings and defined spaces included in this plan add up to an incredible physical renaissance at CSUN. Stand at any point on our campus and you can see a new building, or garden, or parking structure. Stand at any point on our campus and you will feel proud and pleased with the revitalization that has already occurred. Stand at any point on our campus and you can envision future physical additions that are esthetically pleasing and will allow us to fulfill our mission.

For the past three years, I have been asking you to envision with me a world-class performing arts center that would satisfy a 30-year-old dream of community and campus visionaries. This performing arts center complex will serve the educational and cultural needs of our community for generations. The performing arts center facility will not only expand and serve the academic needs of the university, it will also serve as a much-needed signature venue for the San Fernando Valley.

I am very pleased and proud to announce that, on July 1, we kicked off the silent phase of the Imagine the Arts campaign that will last approximately five years, to support this \$100 million project, with approximately 50 percent of those funds coming from the state and 50 percent to be raised through private support. The goal is to have it opening and functioning in late 2009.

But let me be clear: this project is not just about creating a magnificent new building or support for the performing arts. It is about cementing our unique role as the intellectual, cultural, and financial heart of the San Fernando Valley and beyond. This project will benefit every aspect of the university and will result in many significant partnerships between the university and our community.

The possibilities for increasing our partnerships leads me to the fourth and final portion of this speech, as we envision a future in which the university receives even more recognition and support from our community.

In last year's convocation address, I said that "people were talking about us." I described the growing evidence that Cal State Northridge was increasingly being recognized, not only locally but nationally, for the excellence of its programs, the success of its alumni, the quality of its partnerships in the community, and the ever-expanding role we play in this region.

Thanks to the excellent work and the generosity of faculty, staff, deans, our alumni, and our community friends, our fundraising accomplishments remain strong. In 2004-05, we received a \$7.3 million gift from the estate of Jack and Mary Bayramian for scholarships to support student success. This gift is significant not only because of its size and purpose, but because of why it was made. Mary Bayramian greatly appreciated the support she received from faculty and staff here, which led – so many years later – to her vision to give back to the university. This is the consequence of what I have asked, that each of us take responsibility for the success of our students.

Last year I said that we would begin to focus on establishing chairs and professorships in the colleges. Each college now has a development plan that includes the objective of at least one, and in most cases several, chairs and professorships. As a result of the generosity of three Cal State Northridge alumni this past year, we now have a newly-named chair in the College of Business and Economics, a newly-named chair in the College of Engineering and Computer Science, and a new professorship in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The deans, their development directors, and, yes, the faculty and staff in every department must continue to build on our recent successes in raising private funds. As individuals, we can all help with this effort in a variety of ways — by strengthening relationships with our former students, by sharing our individual contacts in the community, by integrating our partnerships with area businesses and organizations.

One of the “perks” of being the president of Cal State Northridge is that I often receive, from so many people in so many places, accolades for the excellence of what all of you accomplish here. I also have the opportunity to hear of people’s passions for the university. Because of the hopes and dreams of so many people, including our students, for our Intercollegiate Athletics program, I am establishing a Blue Ribbon Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics to envision a strong, competitive, and well-supported Division I athletics program for our future. Vice President Mo Qayoumi will chair this commission and Dr. Cedric Dempsey, president emeritus of the NCAA, will serve as a consultant. They will work through the fall. Efforts to build our reputation in the greater Los Angeles basin must continue. We will continue to depend on the fiscal and reputational support of this university by the people who live in this region.

I have asked you, at various points in this speech, to take personal action in order to assure our strong future as a university. Here the action that I ask from each of you — to ensure the strength of this university’s reputation and place in the greater Los Angeles area — is a simple one. I am asking you to focus on our considerable achievements, and to celebrate them. I am asking you to express your pride and satisfaction with what we do. I am asking you to tell others about us, perhaps even to boast a bit about who we are. I am asking you to help me get out our incredible message about the excellence of the education our students receive, about our commitment to learning, and about the indispensable ways that we serve the people of this region.

The envisioned future of Cal State Northridge is strong but it requires not just institutional initiatives but individual commitments and actions. These must come from all of us if we are to realize fully the incredible potential that the plans already underway can provide.

From the heart of the university, which is in student success and achievement, to our finances, to our physical campus, and our support from the greater community, there are daily opportunities for each of us to make a difference. The choice is yours. The choice is ours. As for me, I envision a Cal State Northridge that will be greater than we have ever been and even greater than we can imagine it to be.