
**State of the University Address
August 26, 2010**



David L. Parkyn, President

We never tire of the first day of school. We draw on a distinctive source of energy at this time of year. I saw it two weeks ago in Diana Park's eyes as she entered Carlson Tower, her arms loaded with equipment for her lab. I saw it in the eyes of four new RDs as we enjoyed lunch in our home a few days ago. I saw the same energy in the eyes of several new faculty members—both younger and older educators—when we had dinner together last week. I saw it in the eyes of Troy Edwards as the women's soccer team gathered around him for practice last week. I even saw it in the eyes of Donnie Blunk and his crew of student painters who have every reason to be exhausted rather than energized by the demands on their work as the school year approached. I see it in your eyes this morning; I hope you see it also in mine. We are educators—we never tire of the first day of school.

In this excitement we wonder how the year will go. How close will we come to fully realizing our expectations for the year?

We know this for certain: the year won't go exactly as planned. Two years ago we had high expectations for the year and we had to rescue these expectations from the flooding waters of the Chicago River. Last year we had high expectations and these were interrupted five times by the unexpected deaths of campus colleagues and students. Such experiences teach us we are stronger together than any of us is individually. They teach us to lift our eyes to the hills and to know God who keeps our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 121). We know for certain we will be surprised this year, and in this surprise we will look to God and be strengthened.

The Past Year

In reflecting further on this past year we can celebrate several important accomplishments.

- As a University we received some encouraging external recognition: the Faith-in-Action Award from Casa Central, the Andringa Award for Advancing Racial Harmony from the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll for the second consecutive year. Recognition also came through a profile of North Park in Samuel Schuman's book, *Seeing the Light*, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Public recognition like this affirms our goal in the University's strategic plan to claim a "distinctive, ownable, and sustainable 'space' for North Park in American higher education."

- Additionally this past year we increased our embrace of Chicago as a place of learning. There are many examples of this; I'll mention only two. The number of students completing for-credit internships increased by 40% over two years ago, and the number of students participating in activities sponsored through UMin's Urban Outreach program increased by 57% over the past two years and by nearly 90% over the past three years. These increases in urban initiatives affirm the goal in our strategic plan to embrace Chicago as a resource for strengthening our educational program.
- Through the National Survey on Student Engagement we learned of our considerable achievement in providing what NSSE calls "Enriching Educational Experiences." Indeed, when compared to other colleges and universities we excel in offering learning experiences that draw on relationships with others, especially others who are different from us. This is evidence that the commitment and dedication of our faculty and staff, coupled with our location in the heart of Chicago, come together in special ways to advance student learning. The NSSE results affirm the goal of our strategic plan to offer students a transformational education which reflects the distinctive learning community at North Park.
- There were many other accomplishments this past year. New academic programs were introduced in environmental science and criminal justice. The undergraduate nursing program was reaccredited for a ten-year period. We celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Axelson Center. Our Chicagoland advertising campaign was very well received. The faculty completed a review of major portions of MAPP. The spring semester play, Legitimate Geniuses, written and directed by junior Stephanie Weber was performed by our students at the Neo-Futurarium, a well-regarded site on Chicago's storefront theater circuit. We organized and hosted the 4-Days-4-Justice workshop on evangelism and justice. The first year of the Collaboratory for Urban and Intercultural Learning began with the Student Diversity Leadership Conference and ended with a grand Multicultural Awards Dinner. Two graduating seniors received Fulbright Awards and another was appointed for service in the Teach for America program. And the year came to a close with a great commencement weekend which included a Baccalaureate Service for all graduates at a downtown location, three commencement convocations on a single day, and a jubilant celebration by alumni returning for their 50th year class reunion.
- Over the summer months we completed a number of improvements to our campus facilities: a new indoor and outdoor entrance to the gymnasium; a complete repainting and recarpeting of Ohlson House and improvements to common areas in Anderson Hall; new windows in Old Main; new furniture in some academic spaces; repairs to Isaacson Chapel; new infield turf in the Holmgren Athletic Complex and renovated locker rooms in the gymnasium; and a number of smaller projects across the campus.

These accomplishments cross nearly every part of our campus community and are the result of our combined efforts. I extend my thanks and the appreciation of the Board of Trustees to each of you for your dedication to our common life together.

Entering the New Year

I'm pleased to report we are prepared for the coming year in two important ways.

First, we have achieved our recruitment goals for both first-year and transfer students. This achievement comes in spite of some exceptional challenges. During the spring semester our student recruitment numbers for the coming year were trailing far behind historic patterns. We were alert to some of the factors which led to this decline in deposits in mid-spring and we were uncertain of others. What we knew for certain was that we had to respond.

And we responded. Under Mark Olson's leadership our colleagues in the admissions and financial aid offices faced up to the challenge; this group emphasized proven tactics from past years and implemented some new practices, put in long hours, and did everything necessary to assure the entering class we desired.

We often said during this past year that recruitment is everyone's business, and so the credit also goes beyond the admissions team. I want to note three good examples.

- Nearly one-third of entering students come to North Park as student-athletes with an interest in joining one or more of our intercollegiate sports teams. This means coaches play an important role in the student recruitment process. This year more students than ever were recruited by the combined effort of coaches and admissions personnel and as a result in many cases our athletic teams are larger than they have ever been.
- This year we will enroll 179 international students. 93 are new to North Park this year—40 degree-seeking undergraduates, 31 year-long exchange students, 14 ESL students, and 9 graduate students. 37 of these new students are from Sweden, as we might expect, but 34 are Korean, 15 are Norwegian, 11 are Polish, and 7 are Chinese. In addition, approximately 60 domestic students will study abroad this year. Who makes possible this international exchange of scholars? Jen Pope and Ann-Helen Anderson are central to the effort.
- On Thursday of this past week I received an email from the father of new student. Here's part of what he wrote, with family names removed:

I have a daughter who will be starting school next week at North Park. We have been getting her ready, figuring out finances, hoping we have taught her well ... all those things parents do in the final weeks before they send off a part of themselves.

One thing parents don't need at this time is trouble communicating with the school about finances or schedules or ... anything.

North Park has been a joy to work with every step of the way. From the Preview Day last spring, to assistance from our daughter's admissions counselor (I believe his name is Ty), to Pastor Judy responding to an email from my wife, and in the last few weeks the quick communication from Carolyn Lach and Ligia Amarei in Financial Aid and Student Services has been ... well ... a pleasant surprise! I expected to have to contact several people several times over several days (thus email and voicemail messages to different people). Instead, Carolyn actually called me back within a few hours of my initial call and I received an email from Ligia within the same time frame. Carolyn talked to me until I understood what I needed to understand!

Your administrative staff at North Park has given us the confidence that our daughter is going to a school that genuinely cares and will help her become all God desires her to be even before the first day of class. We are counting on the faculty to be as good as the administration! And I am sure they are.

Here is clear evidence that recruiting students means much more than having them apply and accepting them. Were it not for the work of Ty, Judy, Carolyn, and Ligia over the summer months this young woman would not be enrolling at North Park. Recruitment is everyone's business

Second, we are prepared for the coming school year in another important way: we have a budget in place which will serve us well. Our budget this year reaches nearly \$50 million, representing close to a \$3 million increase over last year. Over 75% of this increase comes from tuition for traditional undergraduate students who continue to be our primary source of revenue.

This increase of nearly \$3 million has been allocated in a number of ways. Over half of it supports an increase in faculty and staff compensation including a proposed raise and increased expenses for employee benefits. Additionally, the budget supports eight new positions: a faculty appointment in the School of Education, a faculty appointment in the seminary, a chemical hygiene officer, an internship coordinator, two positions in admissions—a recruiter and a position to support marketing content and social media, and two positions to support increased student participation in athletics—a director of student athlete support and an assistant director of athletic training. Other parts of the budget increase support replacement of significant cuts made last year in our technology budget, increases in external contracts, and modest adjustments (in the aggregate) for program budgets across the university.

There are a number of proposed initiatives which the budget does not support; we'll continue to review these into the coming year. And as always, we will need to monitor

the budget throughout the year as it is contingent on student enrollment which is our largest source of revenue.

I want to thank budget managers who worked with us to prepare the annual budget and who find ways to do as much as possible with the funds allocated to their respective area. In addition, Carl Balsam and Les Carlstrom continue to provide very effective leadership for institutional finances; our deep thanks to them.

Planning for the New Year

As is our tradition, during the summer months the senior leadership team prepared a list of tasks, initiatives, and priorities which should be addressed during the coming year. This rather long list will be distributed to all faculty and staff within the next week. During the early weeks of the semester this document will be reviewed and discussed by several groups including the Deans' Council, the University Faculty Senate, and the University Council. Once we receive input from these groups, and any individuals who wish to comment on it, the statement of priorities will be presented to the Board of Trustees in October.

From this extensive list of priorities I have selected just six to briefly discuss today.

- **Accreditation Review.** Over the past year we've prepared for our ten-year review by the Higher Learning Commission. Provost Jones, Robert Stanley, and Elizabeth Ritt led a collaborative effort involving a large segment of our campus community in preparing a self-study report. This report will serve the peer review team as their primary reference in preparing for their campus visit in mid-November. We expect this review process to affirm our work at North Park as well as identify select areas where improvement is necessary.
- **Institutional Leadership.** During this year we will appoint people to several important leadership positions. These include two members of the University's senior leadership team (in enrollment and marketing and the seminary), three deans (in the Schools of Nursing, Music, and Adult Learning), and several director level positions. These searches require diligence on the part of many and if undertaken properly will advance the effectiveness of our educational program over years to come.
- **The University Faculty Senate.** Under the capable guidance of Nancy Arneson as president and Al Kaminski as vice president, this will be the inaugural year for the University Faculty Senate. This year offers the opportunity to set the trajectory for our work together over years to come. I'm confident that during this year the University Senate, working in collaboration with Provost Jones, will (a) embrace those leadership responsibilities assigned to the faculty and fulfill them in ways which assure a high quality educational program, (b) identify and contribute to those areas where the counsel of the faculty can foster effective administrative leadership of the university at large, and (c) promote a dynamic

program of faculty development and foster an engaging and active campus learning environment.

- **Development.** Two years ago we introduced the dream of constructing a new campus building to support the sciences and campus community life. At \$42 million this is a big project for us. I'm pleased to note we have made good progress toward this dream and to date have raised commitments from lead donors which exceed half the expected building cost. Over the coming year members of our development team and I will continue to work toward this goal.

This year we expect to involve the campus community in this fund raising effort in two important ways. First, with your involvement we will initiate a campus-based mini-campaign so all members of our campus community can contribute to this project. Second, we will invite some of you to join us in organizing another mini-campaign designed to engage graduates who are doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals as donors toward this important campus project.

Beyond this, our fund raising efforts are far enough along that we now need to advance the architectural design of the new building. Faculty in the sciences will visit a number of recently constructed science teaching facilities at other colleges and universities. From this we'll learn how best to design our new building. Additionally, the campus community—faculty and staff as well as students—will be invited to participate in a number of design charettes. These highly participatory and engaging sessions, led by our architectural team, will help us design a building to effectively support community life, excellent teaching, collaborative research, and active learning. This design work will require our best and most creative efforts.

- **Campus Ethos.** On several occasions last year I encouraged us to “walk alongside our students.” In response to my comments some of you have described to me how you walk alongside students and your encouraging and insightful comments have alerted me to an area where we should invest a little more effort.

A few years ago in preparing our strategic plan we reviewed our mission, vision, and institutional identity. Since then we've been successful in framing a common vocabulary for telling the North Park story.

In this same part of the strategic plan we also identified seven ideals which describe the distinctive educational experience students can expect at North Park. In the second year of this strategic plan I wrote a brief essay on each ideal and distributed the essays with my monthly campus communiqués. Since that time we haven't done much to bring these ideals to the forefront of our community discourse. We need to re-engage this discussion to increase our common understanding of and commitment to these ideals. When we regard these ideals as central to our mission and identity they will mold our curriculum at

all levels—undergraduate, graduate, and seminarian, shape all our co-curricular programs, and provide overall guidance and direction for our entire educational program.

But my point this morning is more personal and individual: the best way for each of us to walk alongside students is to identify one or more of these ideals which we individually can embrace in our respective area of responsibility. We don't all need to be responsible for all seven ideals. Rather if each of us selects one or two for our special attention, through our combined individual efforts we'll transform these ideals from mere rhetoric into the reality of everyday campus life at North Park. And when we do so student lives will be transformed.

I thought about this in a new way two weeks ago while in church on a Sunday morning. One of the texts for the day was from the early verses of Hebrews 12: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." This is the image we should claim: when we walk alongside our students we offer them a great cloud of witnesses which sustains our students as they run toward the goal of preparing for a life of significance and service. Together we can form a beautiful cumulus cloud through which we wrap our arms around our students as they run the race before them. This is our highest responsibility as a community of educators. The fundamental ethos of our work together must derive from a commitment to walk alongside our students.

- Retention. We worked this past year to increase undergraduate student retention. And here is the result: our retention rate for undergraduate students dropped to its lowest point in over a decade. Two simple examples can illustrate why this is important. First, 45 to 50 students who would have been here with the retention rate of previous years are not with us this year and likely will not return to North Park. Second, this drop in retention rate represents a loss in net revenue of over half a million dollars, a loss for which there is no simple fix on the expense side of the University ledger, and a loss of funds that could otherwise assist us in many areas to make North Park a more compelling place for student learning. A decrease in our retention rate of this dimension is an urgent matter, one we cannot ignore.

Asking us to increase retention can be somewhat abstract so let me draw the picture clearly and simply. The goal is this: to assure that as many students as possible complete their first year and enroll into their second year. Once students are enrolled in their third semester it is highly likely they will graduate. So our goal is simple: get each student into his or her third semester at North Park.

Over the summer we worked with a consultant to review our support for undergraduate student retention. The consultant's report will help us work

smarter and you'll hear more of this throughout the year. One new initiative is a series of Bridge events, a new program designed to engage undergraduate students in campus life during the first weeks of the semester. Research identifies the first five or six weeks of the semester as crucial to student success—the more new students connect with campus life the more likely they are to persist. The Bridge events will promote this, but they will succeed only if we each choose to participate in several of these activities. So please, let's get involved.

But there is a larger challenge. We need to assure a more effective, more cohesive, and more engaging first year experience for our undergraduate students. We have a lot going on during the student's first year—through both the curriculum and the co-curriculum—but we have been delinquent in forming these disparate activities into a cohesive whole. We need to correct this and we need to do so with a sense of urgency.

In asking us to address our undergraduate students' first year experience I'm not proposing something radical. In fact, I am simply asking us to give attention to a program area which hundreds of colleges and universities across America have addressed over the past two decades. Put another way, I'm simply asking us to adopt at North Park what has been proven to be a best practice in undergraduate education at schools both large and small.

By definition the undergraduate first year experience crosses many boundaries. It embraces the curriculum and the co-curriculum, general education and residence life, athletics and University Ministries, career development and supplemental instruction, commuters and residential students, Monday morning and Saturday night. In other words, everyone who works with undergraduate students is responsible for part of the first year experience.

During September I will bring together a cross-sectional working group to address this challenge at North Park. I will bring the group together because it must be representative of this wide array of curriculum, programs, and offices. As the group gathers I will offer my initial thoughts on the challenges at hand, and then I will ask the group to take the baton. We will provide the resources necessary for the group to learn from the experiences of colleagues in other colleges and universities. And then we will expect the group to guide us as an institution into developing a renewed undergraduate first year experience.

This project links directly with a major goal in the University's strategic plan: to develop an educational program of measurably improved quality which reflects the distinctive learning community at North Park." We must address the challenge of undergraduate retention with a heightened sense of urgency and we'll do this by giving very careful and deliberate attention to the students' first year experience. I'm open to any number of approaches to this. I'm foreclosed

in only one way: doing nothing is not an option. We will move quickly on this because the need is urgent.

As I conclude my comments on this topic I remind us of something larger. Retention doesn't depend on a working group proposing a new program. Rather both recruitment and retention depend on each of us being alert to the needs of students around us. In the early weeks of the semester this means some rather simple things. Keeping an eye out for the student who is wandering across the campus, hoping someone will help by pointing the way. When you see this student, don't point the way; rather walk with the student all the way to their destination. Keep an eye out for the student who is alone and in need of companionship. Remember the loneliness you experienced when you first left home, greet the student, introduce yourself, learn just a little of their story. And in the early weeks of the semester go out of your way to attend a concert, a game, a performance or some other campus event. It is these seemingly little ways in which we walk alongside our students which grows their bond to our community and helps them find their collegiate home at North Park.

These then are six areas of importance to us in the year ahead: accreditation review, institutional leadership, the University Faculty Senate, development and facilities planning, campus ethos, and student recruitment and retention. Each of these is important and each requires our collaborative efforts. Thank you for joining me in this work.

Closing Thought

During the summer I have periodically reflected on words taken from a general thanksgiving written centuries ago by a now anonymous Christian liturgist. In the middle of this prayer of thanksgiving are these words:

We thank you for setting us to tasks which demand our best efforts,
and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

These words ring true for me when I think of my place at North Park; I pray they ring true for you as well. God calls us to this time and place, sets before us important tasks and invites us to bring to them our best efforts, and promises accomplishments which will satisfy and delight our souls.

The road is long, yet I rejoice that we travel together. May God bless each of us this year in our individual vocations and in our collective life on this campus. Thank you for your dedication to the students of North Park.