

Fall 2008 Convocation
Patrick J. Schloss, President
Valdosta State University

August 11, 2008

It is my pleasure and honor to present my first Convocation address as Valdosta State University's eighth president. I personally welcome faculty, staff, and members of the community.

I am very pleased to acknowledge the presence of:

I have always been moved by a simple message, attributed to H.F. Johnson, Sr.

The message is posted in one of the major academic halls at Cornell University. It was originally written in 1927 in reference to the work of Johnson wax company employees. With your indulgence, I am going to adapt the message for the purpose of our convocation.

“When all is said and done, Valdosta State is nothing but a symbol. And when we translate this, we find that it means a great many people think well of the service we provide and that a great many have faith in the integrity of you, our faculty and staff. In a very short time, the buildings and grounds that are now so lively

will be obsolete, for all their strength, they will someday be dismantled.

But a school comprised of compassionate and learned people will live so long as there are human beings to remember. Inspiration and knowledge are not built of such flimsy materials as steel and concrete – they are built of human virtue, which may be made to live forever. The goodwill of you, our faculty and staff is the only enduring thing in this or any other reputable institution. It is the sole substance... the rest is shadow!”

I have thought of this message often since reading it at Cornell and prior to my arrival at Valdosta. I have thought of it more often as I have come to understand the virtuous group that constitutes our faculty, staff, and administration. Even though our time on campus has been short—two weeks to be exact, Maureen, and I have come to see the substance that has led so many to call Valdosta their home or their alma mater.

Valdosta State University has more than 100 years of rich history, from its founding as a state normal college with only 3 full-time and 15 part-time students. It has grown to be one of the premier Universities

in the State of Georgia with an enrollment this year approaching 11,800 students.

Early students began with a dream of becoming the first in their family to acquire a college degree. While the ratio of first generation students has decreased, the focus of our students has not changed.

The most recent class will enter our academic halls next week. Aspirations will vary from student to student, but our commitment to the substance of which H.F. Johnson, Sr. referred, is unwavering.

I believe I echo your views, and join a national trend in selecting the two greatest

challenges that we will face together-- To promote a culture in which higher education at Valdosta State attains increasing status and value, and to insure that Valdosta State is supported at a level that honors those who have given heart and soul to its mission.

Success in these challenges will be demonstrated by our ability to capture the imagination of the community, state, and nation. Our effectiveness will instill confidence that Valdosta is the institution of choice for young or old; privileged or disadvantaged; domestic or international; focused or fragmented.

I know you join me in appealing to alumni and friends so that they return to this generation, through Valdosta State, what was so richly given to them. In return, I know you join me in celebrating what may be our richest resource: a clear and close connection to partners in the community, partnerships that highlight Valdosta's place as the economic and cultural hub of south central Georgia.

The role of the president is often viewed as moving challenges to opportunities or as a friend once suggested, making lemons into lemonade. It is not hard to find lemons. The challenge is in making lemonade. I am

supremely confident that this team of scholars and friends is ready and able.

You know, that at no time in this nation's history has the current generation attended postsecondary institutions at a lower rate than in the preceding generation. At no time in recent history has the United States failed to lead the world in the percentage of young people attending postsecondary schools... **until now.** Today's teenagers are less likely to attend postsecondary institutions than the previous, and the United States no longer leads the world in the percentage of young people attending postsecondary schools. In fact, we are no longer in the top ten.

According to the “2007 Higher Education Outlook,” after many years of large growth in tuition revenue and in enrollment, many states have begun to see a decline. The report states that total enrollment in American higher education grew by 12.8 percent from 1999 to 2004. Enrollment across the country is not expected to grow for the foreseeable future. As you may guess, the war on drugs and other priorities will continue to compete for resources traditionally directed to colleges and universities.

Thankfully, Georgia is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. This increase

has led the University System of Georgia to prepare for an estimated 100,000 additional students by 2020. Our enrollment is likely to grow to 16,000.

Unfortunately, social and political factors that compete for higher education funding will likely diminish our resource base. We will continue to be called upon to do more with less.

State governments once appropriated around three fourths of the cost of a college education. Today, appropriations at many state institutions have fallen into the 25 percent range. The ratio has been turned upside down. Today's students, and their

families, bear a near inverse portion of the fiscal responsibility.

Economic conditions should not dictate who can and cannot benefit from a college degree. Economic conditions should not limit our ability to equip classrooms and recruit exceptional scholars. So we turn to philanthropy as the keystone of what will be a vibrant future.

It is not lost on Vice President Crawford, and his outstanding staff, that we are in the largest period of generational wealth transfer in our Nation's history. According to a report from The Boston College Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, some 41 trillion

dollars will flow from the estates of baby boomers to the next generation.

Valdosta State must make its case for legacies that return the gift so thoughtfully provided through the land grant, the GI bill, the Hope scholarship, and other government initiatives.

While it is heartening that Valdosta State's Financial Aid office will dispense \$80 million in student support this year, we can do more, and we will do more.

Lest we let our students off the hook, let's encourage them to join us in discerning substance from shadow. When many of us

went to school, the total cost of a Valdosta State education was very close to \$2,000 dollars for two semesters and a summer. A Volkswagen Beetle cost \$2,000 dollars. By the way, it cost two dollars to fill the tank. A comparable car today costs about \$15,000 while the annual cost of a Valdosta Education, including summer, is about \$15,000.

I remember paying \$2.00 a plate for Cindy's and my wedding reception. My daughter thrilled me last week with the announcement of her engagement. She then shocked me with an \$80 dollar a plate estimate for my contribution to her happiness.

Let's encourage our young people to make payments on their future, not on vehicles that will be obsolete in a few short years or parties that are only a shadow of the real substance of abiding relationships.

Back to the lemons, state appropriations have declined before. From 2003 to 2005, we lost 11 million dollars. These funds were never fully restored.

Prior to the 2003 reductions, the University created a Budget Advisory Council. The Council assists in identifying efficiencies and allocating resources.

I have joined members of the Budget Advisory Council in several discussions with the System administrative staff. The most recent update confirmed three things:

1. The eventual size of the reduction is dependent upon legislative action to rescind or defer the Homeowners Tax Relief Act. If the legislation does not rescind or defer the tax credit, our reduction will be closer to 10 percent. If it is rescinded, the reduction will be around 6 percent.
2. We have been asked to submit a 6%, 8% and 10% budget reduction plan to the Governor's Office of Planning and Budgets. In July, we submitted a 5%

budget reduction plan, which equates to nearly 3 million dollars from the FY09 state appropriation. Of course, a 10% reduction would draw nearly 6 million dollars.

3. Thankfully, the state is not likely to rescind salary increases earned by our employees.

While the cuts are onerous and will deeply affect this institution, they will not call us off our commitment to the people we serve. They will also intensify our efforts to plan and administer through shared governance. At Valdosta State, those closest to the mission will continue to guide resources required by the mission.

I am reminded of the great wrestler, referred to as the Russian Bear. He was famous for debilitating opponents with the 'Pretzel hold.' A thoughtful but ambitious upstart hoped to make his name by defeating the Bear. He begged his trainer to assist in preparation for the bout. Initially, the trainer objected. He said that far too many have been maimed by the Russian Bear. The pretzel hold is virtually inescapable. He did not wish to see his dear young friend hurt or even killed.

The trainer relented to the young man's begging and pleading. They worked hard in

preparation for the bout. The eventful night came and the great match began.

Sure enough, despite all their efforts, the young man appeared to be no match for the Russian Bear. The Bear gradually and surely wore down the young man. The worst came as the Russian Bear found an opportunity to slip in the pretzel hold.

The trainer could not stand to watch and sadly moved to the exit. On approaching the door heard a great cry from the crowd and saw the Russian Bear go flying from the ring. The young man rose up victoriously.

The trainer ran to the ring and asked how he did it. How was he able to get out of the pretzel hold and defeat the Bear? The young man said... “There I was, all bent and contorted. My eyes bulged and my spine was about to snap. In front of my nose, was a well-formed gluteus maximus (that is “butt” for those not in exercise physiology). I chomped down with my teeth as hard as I could... You know, you would be amazed how strong you get when you bite yourself in the ah...butt.

I guess fortitude comes from a number of places. Ours will come from a focus on the substance for which Valdosta State is known. It will come from our commitment to

the young people we serve. From time to time, it might come from irrational exuberance.

I hope you will forgive me, in advance. While my intentions are always good, I have been known to bite myself in that hollowed place from time to time.

Like you, I have lived through a number of economic cycles and the thing I have learned the most is that hard times distinguish the most capable. You do not have to look far to see that we are among the most capable.

Against a challenging economic climate, Valdosta State is a leader in access for students disadvantaged by geographic location or socio-economic background.

I am proud to recognize Dr. Brian Gerber, Dean Gunter, the faculty and staff of the Dewar College of Education and the Valdosta City Schools for developing the Valdosta Early College Academy (VECA).

Valdosta State University was selected by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the Upward Bound Program. The Department of Equal Opportunity and Multicultural Affairs secured a \$1 million grant to introduce at-risk High School

students to university life. Well done,
Maggie Viverette!

A Valdosta State experience is becoming more accessible using Georgia ONmyLine. Through this program, the Dewar College of Education and Graduate School have added five new online Master's Degree programs and two online graduate certificate programs.

Access at Valdosta is increasingly defined through an expanding portfolio of degree programs. We now have a Doctorate in Public Administration and a Master's Degree in Communications. The College of Nursing reactivated the Nurse

Practitioner Program. Our Master's in Library Information Science was recently accredited by the American Library Association.

My Friend's House, sponsored by The Division of Social Work, provides outreach to individuals with Alzheimer's Disease and other dementias—81 were served last year.

I am pleased to be part of a pattern in which Valdosta scholars reach out to those least able to support themselves. Thank you for highlighting the substance for which we are known. Thank you, Dr. Giddings and the outstanding faculty that contribute so much to this enterprise.

Accessibility includes providing the facilities and infrastructure to accommodate a growing student enrollment. Returning students will notice several changes to the campus landscape. Phase II of our \$263 million dollar capital construction program includes eight major projects.

The Sustella Avenue and Oak Street parking decks now provide 2,084 spaces, and bring the total number of on-campus parking spaces to 5,029. Demolition of Georgia Hall is complete and Reade Hall will be renovated in January. This is about the same time as the new student health center opens and the athletic field house

and practice fields are completed.

Demolition of the old student union and gymnasium is almost complete and ground breaking for the new student union is scheduled for later this month.

More than 45 individuals have completed the first three levels of Six Sigma training. Dr. Kristina Cragg and Ms. Jeanne Severns are in the process of earning the highest level of Six Sigma training.

The Leadership Team has identified three projects that will be initiated in the fall these include:

1. Reducing energy costs

2. Streamlining employee processing
3. Reducing travel costs

The 2008-2009 academic year will be especially important as we prepare for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). I know the entire campus community will join in showcasing this great University.

Let me take a few minutes to celebrate our students' achievements. Please excuse me. I know that the list is woefully incomplete, owing mostly to my recent arrival. I hope that you will send me your

notes through the year. With any luck, we can make a full day of this address in 2009.

- Model United Nations team finished in the top 10 percent in New York. The team has been invited to participate in China.
- Our Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) team finished fifth out of more than 950 teams at the national level. The student organization completed 46 projects and contributed more than 13,000 service-learning hours.
 - The Blazer football team has won a national championships, AGAIN!
 - We joined the city and secondary schools in bringing Title

Town to Valdosta.

Our student-athletes have excelled in athletic and academic performance. The aggregate fall semester 2007 athletic GPA was 2.78. A record 137 athletes earned a GPA greater than 3.0, 61 were on the Dean's list, and 16 achieved a 4.0 GPA for the fall semester. Our women's basketball team made it to the sweet 16 and three seniors graduated with GPAs exceeding 3.8.

Pride in our individual accomplishment is healthy. In a few minutes, we will recognize six individuals who embody the university through virtue, effort, and

excellence. These individuals represent the real substance that defines Valdosta State. Each winner will be recognized for his or her individual accomplishments.

I must emphasize, however, that their accomplishments are all part of a bigger picture; a picture not unlike one of the most visible icons in American higher education.

The picture is nicknamed "Touchdown Jesus". It is a large mural entitled "The Word of Life" and located on the [Hesburgh Library](#) outside of the Notre Dame Stadium.

The mural is comprised of thousands of ceramic chips. The Valdosta experience

like “The word of Life,” is a grand vision for aspiring prep students. The experience is remarkable when considered as a whole. But, like “The Word of Life,” it is comprised of the distinct efforts of a myriad of individuals.

It is comprised of the hundred or more faculty and students that visited Shannon Martin in the hospital and 300 or more that attended her funeral. It is comprised of the orientation counselor who gave a student money for unanticipated costs. It is comprised of the librarian that gave up a weekend to locate materials that were used to distinguish a student’s work. It is comprised of a food service employee who

reserved the best fried chicken recipe in the world for Valdosta students. And, it is comprised of all the residence hall assistants who have mediated disputes that would lead Solomon to despair.

The “Word of Life” is the Valdosta experience. It is each and every one of you, viewed individually and viewed collectively. You form the substance; the things that will be remembered long after such flimsy materials as steel and concrete crumble.

Thank you for your time and attention. Thank you for allowing me to be part of the Valdosta mosaic.

At this time, I will ask Dr. Louis Levy, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Mr. James Black, Vice President for Finance and Administration to come forward and present the 2008 Excellence Awards.