

## **Our UW Oshkosh Anthem: A Better Education For The Best-Prepared Citizens**

by Chancellor Richard H. Wells - Tuesday, September 04, 2012

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/20773/our-uw-oshkosh-anthem-a-better-education-for-the-best-prepared-citizens/>

*The following are remarks shared by Chancellor Richard H. Wells during the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Opening Day ceremonies, Sept. 4, 2012.*

Good morning.

It is my privilege to welcome you to Opening Day of our 2012-13 Academic Year at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

I can confidently say this has the makings of UW Oshkosh's finest year yet. There is reason for optimism. That may be difficult for some to believe, given continued, dramatic funding reductions to higher education and the often unsupportive atmosphere around public employees in our state.

But I see evidence of a landmark year here ahead of us... It is largely gathered here before me today in this great room of educators – creators, really.

We are on a quest to lead our students into a quest.

We are taking the pioneering position in the reinvention of general education and in the preparation new generations of contributors – artists, engineers, scientists, social scientists, teachers, journalists, nurses, entrepreneurs and innovators. We will not only infuse them with knowledge, but we will guide them on quests to become better family members, better neighbors, better members and leaders of our workforce and economy and better local and global citizens.

This year, what we are going to do more than ever before is apply a laser-like focus on providing a better education for our students. We need to do this now more than ever... for them... for our institution... for our state... for our democracy.

Consider that our anthem. It is not an entirely brand new one. For decades, this idea of education as a source of prosperity and equality has been the essence of our institution's alma mater, the literal translation of which is "nourishing mother." Our alma mater closes with the dream and hope "that all may live with dignity upon the earth we share."

We all have a role in this pursuit. We all have talent and expertise to offer. I am so proud to say that

we're already well on our way toward major, landmark accomplishments...

I think we all can agree there are some key characteristics of this better education that we must make our shared pursuit. The better education we are creating, and will continue to create in this banner year at UW Oshkosh, must be:

- Inventive, if not imaginative.
- Developed with the understanding that we will continue to take risks and reward success.
- And, in all ways, it must be built upon on our most essential value: Quality.

We will launch and accomplish challenging, high-quality educational objectives in the next couple of years that other higher educational organizations are paying very close attention to. We continue to push the envelope in higher education. That's where we are different: We are, in an exciting way, making education something students live – something more engaging; a shared, community experience and resource.

Let's start by talking about our imagination and inventiveness. We have a major initiative underway, and I am incredibly proud of your work on it.

With the leadership of our faculty, we have undertaken a historic transformation of general education. The new University Studies Program, now one year from its fall 2013 launch, is remarkable. I am proud and impressed in the imagination, vision and hard work already applied to make this program a reality.

For one, the program is revolutionary: The days of students wearily plowing through a list of required lecture courses and crossing them one-by-one off a list are over. The University Studies Program prescribes small learning communities, student-on-student peer mentoring, alumni mentoring and an array of high-impact courses that dovetail with signature questions we agree are the BIG QUESTIONS a liberally educated student in the 21st Century must courageously explore.

Next, the program is purposeful and elegant: This program is built upon better learning and better teaching. Through the lens of the University Studies Program, students will examine ways to create a more sustainable world, the means of bridging cultural divides and the collaborative work necessary for a life of civic engagement. To do these, we plan to set our students out on Quests. To be honest, as I have seen this model develop, it has been hard for me not to get excited about it. I've found myself having to hold back and prevent myself from diving into the faculty's studio. The hard work and collaboration is remarkable.

Finally, the program is bold: Consider this, in 2014, an estimated 900 UW Oshkosh students – 900! -- will be the first to fan out into our campus and community, partner up with nonprofit agencies and other groups and fulfill their Civic Engagement quest. Their experiences, their ingenuity and their solutions will provide a kind of fuel for the dozens of Boys and Girls Clubs, food pantries, shelter and home providers and other agencies and organizations sustaining our communities. Their collaboration will also be fuel for their futures. What our program does is makes access to these service-learning projects a new kind of core educational experience available to ALL students.

The highly successful implementation of the University Studies Program will be the result of faculty, academic and classified staff creativity. We will have developed a new nucleus of education here at UW Oshkosh – one that is transformative for students and for higher education itself. This is not easy work. The implementation of the program causes a kind of chain reaction, requiring us to additionally update and recalibrate our degree programs and student support services. But that work, too, is underway, and I'm confident we are up to the challenge.

Again, we know other institutions in the higher education community are watching our work. Our general education redesign is becoming a kind of living case study. Higher education sees UW Oshkosh taking a noble risk in pioneering this ground-up, brand new approach.

So far, all I can say to you is, "BRAVO!"

I am eager to share the story of how we did it with our peers across the state, the nation and the world.

Risky? You bet.

Rewarding? No question about it.

Speaking of that, let me discuss the next characteristic of the better education we are designing here at UW Oshkosh: The expectation that we take risks and reward success.

Successfully designing and providing a better education means you must support, honor and reward the creators of it.

Given that we are living in a knowledge-based economy, shouldn't we be recognizing and rewarding the knowledge-based workforce – the educators and designers – who are empowering their students?

Absolutely we should. ...You are those people. You are the source.

In late June, I promised I'd report back to you on Opening Day our progress in distributing performance-based equity salary adjustments. About 30 percent, or 124 employees, of our classified staff received adjustments earlier this summer, and we plan to provide a smaller percentage of more performance-based salary equity adjustments for members of our classified staff by July 1, 2013. Our work to provide performance-based equity salary adjustments to the rest of our 1,700-employee community continues.

We continue to work with the Office of the Provost, college deans and the Faculty Senate on the implementation of a comprehensive faculty salary equity adjustment system. Our goal continues to be that a significant percentage of faculty receives performance-based equity salary adjustments by July 1, 2013.

Meanwhile, we continue to push to accelerate the salary equity adjustment process for academic staff, working closely with Senate for Academic Staff leadership. As I stated in June, another significant percentage of that group will also see performance-based salary adjustments by July 1, 2013.

And as we provide these performance-based equity salary adjustments, we continue the critical mission,

in concert with UW System Administration and our Board of Regents, of advocating for a targeted, state-funded pay plan for all System institution employees in the 2013-15 biennium.

The recruitment and retention of talent at UW Oshkosh is essential. We must continue to remind our many stakeholders that faculty and academic staff pay has long been 15 to 20 percent below that at comparable Midwestern peer institutions. This says nothing of the furloughs and four years without a state-funded employee pay plan, with the exception of a 2 percent salary increase for some classified staff three years ago, we have endured. As I said in June, static wages and rising employee contributions toward benefits have resulted in an approximately, on average, 8 percent decline in take home pay over the last year.

Building a better education – continuing the work we are already championing here – will help us build the case for change. We have to go on the offensive. Students paying more for a better education have a right to expect more. And that means they have a right to a faculty and staff at UW Oshkosh who are fairly compensated.

If our number one priority is a better education for students, the fundamental way to achieve that is to provide those people educating them – and doing so in innovative fashion – the maximum opportunity to excel. That means helping them to grow. That means, like it or not, you compensate them fairly and competitively. So, we have additional work to do to tell our story.

I am pleased to share with you that, while we continue to innovate and redesign the fundamental structure and soul of general education here, our colleagues at UW System are also designing the architecture of a new strategic communication and advocacy campaign.

It is built on the notion and mantra of “Knowledge Powers.” “Knowledge Powers” Wisconsin.

The campaign is scheduled to launch this year. It is designed to energize a population and demographic of Wisconsinites we know to be one of the state’s largest: The hardworking, everyday folks who are not higher education’s detractors or enemies... but they are also not our more active champions.

We want to reach out to these good people and demonstrate to them that, in teaching, in agriculture, in industry, in the arts, in business we – UW System institutions – are incredible power sources. We help families and communities flourish. We have a tradition of helping this state prosper.

So, I see a tremendous opportunity for us to reengage our third-party supporters and this new world of unconnected Wisconsinites – people who can be new supporters – and rally them behind your work, your contributions and our shared successes. This is one key way we can not only reverse the trend of deep, dangerous funding reductions to higher education in our state but also begin to demonstrate the need to provide the committed providers of higher education competitive salaries and benefits.

Simply put, it’s good for Wisconsin. Again, “Knowledge powers.” You will be hearing and seeing more as we head into 2013.

And as this year progresses, we will continue to report back to you on our efforts to provide

compensation throughout our faculty and staff groups. I am thankful for all the feedback you have sent me and other vice chancellors, and I encourage you to keep it coming to help us make sure we keep moving this incredibly important compensation initiative forward.

Finally, this morning, I want to talk about the third characteristic of the work to build a better education: Quality.

As many of you know, I had the privilege earlier this year to be dispatched to a Jan. 27 White House briefing on the President's so-called "Blueprint for Keeping College Affordable and Within Reach for All Americans." It was in the early moments of the President's grand vision for higher education in America.

What became instantly clear to me in that briefing is that there is nothing of greater importance in our collective efforts to build a better education than the improvement the quality of the education a student can obtain.

Days before that briefing, the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability released a report titled "Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Accountability in Higher Education." It's a great report and it demands that for achievement of our educational, economic and political goals, higher education in America must receive "sustained attention to the quality of student learning."

I said it in January, and I'll stress it again here today as we rededicate ourselves to the work of building a better education: Improved educational quality must be the key driver of the President's Blueprint initiative and our own UW Oshkosh efforts.

Better educational quality leads to a better subsidized price for a better price-value for students and, ultimately, a better quality of life for more Americans.

What do we mean by "Quality?" It's not a throwaway word, and we cannot let it become one.

Quality must be – **MUST BE** – guided by our essential learning outcomes. We must make sure the education we provide is better aligned with the demands of the 21st Century. Sure, this means we need to design a quality education that is attune to the needs of the workforce.

But let me also be clear on this: We must make equally certain that the quality education we create and provide doesn't conform to the demands of our economy at the expense of its humanness. By that, I mean we must ensure the pursuits of sustainability, diversity and inclusion, civic engagement and cultural understanding and appreciation guide us and our students. This makes not only better workers. More importantly, it makes better human beings – adaptable, altruistic, curious, courageous, open-but-not-empty-minded leaders who seek to bring people together, not sort them out and push them apart.

In his extraordinary book "Healing the Heart of Democracy," author Parker J. Palmer proposes to "work on reconciling whatever divides us from ourselves – and then moves out with healing power into a world of many divides, drawing light out of darkness, community out of chaos, and life out of death."

That is the ethic I want instilled in the students we graduate from our institution – those who have the

knowledge, determination and leadership to help “draw light out of darkness, community out of chaos and life out of death.”

The good news is your visionary efforts to redesign general education in the University Studies Program do this. Your entrepreneurial work to build and use student-faculty research instruments like Biodigesters, for example, and your day to day teaching on campus and online are providing the essential building blocks for a high-quality, better education. ... for the Best Citizens.

Students, too, are going to have to step up. We are preparing for them a revolutionary new way to learn. They will be expected to dedicate themselves to, and will be nurtured in the pursuit of, a deeper, stronger commitment to their studies. So, it is therefore our job to also do all we can to best manage the resources we have, to fortify the student employment programs we have created – such as STEP – and to fight for the preservation and enhancement of student financial aid. These are the things that will enable them to confidently and deeply dive into a renewed reservoir of excellence and opportunity at UW Oshkosh.

We are driven by the vision and momentum our faculty is already generating.

And this challenging, difficult redesign of a quality education is providing an essential bridge into our next 10-year accreditation process, overseen by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Much of our work to conform to a new reaccreditation process is underway, as the University Studies Program has driven us to make sure we are aligning our general education at UW Oshkosh with a mastery of essential learning outcomes.

It is driving us to be more efficient and effective in the content and delivery of general education. Provost Lane Earns will have more to share this morning about our “Quality Initiative Project,” the framework of which will be shared with University governance groups for collaborative development in the year ahead and beyond.

In closing, before I invite our vice chancellors to share additional updates with you today, let me say it is extraordinary all the change we are making happen at UW Oshkosh. And, as I led off reporting to you today, I believe the conditions around us are changing -- there is reason for optimism and things to feel better about coming into this academic year.

Our budget process in Wisconsin is always a marathon. But this year, we can feel some added energy in knowing that we are actually starting at the “start” line. We are not being asked to back up a few miles before the race begins.

For the first time in many years, the Governor has not required the UW institutions to submit biennial budget reduction plans. This is a good sign. It is also very good news that UW institutions will not be expected to carry an additional \$66 million lapse cut into the next biennium. For UW Oshkosh, this means we will not be required to provide \$3.2 million in lapse cuts into the new biennium. Furthermore, the fact that all UW institutions are being asked to submit examples for potential enhanced state funding of the many ways they are helping create more and better jobs is an indication that our economic development efforts and value will be considered for higher funding priority.

There is attention on us. There is increasing trust.

Again, it's all a marathon, and it's just getting started. State revenue projections are just that – months away from being final. Our Governor and Legislature have yet to debate and act on our budget requests.

Nevertheless, there is reason for optimism. Maybe we are starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel. And, this time, the light is not a freight train bearing down on us as we are strapped to the tracks.

Maybe the belittling we have endured, the angry and uncivil attitudes and the erosion of our compensation during an unprecedented era of entrepreneurialism and innovation, is fading.

As it should.

We have refused to shut doors to students. We have made, and continue to make, sacrifices but not at the expense of our work to spark a revolution in teaching and in learning. While we honor our traditions, we are passionately dedicated to redesigning general education's future right here on our campus. We do this as our anthem... for the betterment of our students... in the spirit of the alma mater, or a nourishing mother: So that all may live with dignity upon the earth we share.

I am proud of all of you. And I look forward to seeing all we have accomplished at this new academic year's conclusion.

Thank you.

Learn more:

- [See the entire 2012 Opening Day program here.](#)