

Opening Convocation  
Mount St. Mary's College

January 5, 2012

Happy New Year and welcome back after a much-deserved break. It is good to be back here on the West Coast and to be with you at this convocation marking the start of the spring semester. Before I begin, I want to thank you for the warm welcome, support, energy and commitment that you extended to me throughout the fall term. I feel very fortunate to be part of this community!

When we met at Opening Convocation in August, I asked you all to envision a bold future built firmly on our mission. Today, I want to offer some remarks on this process as well as raise several issues that may inform our thinking. But first, let me thank you for the many creative ideas that you have already begun to share as we think about coming years and how we can best serve not only the students on our campuses today, but also the students we will educate across the years to come. I have been struck by the entrepreneurial approach of this community as we envision Mount St. Mary's College of the 21st century.

I have appreciated the opportunity to speak with so many of you over the course of the fall term – both formally and informally. I was able to meet with every academic department to hear about your programs and your aspirations for our students. I have sat down with staff from areas across the college to learn more about your work and your challenges. I have met with COSA and am looking forward to a program it will be sponsoring to assist us in our visioning process. I have sat down with students from both campuses and look forward to more occasions to interact with these incredible women – and men -- over the coming semester. I am so grateful – but not surprised – by your honesty, your commitment and your enthusiasm on behalf of our students.

I announced last August that we would engage in an inclusive visioning process this academic year. Let me bring you up to date on where we are in this work and what we will accomplish this spring. The faculty has begun its work to articulate an academic vision that will serve as the foundation for our comprehensive vision, and we will bring this first part of the process to completion early this semester. To facilitate this effort, I have asked the executive council of the Faculty Assembly, in conjunction with the provost's office, to plan a January retreat to allow the faculty the time and space it needs for this critical work. In February, we will ask the rest of the community to engage in this process. We look forward to sharing our progress in this work with the Board of Trustees at a board retreat in March, completing the visioning process by the end of this academic year. I realize that this timetable is ambitious and I am asking your help to bring this project to fruition this spring.

As your president I feel a sense of urgency to move forward to accomplish the dreams you have articulated to me. There is a palpable energy and a vibrant sense of possibility on our campuses. We are ready to do this work and we will move quickly to craft a vision – a vision that in many ways is already in the air we breathe on our campuses. I am eager to begin the exciting and substantive work that this shared vision will call us to do. We have such good work in front of us. I ask for your active and energetic participation in this critical endeavor.

As we move forward, let me reiterate that we will remain faithful to our founders and to our mission: we must be clear about who we are and what we are called to do. We are inspired by the legacy

of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet to help women become all they are capable of being; we remain committed to serving all persons without distinction; and we look always to respond to the needs of our dear neighbor – whether that neighbor is here among us in Los Angeles or across the globe.

One of my joys in my position is the opportunity to speak about Mount St. Mary's College to those beyond our campuses. It is my privilege to introduce or reintroduce our college to audiences who might not be familiar with the Mount of today. Here is what I tell them:

We are a Catholic liberal arts college for women of the 21st century. And as a Catholic, liberal arts college for women, we are called to be innovative, to be visionary – exactly as our founders were before us. That is why we were pioneers in adult education, opening our doors early on to nontraditional students, including men, to achieve their dreams of an education. That is why we created the associate degree program to provide access to students for whom the four-year degree seems out of reach; and that is why we created graduate programs whose growth demonstrates a compelling need for quality programs at the masters and doctoral levels for women and men in our community.

We live, however, in challenging and exciting times. It is our job now to determine how we will live out our legacy as a Catholic liberal arts college founded by and for women in the years ahead.

Our panel today will delve into the challenges and opportunities of the liberal arts college in this age of rapid change and globalization but let me offer some thoughts on several areas related to higher education today – issues that we as a nation and we as a college community will be called to address.

In my convocation address in August I quoted the words of the Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee who said: “The choice for higher education is either reinvention or extinction.” I stated then that I felt the statement was perhaps inflated. Five months later, I am not so sure. The landscape is shifting and recently I find myself thinking of the words of one of my favorite songs by one of my favorite artists, “The Times, They Are A-Changin’.” As Dylan’s song evokes, I believe that the “waters around us have grown” and I take to heart the famous line, “You better start swimming or you’ll sink like a stone.”

In this era of reinvention or extinction, at this time where the waters seem to be rising, we need to think carefully and boldly about how we see ourselves in this shifting landscape.

The critical eye of the public is on higher education – and justifiably so. There is great concern about the rising costs of higher education. At a meeting I recently attended, Jonathan Brown, the president emeritus of AICCU, quoted a startling statistic: between 1980 and 2009, the cost of tuition and fees in higher education increased 600% and in the last decade, student debt has grown 550%. We must ask what this will mean for higher education and what will this mean to Mount St. Mary's. At a time when our Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reports that we have fallen from first in the world for college graduations to 15th, and we are being called by our government to educate and graduate greater numbers of American citizens, we have to think in new ways about access, affordability and completion. And finally, let us not shy away from the discussions begun in Derek Bok’s 2005 book, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*, and the more recent 2010 publication of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* and *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing our Kids – and What We Can Do About It*. These works question the whole educational enterprise at the undergraduate level by posing the crucial question: What are our students actually learning through their college experience?

The challenges that face us as a country, as members of the higher education community, and as members of this, the Mount community, are great. But I do not find them discouraging. I believe that these challenges are also exciting, even exhilarating, for they provide us the opportunity to help define this quickly approaching future. The old models will no longer be enough. So how will we respond? How will we provide our students a meaningful experience that is both inspirational and pragmatic in its grounding in the liberal arts? How will we provide an experience that prepares them for lives of meaning and accomplishment – and remain sensitive to the issues of affordability and access? How will we as a Catholic liberal arts college of the 21<sup>st</sup> century achieve this?

These are times that call for creativity and fearlessness. And I have been struck by the creativity of our campuses. Over the course of the fall semester, you have shared with me ideas and dreams that replace the ivory tower model of higher education. You seek to create programs and opportunities that engage the college, and most importantly, our students in the communities in which we live and work – both local and global. Among the many, many ideas you have, let me speak to three areas in which Mount St. Mary's has shown an entrepreneurial spirit that will be critical to our future:

1) As you know, MSMC was awarded a five-year \$6-million dollar Title III federal grant to enhance curricula and support for Hispanic, female and low-income students in the STEM areas and, what is perhaps most exciting is that we do this in partnership with El Camino Community College. As we educate our own students, we also provide access to a greater breadth of students and we prepare them as future leaders.

I am also thrilled to announce today that the Mount has been awarded a grant from the prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities. We have been awarded \$100,000 to fund our project, "Women & China: Internationalizing the Humanities and Professional Studies." This interdisciplinary program will establish a model for integrating international cultures into our undergraduate and graduate curricula and strengthening the connection to the humanities in our professional schools of nursing, physical therapy, education and business.

Congratulations to all of those who worked on these grants, particularly Stephanie Cubba, vice president for institutional advancement, who led this effort. You have our support and our thanks!

2) Let me turn now to a second initiative that engages the Mount in the greater community. This past summer and fall, a group of our faculty and staff, with the support of Eleanor Siebert and Stephanie Cubba, prepared the soon-to-be published Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California. Researching existing databases and surveys at the state and national levels, our colleagues have produced an overview of the challenges facing California women in the areas of poverty, education, technology, employment, leadership, health, violence and incarceration. We will release this report at a very public presentation on March 29. As a women's college with a mission to serve and to lead, we will help drive this discussion of the forces that shape women's lives – and we will involve our students in these conversations and in the projects that will spring from them.

3) I am also happy to announce a third initiative in which we as a college will engage. Mount St. Mary's College will join other women's colleges to participate in a new project sponsored by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, with help from the Seven Sister Colleges of the Northeast. Secretary Clinton's *Women in Public Service Project*, launched at a State Department Colloquium on December 15, 2011, will identify and educate a new generation of women committed to public service, create an infrastructure of support and mentoring and enable more women to enter public service and political

leadership. As our sister colleges of the east begin this initiative working with women from developing countries in Africa, Mount St. Mary's College has been asked to partner with Scripps College and Mills College to work with women of Latin America and the students and faculty from our three colleges to inspire and prepare future generations of women leaders. I will tell you it felt very good at the formal State Department Colloquium to hear Secretary Clinton call Mount St. Mary's College by name as one of the colleges at the forefront of this project. I felt excited and proud for it will not only provide our faculty and students an exciting opportunity, it shows our commitment to women across the globe. As we get underway in the planning of this program, I will be calling on our faculty to work with colleagues at Mills and Scripps to create an innovative program of which we can be proud.

And there is so much more going on our campuses; our community engagement initiatives, travel trips with our students to countries like Ghana and China; student engagement in academic conferences and competitions; faculty/student research projects that result in presentations and publication; and partnerships between academic departments and community organizations. Our education department and graduate studies are discussing a new master's program in collaboration with a community partner. Our nursing program is exploring ways to meet the changing needs of nurses through the creation of a nontraditional Bachelor of Science program in a field where the baccalaureate degree is fast becoming the "must have" credential. Our language department is investigating a collaboration with the public universities to expand the offerings of French language and literature beyond the limits of our program. And finally, we continue to explore how technology can address the needs of our students and of future students. Most recently, we have been approached about participation in an initiative funded by the Gates Foundation to help create an intensive online program at the associate level. We are looking at this – and at all initiatives that are before us – closely for we must remain open to this dynamically changing landscape. We will not do everything but no idea should go unexamined.

Let me close by reiterating my thanks to your creativity and your sense of possibility! Today I have only mentioned a sampling of the many ideas that you have brought forth -some even recently as during our Christmas break. We need your ideas, we need your energy as we create our vision for the future.

Yes, I come to you today with a sense of urgency – but not because we are struggling or faltering in any way. To the contrary, I come to you with a sense of urgency because we are ready! We are Mount St. Mary's College and we are poised to create an exciting future that will help define higher education of the 21st century.

So I welcome you back and I ask you to roll up your sleeves and get ready. We need you! There is important work to do in higher education and on our campuses, and I believe that no one is better prepared than we at the Mount to do this work!

Thank you.