

2009 UNIVERSITY CONVOCATION REMARKS
Delivered by Executive Vice President and Provost, Julie H. Sullivan, Ph.D.
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I would like to focus my remarks this afternoon on our on-going commitment to academic excellence. Last year, I focused my convocation remarks on our academic planning process and the key components the deans and faculty articulated as integral to our USD vision for academic excellence. I described the primacy you give to ensuring the high quality and personal nature of our teaching and the intellectual vibrancy of our research, scholarship, and creative activity. I also described four attributes you identified as university-wide strengths: interdisciplinary collaboration, global engagement, sustainability (environmental, economic, and social justice), and leadership.

Since then the deans and faculty provided further input to the development of a document titled, "Increasing USD's Academic Excellence and Distinction: Charting our Path for 2009 to 2014," which articulates our teaching, research, and other strengths and the goals and related strategies for the next five years that will guide our course as we continue building on our strengths. I won't recap that document here. It is available on my Web site for those of you who want to reference it.

Today, I want to talk about the progress we recently have made in pursuing our goals and highlight a few of the related goals we are poised to achieve this upcoming year. First, let me describe the students and faculty whom you have recruited to join the USD community this fall. The accomplishments of our students and faculty, both now and in the future, drive our academic reputation.

I am thrilled to share with you that we welcomed the most academically qualified and most diverse freshman class EVER to USD this fall. Diversity is a vital component of our academic excellence, allowing us to teach, learn and discover in a community of multiple perspectives, cultures, and traditions. Based on available data to date, this is the first time the digit to the right of the 3 and the decimal point in the average high school GPA is an 8, the first time the first two digits of the average SAT are 12, and the first time the first digit in the percent of students from underrepresented groups is a 3.

Our graduate and law student incoming classes also are impressive. Across all of our many graduate and law programs, the number of matriculating students exceeded or met our enrollment goals, and several programs reported significant increases in the academic profiles of their incoming students. For example, our incoming law school classes (both day and evening) boast a rise in the average undergraduate GPA of their students from 3.35 to 3.44 (and 3.27 two years ago), while maintaining their outstanding LSAT average.

Likewise, with the new faculty you recruited to USD this year. Again, I dare say that this may be the most diverse and academically qualified group of new faculty we have ever welcomed to USD. Between January 2009 and 2010, 30 new faculty will join us. They

hail from 11 different countries: Ukraine, China, Israel, South Africa, Jordan, India, Spain, Ecuador, Belgium, Vietnam, and of course the United States (which includes one Native American and one African American). Among the many outstanding universities where these faculty earned their Ph.D.'s and J.D.'s are Stanford, Duke, Princeton, MIT, University of Chicago, Harvard, and many more.

These faculty will play an important role, along with the colleagues who attracted them, in building and strengthening areas of strategic importance to our Schools and the College as each unit seeks to advance their own academic reputation and thus in turn continue to attract outstanding students and faculty.

For example, I will highlight one or two areas of **emerging** excellence for each school and the college that will be significantly strengthened by the faculty who join us this year.

College of Arts and Sciences – the arts, including theatre and architecture

School of Business – finance

Engineering – energy, specifically solar technology

School of Law – intellectual property

School of Leadership and Education Sciences – educational technology

School of Nursing – psychiatric and trauma nursing (including developing resilience in families and individuals facing illness, war, or other major trauma)

School of Peace Studies – development and also international human rights (as a result of a joint appointment with the law school)

Of course, in addition to these areas of emerging excellence, there are also many areas of established excellence our new faculty will be contributing to, as well.

This afternoon, I also am extremely proud to share with you some recent and very significant accomplishments of our current faculty, particularly with regard to their success in securing external grants and contracts. I highlight this success because not only are these awards important sources of funding, but perhaps even more importantly, they are a source of external validation for the quality of the work (both research and teaching) in which our faculty are engaged.

In the past two months (July and August), our faculty have been awarded a total of approximately \$2.5 M in grants and contracts, with several more expected to be awarded any day now! This is an extraordinary accomplishment!

So with all of this exciting news as a backdrop, what goals and priorities are we poised to achieve this upcoming academic year? I will highlight four important areas where we are

poised to make significant progress this year. These are: retention, inclusion and diversity, contract and grant support, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Retention

The academic reputation of our university is not only driven significantly by the profile of the students we matriculate, but also by the percentage of these students we retain and graduate. Current thought indicates that these latter metrics, retention and graduation rates, will play an increasingly prominent role in assessing the quality of universities.

Clearly retention and graduation rates are important for all of our programs, graduate, law, and undergraduate. Focusing on our undergraduates for a moment, historically, USD's freshmen to sophomore retention rate has lagged its peers and hovered around 85%. Thus, this upcoming year, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs will collaboratively implement a comprehensive retention plan, under the leadership of Dr. Jim Gump and Mr. Merrick Merino, with a goal over the next three years of increasing (and sustaining) the retention rate of first year students to at least 90%, which is equivalent to our peer benchmark.

So what role do each of you have to play in our reaching this undergraduate goal and also continuing to improve our graduate and law retention rates? Does anyone know the Nigerian proverb "Ora na azu nwa?" (Those of you who attended the Black Student Orientation do.) It means, "It takes the community/village to raise a child."

Hilary Clinton, during her service as the former First Lady, wrote a book released in 1996 titled, "It Takes a Village" based on this African proverb. I quote from her book – "And we have learned that to raise a happy, healthy, and hopeful child, it takes a family, it takes teachers, it takes clergy, it takes business people, it takes community leaders, it takes those who protect our health and safety, it takes all of us. Yes, it takes a village."

Now, let's translate this to a USD student's experience. "To graduate a happy, healthy, and hopeful USD student, it takes a family, it takes professors, it takes coaches, it takes ministers, it takes the professional staff in student life and all other areas of campus, it takes peers, it takes mentors, it takes those who protect our health and safety, it takes all of us. Yes, it takes a village."

I encourage and thank each of you for playing your role in the USD village which supports and retains our students.

Inclusion and Diversity

Under the outstanding leadership of Dr. Alberto Pulido and Mr. Steve Pultz, the President's Advisory Board on Inclusion and Diversity (PABID) concluded their work last year by providing the President with recommendations for continuing to move our vital diversity and inclusion program forward. These included recommendations surrounding diversity of place, diversity of people, diversity in pedagogy, diversity of life

experiences, and diversity of culture and community. The PABID also recommended the creation of a center with dedicated staff to serve as a focal point for our diversity and inclusion program.

During my tenure at USD, I have never experienced such enormous positive momentum surrounding our diversity and inclusion program. There is great energy, enthusiasm, and creative thought going into this work. We are poised this year to reach even greater heights in ensuring that USD is a diverse and inclusive community.

Contract and Grant Support

As I mentioned earlier, our faculty have been much more active and extremely successful in securing large (often federally funded) grants and contracts. Since the retirement of the former Director last spring, our Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) has functioned quite well under the leadership of our Interim Director, but admittedly with a reduced staff. This fall, we will begin a national search for the Director position. This year will be a time of growing and expanding our staff's capability of providing pre-award promotion and proposal development support, both of which are critical to our faculty's continued success.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

This year we will continue to strengthen our academic excellence by building on our unique breadth and depth of interdisciplinary collaboration at USD. Our world becomes more interconnected every day. The problems of our future are complex, multi-dimensional, and integrated with one another. They will best be approached through a new lens which often results from cross disciplinary collaboration.

In fact, some of you may have seen Professor Mark Taylor's, chair of the religion department at Columbia University, recent call for the end of the university education model with majors as we know them today, which he refers to as a discipline specific, mass-production model, and for the creation of a new customized model of education with majors centered around problems, like Water, for example. However, while Water is certainly an interdisciplinary major, synthesizing knowledge from the humanities, sociology, and the natural sciences, it is not an isolated problem.

In my view, our new environmental studies major, which we will roll out this year, takes Professor Taylor's suggestion one step further. Not only, does it recognize that water is a multi-faceted problem, it also recognizes that water is a problem integrated with other problems. If you want to deal with water, you also have to deal with climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty alleviation, and the need to grow enough food to feed the planet. Our sustainable success in addressing any one of these issues will depend on solutions that are as integrated with one another as nature itself.

Similarly, another new initiative for this upcoming year, the Responsible Enterprise Initiative, also reflects this interdisciplinary, as well as integrated perspective. It reflects a

USD approach of finding integrated solutions to integrated problems. The REI is a collaborative effort between the School of Business and the School of Peace Studies to promote new generations of “change makers” who develop innovative approaches for achieving the “triple-bottom line” – people, profit, and planet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am so proud of what we have accomplished, and I am so excited about our future! While, like everyone else, we live in an environment of constrained resources, I am confident we will continue our journey along the path of greater academic excellence at as rapid a pace as ever. As President Lyons has just so purposefully and eloquently reminded us this afternoon, although we are “comparatively speaking” a young university, our foundation is strong, and our roots run very deep.

Thank you.