

Opening Year Address
Tuesday, August 25, 2009

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Thank you for taking time out of your day to join us this morning to welcome our new colleagues and to allow me to share my message as we begin the 2009-2010 academic year.

Since I started at Bethany College two years ago, I have patiently and enthusiastically awaited this August. The simple answer as to why is because I have begun my third year and I believe that the Third Year is the critical year.

During the First Year, you learn about the people, the place, and the culture. During the Second Year, you begin to get the feel of the pace and the strategy for success. During the Third Year, you hit full stride and are full of expectations for forward progress.

Today's message is not intended to be my State of the College. I intend to do that again in late October when we have received the final draft of our financial audit and the 20th day numbers are in. At that time, I will provide, in fuller detail, where we are and where we are headed.

Let me begin this morning by recapping a few of our accomplishments over the last year and then share the College's agenda, as I see it, for the upcoming year.

We have done much and seen much improvement, because, quite simply, we have begun to come together as One Bethany. What we have done over the last twelve months could not have been accomplished if we had not worked for a common purpose – for Bethany College.

We are quickly bringing to a close this "first" phase of campus improvements. Over the last year, we have enjoyed the new turf and track at Anderson Stadium – and this fall, new restrooms and concession stand await our football and soccer fans; Swede Suites is a big hit; the new weight room is the envy of Lindsborg; and the laboratory addition to Nelson is ready for teaching and learning.

Last week, *US News & World Report* released its annual rankings and, this year, Bethany is ranked #30 among Midwest baccalaureate colleges, up from 37th last year – and, more impressively, we were identified as one of the top Midwest baccalaureate colleges in economic diversity, cultural diversity, and international diversity.

In last spring's National Survey of Student Engagement, 96% of seniors indicated they would choose Bethany again if they could start their college career over. This compares with 83% two years ago.

Over the last year, we raised over \$3.2 million. That's a two year total of \$6.2 million and the most money Bethany has raised in any two year period in its history.

While the numbers are still premature, we are looking at a solid increase in enrollment over last year. As of this morning, we are anticipating a first day enrollment of 620 students. The first time we have surpassed 600 since the fall 2003. That represents a 6% increase over last year's fall enrollment and a 15% increase over the last two years.

As of this morning, we have enrolled 184 first-time freshmen for this fall, which already represents the largest percentage increase over a two year period in the last thirty years.

Over the last year ... over the last two years ... together – as One Bethany – we have made much progress. I stand here today confident in saying the Bethany renaissance is underway.

That ends our celebration of last year. Let me now shift to our agenda for 2009-2010. Over the next year, I see our focus on six major items.

First, continue to prepare for the Higher Learning Commission's comprehensive site visit November 15-17, 2010.

Over the last year, under the outstanding leadership of Carolyn & Bruce Kahler, the Self-Study Steering Committee and the five criteria-based committees have been hard at work. Would those members of the steering committee and the five criteria committees please stand so that we can recognize your work to date? Thank you!

A lot of work must still be done before we are ready. I hope each of us will help this important effort when we are asked for help. Or, even better, we offer our help before it is asked.

Second, finish the year with an operationally balanced budget, meaning a balanced budget before accounting for what happened in the stock market.

We begin the year anticipating finishing the year with a balanced budget. As we approach our comprehensive site visit next year, it is critical we finish this year in the black. Last winter and spring, I pulled together 23 members of our community in five budget summits to work on balancing the budget. The Board of Directors accepted and approved our work last May. That work is now handed off to the Budget Advisory Council, which this year will be under the leadership of Bob Schmoll, our new vice president for finance & operations.

Third, complete work on the first iteration of our strategic and operational plans by identifying our three-year targets and by cascading the goals and targets throughout Bethany College.

Regrettably, last winter's budgetary challenges pushed our planning efforts to the back burner. This year, I will be re-engaging the Strategic Planning Council to help drive and bring home the first iteration of our strategic and operational plans. I will also be looking to the Strategic Planning Council to facilitate the completion of our capital plan – which will address deferred maintenance, technology, and replacement cycles for instruments, furniture, and equipment – and to facilitate a campus-wide conversation in developing the “campus wish list” in preparation for an upcoming comprehensive fundraising campaign.

A critical next step in our planning efforts is for our operational goals to be cascaded down throughout Bethany College. Our first iteration of planning will conclude when our strategic goals and targets are then supported by operational goals and targets which in turn are supported by individual performance goals and targets. As goals are cascaded throughout the College, we take an important step toward building accountability and teamwork.

Fourth, continue to make forward progress on our strategic goals, with a continued emphasis on recruiting and retaining students, especially retaining.

In late October, at my State of the College presentation, I will review our strategic goals and the progress we have made or have not made over the last five years.

One area that is not seeing the progress I had hoped is the area of retention. I believe as much today as I did two years ago that Bethany's enrollment growth will be driven more from retention than from recruitment. While we will not know our official freshmen to sophomore retention from last fall until late September, the five previous years tell the story:

Fall 2007 freshmen to Fall 2008 sophomores = 53%
Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 = 60%
Fall 2005 to Fall 2006 = 54%
Fall 2004 to Fall 2005 = 58%
Fall 2003 to Fall 2004 = 52%

That's a five year average of 55.5%. By comparison, our strategic vision for retention by 2020 is 77%. We must ratchet up our efforts and I look to the three groups we formed last year to facilitate those retention efforts. This year, however, we will tweak those groups and their charges. I will be working with these groups to set clear deliverables, accountability, and the freedom to act to make the progress we need.

This year BEST will be redefined as the Bethany Experience Steering Team. Reporting and accountable to BEST will be the other two groups, Building Enrollment Through Retention (BETR) and the Bethany Intervention Group (BIG).

Fifth, focus on the future and seize the opportunities that are before us.

Last year, I believe, we had great success with ITAC – Information Technology Advisory Council. They developed our first technology plan and we have begun to fund and to make happen that plan. The success of ITAC persuades me that we can use that model for other opportunities that are before us.

New this year – after approval last spring from Faculty Senate and last weekend from the Board of Directors – Provost Gene Bales will chair a Handbook Committee to facilitate changes and improvements to the several handbooks that we have on campus.

Also this year, starting this fall and concluding their work by winter, will be three task forces. A Pricing Task Force to review our current pricing structure, to determine our marketplace, and to recommend a near-term strategy for pricing within our marketplace. A Benefits Task Force, which emerges from last spring's Employee Insight survey, to review our current benefit offerings and structure, to determine if we are competitive, and to recommend to President's Council any proposed changes. Finally, I've already begun work with Staff Senate, as the core of a task force, to lift up Staff Senate with a larger voice, broader role, and stronger expectations for shared governance at Bethany.

Finally, in a few weeks, we will launch, at least for the fall semester, Idea Teams to create opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to generate new ideas and future possibilities for Bethany College. The details for the Idea Teams are still being finalized and will be shared in a few weeks.

Sixth, and last, have fun!

Last year, the Good Times Gang did an outstanding job in bringing us together to have fun. I'm looking to them to continue and to build on that good work this year.

As I look to the next year, I see before us two paths: current realities and future possibilities.

As I see our current realities, I know – and hope you see as well – that our country and the world is not yet out of the current economic downturn. Over the summer, we have seen our students transfer to community colleges or “stop out.” We have seen prospective students financial situations change when both parents are laid off.

Last winter, making the rounds on the listserves and conferences, was the recently published list of the 20 “at-risk indicators” for colleges and universities. The reality is that, of the 20, Bethany is “at-risk” on 11.

That is our current reality. But, as I look toward our future possibilities, I am reminded of U.S. Navy Admiral David Farragut during the Battle of Mobile Bay in the Civil War.

Mobile Bay was the Confederacy's last major port open on the Gulf of Mexico. The bay was heavily mined – mines at the time were called torpedoes. Farragut ordered his fleet forward into the bay. When one ship struck a torpedo the remaining ships began to retreat. In response, Farragut ordered, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"

I read this summer the comments of Bob Sevier, vice president with the enrollment management consulting firm Stamats, who listed, what he believes, are the nine characteristics of the vulnerable college. Bethany's current reality is that we are vulnerable on six of the nine.

That is our current reality. But, as I look toward our future possibilities, I am reminded of General Anthony McAuliffe, who, during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, while defending the French town of Bastogne, surrounded by Germans and requested to surrender, replied, “Nuts!”

As I stand here looking at our current realities and pondering our future possibilities, I take strength from Paul's letter to the Romans, where he wrote (Romans 12:11-12), ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

As I stand here looking at our current realities and pondering our future possibilities, I recognize that some of our peer and sister colleges, faced with the same adversities we are faced with, are circling the wagons and hunkering down to wait out the storm; or are just paralyzed and wallowing in it.

To those who want to circle the wagons, I say, “Nuts!”

To those who are paralyzed and wallowing, I say, "Damn the economy, full speed ahead!"

Better yet, in keeping with our Swedish ancestors, let me share what Emory Lindquist wrote in *Bethany In Kansas* (p. 284), "The founders often used the familiar Swedish word, 'Framåt!' 'Forward!' to express their belief about the College in the world of tomorrow. This imperative, 'Forward!' is still valid. Faith in God and in the Bethany idea will enable succeeding generations to write additional glorious chapters in Bethany's history."

In that spirit, I put before you the Bethany College theme for 2009-2010. A theme I hope captures our agenda and our path for this year. It is, "Bright Future, One Bethany... Framåt!"

To remind us in the weeks and months ahead to keep moving forward, the Good Times Gang will be handing out buttons with the Swedish word, "Framåt" on it. Wear it, put it where you can see it. Let's have a great year, let's work hard and have fun. Let's constantly remind ourselves of our "Bright Future, One Bethany... Framåt!"

Thanks be to God.