

Faculty Meeting Remarks October 29, 2009

Well, here we are again! I am so pleased that you found time in your very busy schedules to join me today for a discussion about how we should manage our future. The choices ahead of us are momentous, and I am here to seek your counsel and advice as I do my best to position USM for success. Today's all-faculty meeting is an opportunity for me to hear directly from you. I stand here today not only as your leader but as your colleague, someone—like you—who pours her heart into this wonderful university. We may be beleaguered financially, but we are also intensely in-the-moment, acutely aware that if we employ our strengths in the most creative ways possible, we will survive and prosper.

Before we get to the future, let me provide a budget update on where we are today. If you attended one of the Town Meetings this

week, you heard these figures, so please bear with me as I bring your colleagues up to speed.

You've heard this story before: state tax revenues continue to plummet, the prospect of any quick—or even near-future—return to even level funding has become as unrealistic as it is desirable. This is a sober time for public higher education in Maine. We cannot bank any longer on the 35 cents on the dollar that the State has contributed to a USM education. We certainly can't expect tuition increases to pick up the slack. The message that is abundantly clear is that it is up to public education to sort out its own problems. We're pretty much on our own.

So let's get the bad news out of the way right at the start: The State has asked the University of Maine System to prepare a \$7.4 million budget cut in FY 2010, with another cut of \$7.5 million in FY 2011. This translates into a mid-year reduction of \$1,746,000 for USM. These cuts

come at the same time that our expenses continue to go up: increased energy costs, financial aid, library subscriptions, salaries, emergency repairs, severance costs, and so forth.

Enrollment fell again this fall; student credit hours declined by 1%.

Out-of-state student credit hours fell by 5%. This resulted in the loss of tuition and fee revenues of \$1 million. The combined projected budget deficit for FY 2010 is now \$2.7 million, and we must eliminate it by the end of this fiscal year.

The good news is that we held back stimulus funding last year. That means that in addition to this year's \$1.35 million in stimulus funding for FY 2010, we still have \$884,000 from last year to apply to our deficit. However, even with the infusion of federal dollars, we are \$807,000 in the hole. And once again, we have no money for re-investment or growth. Fiscal year 2011 looks even more daunting. The System has decided to hold back next year's stimulus funds to

use in a Strategic Investment Fund. The landing next year will be extremely hard unless we increase our revenue base.

One way to do this is to rebuild the size of our student body. We need to bring in new students and keep those who are already enrolled. For you as faculty, it also means developing academic programs that students are interesting in studying.

Some faculty will jump at the chance to create something new.

Others will resist. We could say, "Well, at least we can still open the doors. If we're very, very careful with our pennies, we'll pull through these times, and our way of life will survive." In truth, I don't think this is a reasonable approach. In fact, it has a far too Dickensian feel to it. Do we really aspire to the shabby, pinched gentility of Little Dorrit, eking out a meager existence on the margins of the poor house and utterly dependent on rescue by some long-lost uncle?

I'm not attracted by the prospect of some sort of romantic martyrdom. Like Little Dorrit's tenuous hold on respectability, higher education might cling to the status quo and its increasingly reduced prospects and wait for a savior. But I, for one, don't think this will work. I don't think we can turn our backs on the need to re-imagine and, therefore, reenergize our academic business model for this university. We cannot contribute willingly to decline and hasten the day when we will do nothing well, many things poorly, and quite a few things no more at all.

We must act so that programmatic offerings do not erode, opportunities for faculty research and scholarship do not decline, but most importantly our ability to serve the common good is not fatally undermined.

We cannot put off the day of reckoning in the hope of better days.

I've been a faculty member. I understand the appeal of this way of

thinking only too well. However, I would be less than candid if I didn't sound the alarm about the consequences of this approach at this moment in the history of public higher education in Maine and this nation.

Public higher education across America is under attack. Look at what is happening in California, Arizona, Wyoming, Florida, or closer to home, across the border in Massachusetts: eliminations of faculty lines, unpaid furlough days, program and service cuts—and the spectral prospect of the end of stimulus funding next year along with the now-general expectation that tax revenues supporting higher education will continue to lag behind any general economic recovery for a considerable time. It will take years to climb out of this trough.

We must find a way to generate the intellectual and cultural *frisson* to which every academic aspires. We must find a way to generate

that 'buzz' so appealing to prospective students who are making their educational choices on so much more than just our proximity.

I foresee a reborn USM that takes pride in its status as the State's only comprehensive university and tailors its programmatic offerings imaginatively in support of its mission. This new USM has at least three—maybe four—new signature programs that draw large numbers of students to us from around the State, the region, the nation, and the world. Our nationally recognized core curriculum and Student Success Centers are widely recognized as models in higher education, and students and their parents see them as determining elements in their choice of universities. I imagine marketing our experiential learning opportunities, the widest variety in Maine, as a powerful example of USM's commitment to engaged education. And most importantly, I foresee a steadily rising proportion of our students graduating and offering testimonials that

repeat and reinforce a message that will seize the imagination of our State: USM is creating Maine's future—every student, every day.

We have the talent and the intellectual gifts to rise to this challenge. I seek your counsel and support as I strive to negotiate the inevitable changes facing USM. The immediate task at hand involves organizational streamlining. It is hardly radical to point out that USM has far too many small departments that tax our institutional resources at a time when every dime is precious. These tiny programs graduate too few students. Your challenge as faculty is to come up with new units—faculties, departments, call them what you will—within which your teaching, scholarship, and research can continue and prosper. Housing a mix of new and old majors, these fewer, larger units will not only provide you with those essential support services that make your work possible, but also free resources that can then be applied strategically within academic affairs to improve

the quality of instruction, the support of research and scholarship, or development of more new or updated programs.

Many faculty have been incredibly receptive to thinking anew, others deeply resistant. I understand the reluctance. Change in academia is hard. But the departments and majors that made sense a generation ago are now due for reconsideration, revision, renewal, or elimination in order to fund offerings that will not only draw students to USM, but inspire you as faculty.

Now let's use this opportunity to face our fears together as colleagues, to embrace the necessity of change at this moment in our history, and to thumb our noses at the perils of the moment as we respond with a burst of impassioned creativity. Now I want to hear from you. Questions, responses, observations?