

Fall 2009 Convocation Valdosta State University

Dr. Patrick J. Schloss, President

Valdosta State University is on a trajectory unanticipated by those associated with our humble beginnings. The initial 60 acres, donated in 1911, has expanded to more than 170 acres. The original appropriation of \$25,000 has grown to an annual budget exceeding \$130 million. Our first building, Converse Hall, was constructed and furnished with less money than the cost of furnishings in a single room on the current campus. Initially, South Georgia State Normal College was open to women exclusively and offered two-year programs to prepare educators. Today, Valdosta State University offers more than 100 major programs of study from the associate to the doctoral degree.

Although much has changed, much remains the same. We are proud to celebrate a student-centered faculty, student life opportunities second to none, and a relationship with the region that would be the envy of other institution. We have few rivals when judged by our ability to support the development of young people. We take pride in their

achievements — as entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, educators, scientists and humanitarians. We focus on the value we add to student lives and celebrate their achievement

I am sure you all know the Little Prince. I would like to take liberty with a passage, ‘People gaze upon the stars, each seeing a different thing. For travelers, the stars are guides. For mathematicians they are problems, for poets they are inspiration, for educators, they are an opportunity to teach. In fact, the stars are nothing but tiny lights. They are silent. Many young people joining the freshman class will have stars that are silent. But, because of you, this will change; they will acquire stars like nobody else. You will bring meaning to their stars. And, upon graduation their stars will have a voice.

While our aims and ideals are lofty, the circumstances in which we find ourselves are quite humbling. Because of declining tax receipts, resulting from one of the worst recessions in history, Valdosta State University has experienced a 15% or \$8 million budget reduction. Sadly, the recession does not appear to have hit bottom. We are advised

to prepare for an additional 6 to 10 percent reduction in the current fiscal year. If these projections become true, we will have lost 25 percent of our appropriation within the first two years of my presidency. These reductions are expected to be permanent and are made more difficult by the \$11 million loss from 2001 to 2004.

We have had to make difficult decisions regarding the deployment of increasingly limited resources. We have reorganized and consolidated offices, frozen positions, deferred repair/replacement cycles, and limited travel. Despite the challenging circumstances, we have remained focused on matters of substance that define this great University.

As evidence, our faculty will provide more seats for incoming freshmen and returning students than any time in our history. The quality of our faculty, as determined by research publications, grant awards, and degree status, has never been higher, and faculty/student engagement has never been more substantive.

I hope you enjoyed the slide show focusing the accomplishments of this community of scholars. From gopher tortoises to cancer drugs and from Students in Free Enterprise to the Model United Nations, the Valdosta State University has few rivals among regional universities. We are a grand mosaic comprised of some of the finest academicians and support staff in the country.

I am reminded of the words of Thomas Aquinas, 'If a ship captain's only aspiration is to protect the ship, he/she would never leave port.' You have set sail. Valdosta State and the nation are better for your risk, your talent, and your effort.

As my dear father would say about the depression era in the Dakotas, the only certainty, and occasion for hope, was that a family would buy seed and plant crops. Despite the temptation to conserve by disengagement, or as a friend would say, "manage by amputation," you have planted seeds that are certain to pay dividends in good times and bad.

Our faculty, staff, and administrators have rallied together to design a planning and budget process, unparalleled in the university's history. The model insures that those closest to the mission allocate resources to the mission. The model also promotes an entrepreneurial spirit assuring a clear path from idea to accomplishment.

All budget processes are conducted in the sunshine with the full spirit of shared governance. All major budget centers are to have public meetings with advisory groups. And, all have annual plans are posted for review and comment.

The first of two critical elements in the budget model is the establishment of fund pools for routine but critical activities. Division managers are awarded funds by a University Planning and Budget Council comprised primarily of faculty and staff. Fund pool recipients work closely with advisory groups who are closely aligned with mission for which the resources are used. Through a representative process, faculty decides which courses to teach and labs to staff. The coaches determine what teams to play and what equipment to provide. The end

users will determine technology platforms most important to critical applications.

Examples of our pools and advisory groups include pool managed by the Graduate Dean under the guidance of our Faculty Senate's Graduate Executive Committee. The group will assign 75 new graduate assistantships. A faculty reassigned time pool that includes 40 section releases in support of faculty engaged in scholarly work. We have established, a classroom renovation pool overseen by the Faculty Senate's Facilities Advisory Committee. Finally, we have established an academic equipment pool containing \$300,000.

The second key element of the budget process is the establishment of a strategic initiatives process. Tagged Strategic Focus 2010, the process cultivates new initiatives that shape a more progressive university. Strategic funds are directed to activities that are tested against a number of alternatives with the goal of advancing the mission of Valdosta State University.

My hat goes off to Traycee Martin and the finance division for insuring the fiscal responsibility of Strategic Focus 2010. Closing the circle on my seed corn metaphor, if even a fourth of the projects meet their goal, the effect on our University will be more revenue than that expended through the initial allocations.

Because of your efforts, all of the initiatives highlighted in the slide show will become a reality. We will have four new internet based degree and certificate programs, a substantially larger Blazer Brigade, a choir that flies our flag in the Atlanta region, a first step toward a doctoral program in nursing, expanded student support through an alliance between the counseling center and our graduate program in Marriage and Family Therapy. The process has also opened the door to increased athletic opportunities for young women, and the development of an 'early leavers' degree completion program for those prepared to give it a second shot.

Strategic Focus 2010 will serve well in our quest to serve as a nationally recognized, though regionally focused university. We are confident that the budget model will aid in diversifying our curriculum,

enriching student life opportunities, supporting new facilities, and attracting the finest faculty available.

We have benefitted from steady growth over the past decades. We believe that we can, and should accelerate this rate of growth. We have added recruiters to the metropolitan areas of North Georgia and North Florida. We have added new programs in areas of regional need and we have enhanced student access through Internet-based courses. We have arranged receptions exclusively for high school students aspiring to attend Valdosta State University and enhanced our media presence in key markets.

A decade ago, only a handful of students from outside our area came to Valdosta State. Today, more than 40 percent of our students graduated from high schools located more than three hours away, and this number will exceed 50 percent in the very near future. We will not diminish our focus on local students, but we recognize that our university can be a resource to young scholars across Georgia and the nation.

To emphasize the initial promise, spring enrollment increased by 4.3 percent from the previous year. All indications point to an increase approaching 5 percent as we open the doors in a few days. It is important to note that this growth is not only the result of our ability to capture new students, but our ability to retain existing learners. Students appear to be happy with their choice in South Georgia, and they demonstrate this by staying throughout their educational career.

It should be clear that our focus is not on “growth at all cost.” We will maintain a reputation as good stewards and be known for the model we provide. This year, Valdosta State University joined a select group of institutions striving to become climate neutral. I signed the American College and University President Climate Commitment and formally committed the university to develop a plan that eliminates greenhouse emissions over time and moves the campus towards climate neutrality. This initiative has been met with great enthusiasm from our students, faculty, and staff. I am confident that their optimism is justified.

What can you say about Blazer athletics! Ten of 11 teams qualified for NCAA post-season championship competitions. In addition, Valdosta State University's athletic dance squad and competitive co-ed cheerleading team both won their respective national championship. Equally important to success on the court or field, are the academic achievements of VSU's student-athletes. The woman's tennis team had a combined GPA of 3.67 (spring) and 3.78 (fall).

It is not widely known, but state appropriations and student tuition cannot be used in support of athletics. The VSU Foundation and athletic staff raised more than \$500,000 to give young people a chance to test their skills with the best in the country. Corporate sponsors provide an additional \$400,000. We are proud to report that their generosity of donors has been rewarded with outstanding achievements.

We know the university's aspirations hinge on our relationships with alumni and friends. It is important that we connect with our constituents and cultivate their interest in our development. For this reason, it has been my personal mission to meet as many of the

individuals that care about our work as possible. It is my deepest concern to represent you well.

During our first year Maureen, and I have hosted more than 120 dinners in our home. While a formal agenda was never followed, discussions invariably turned to the future of Valdosta State University. I am confident that for every challenge we face, there is a friend that can champion a solution. Owing to reduced budgets and increasing aspirations, the connection between challenges and solutions will become increasingly important.

In March, I began traveling the highways to meet alumni and prospective students throughout Georgia. The 12-city VSU Connections tour included Tifton, Thomasville, Waycross, Douglas, Moultrie, Albany, Savannah, Brunswick and four cities in metro Atlanta. Each visit provided an opportunity for me, members of the alumni board, faculty and coaches to forge a strong relationship with our alumni, friends and future students. As with our dinners, the VSU Connections tour extended our network and created a foundation of resources for the challenges ahead.

I am pleased to announce two new traditions, Order of the Red and Black and President's Medallion were introduced during spring commencement. These traditions will become part of commencement ceremonies for years to come. The Order of the Red and Black honors graduates from the past 50 or more years and helps connect alumni with today's graduates.

Three Valdosta couples were presented with the President's Medallion during the 4 p.m. ceremony: Ed and Mary Crane, Jerry and Kay Jennett, and Harley and Eileen Langdale. These wonderful individuals represent everything good about our university, and have demonstrated extraordinary commitment to our faculty, students, and mission. They are generous with their personal resources, talent, and time and possess the shoulders on which generations of graduates will stand.

Another important new tradition was created with the first "A Blazin' Hot Night" dinner and auction. The evening featured more than 80 live and silent auction items and raised \$60,000 for the VSU

Foundation. We have begun planning for the 2010 gala and are excited with the prospect of hosting the event in our new student union ballroom.

Valdosta State University continues to prepare for its reaffirmation of accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS). Our Compliance Certification Report, documenting Valdosta State University's compliance with more than 80 requirements and standards, is being prepared for submission this fall and preliminary results are expected in late November.

A critical component of the reaffirmation of accreditation involves the development of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a multi-year project designed to enhance undergraduate student learning, which also relates specifically to Valdosta State University's mission and needs. The topic of Valdosta State University's QEP, selected after campus-wide input, centers on undergraduate research in discipline based inquiry.

It is very easy to talk about a great University and lose sight of the students we serve. While composing this address and struggling to find

a fitting ending my phone rang. A woman identified herself as the mother of one of our students. In a roundabout way she said that her daughter was a wonderful young lady but had not been blessed with many of the advantages that would predict college success. To make matters worse, her daughter felt a strong duty to go home weekends and evenings to help with her chemotherapy.

The mother had been facing her second bout of cancer. The daughter's grades had suffered and adversely affected her ability to gain financial aid. Regardless she had, as she put it, raised enough money through contributions of aunts and uncles to pay this fall's tuition without the benefit of aid.

I do not know if the young lady will regain her aid status. I do not know if she will graduate. But I believe the Little Prince in saying that to some, stars are silent, and to others they have a voice, and it is a very special thing to look at the stars and see things that only you can see.

I **do** know that you have illuminated and given voice to her stars. You have done this against the challenge of poverty, illness and hopelessness.

While this year, like years past, will present material challenges, one thing will remain constant-- you will give young people a vision for the stars, a vision unique to your interest, expertise, and compassion. I am deeply humbled to share this mission with you.

Presentation of Faculty and Staff Excellence Awards