

Convocation Speech 2007

Delivered by

Academic Senate Chair Praveen Soni

Thank you Provost Gould! Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen!!

Mr. President! Acknowledge previous speakers.

*“There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”*

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Brutus.

(Read the first two lines one more time.) Now I am no Brutus or Caesar, and today is certainly not the Ides of March, Thank God, but I am confident that the tide leading to greatness for CSULB is here, and we must take it at the flood, without drowning, I might add. It is not always easy to visualize, but from where I stand, the strategic window is wide open. And with a new (relatively speaking) visionary President and a new dynamic Provost, the university has begun to take steps in that direction. Not that the university wasn't doing fine anyway, but as one learns in management, one has to frequently break the mold and reinvent and reengineer the organization to grow in new directions much like the rising of the phoenix from the ashes.

Transformation of a massive university of over 40,000 individuals working in a small city is no easy task, and the very thought can make one weak at the knees. I believe three elements are critical in the crucible of transformation. Those are Restructuring, Openness, and Collaborative Relationships.

Restructuring is the recognition that existing strategies and structures are not well suited to meet the needs and challenges of the future. Indeed not even of the present. I am glad that restructuring is already underway in the Division of Academic Affairs and across campus. I am sure the Provost and the President will apprise you of those changes in their speeches. So as to respond to those changes and to align faculty governance structures to administrative structures for improved effectiveness, this year, the Academic Senate will also undertake a restructuring of its Councils and Committees.

Openness! What a beautiful word? Quite akin to freedom! Mikhail Gorbachev recognized its value to creativity and productivity in aligning individual's efforts to more productive pursuits, and in reducing conspiracy theories that are counterproductive and destructive to morale, and wont to follow the lack of openness. Democratic institutions, and particularly the universities have depended upon openness as a strength, and indeed it should pervade every level of our university, both in thought and in action. As

Academic Senate Chair, I have encouraged and will continue to encourage openness in all areas of the university, and urge each one of you to demand the same.

Collaborative relationships! I cannot emphasize them enough. They are key! CSULB is one of a handful of CSUs that has enjoyed excellent, cordial, and collaborative relationships between the administration and faculty governance. These relationships have served the university remarkably in the past, making CSULB the ‘University of Choice’ for students, staff, faculty, and yes, even our administrators. Our Provost and President are living proofs. Whereas it may be convenient and comfortable to work with individuals who have held key positions in the past, we must recognize legitimate systems and strive to work with new leadership, duly appointed or duly elected, on both the administrative and faculty governance side so as to foster and strengthen our collaboration. In our quest for greatness, let us not forget our most cherished value of working together. For, what use is “greatness”, if it comes with the demise of something that all of us hold so near and dear to our heart? Would it be worth it?

Academic Senate Retreat

Last year the Academic Senate Retreat spearheaded and focused on mission, vision, and the strategic direction of the university. I am happy to report that

the Retreat was a resounding success, and provided input into the development of a coherent and distinctive mission statement, a shared vision, and strategic direction/planning for success. An interdivisional committee then worked the rest of the year to craft the mission and vision statements for the university, which were periodically shared with campus constituents for their input and feedback. I believe the President will talk about the results of that endeavor in his speech.

What about this year? CSULB has increased its graduation rates significantly in the past few years, but the rates are still below national averages. The campus has set itself a goal of surpassing national averages in the next few years. We tout access, but what use is access without success, and what use is success without quality – quality of our faculty, quality of our programs, quality of our curriculum, as well as the quality of the advising and overall college experience. National surveys on student engagement point out that faculty student interaction at CSULB may be a weak link in student success, and an Academic Senate task force is in the process of developing a policy on faculty as advisors.

Therefore, this year, the Academic Senate Retreat will take place on October 19th and will focus on faculty-student interaction and student advising to reconceptualize the interaction and advising experience. This topic is timely

and has implications for student success (a WASC theme), faculty training, workload, evaluation (a la RTP) and compensation, staff and student training, and for the utilization of Academic Technology in effectively and efficiently advising students. In addition, the topic has campus wide ramifications, which is one of the objectives of the retreat. The President has embraced the topic enthusiastically and given it his blessing. That is no small matter since he does pay for the Retreat.

Academic Senate Activities

What else did the Academic Senate do last year? Faculty members elected by faculty governance processes served on the search committees for the hiring of a Provost, Dean of the College of Engineering, Dean of the College of Business, and the Associate Vice President for Academic Personnel. Two of the searches were fruitful – a new Provost and a new Dean of the College of Engineering were hired. In addition, faculty members served on three campus wide administrator reviews. This year, faculty members will participate in at least eight campus searches – a Vice President of Administration and Finance, six Associate Vice Presidents across the divisions and one Dean.

The Academic Senate and its Councils worked on the new Doctorate of Education program and passed it in time for it to be implemented this year. I

believe the first cohort has already been admitted and they started in summer 2007. The Academic Senate also passed policies related to anti discrimination and student grievance, and debated the amended GE Policy until the cows came home. The cows did come home, but the GE policy did not. It is on the docket this year along with a host of other policies such as the Retention, Tenure and Promotion policy, University Awards policy, Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) policy, Scholarly and Creative Activities (SCAC) policy, Faculty Advisor Policy, and Department Chairs policy.

I am particularly proud of a Senate sponsored forum for faculty held in April 2006 which brought together administrative and CFA representatives to discuss issues and answer questions on actions each side might take in the event of a faculty strike. The forum was well received, and a transcript of the forum was posted on the Academic Senate website for the benefit of those faculty members who could not attend. It was just as well that the issues were resolved and the strike was averted. Phew!!

I would like to thank the Associated Student Leadership for extending an invitation to the Academic Senate Chair to attend their fall retreat for the second consecutive year. It is an honor and indicative of the high regard that ASI places on the mission and work of the Academic Senate.

Accreditation

Those pesky Wasquitoes are at it again, and have been rather busy. Watch out, or you may catch the accreditation fever called WASCaria. Get it! Even quinine will not help. Most, if not all, of you must have picked up a WASC accreditation handout prepared by the WASC Outreach Committee and approved by the WASC Implementation Committee. In fact, CSULB is a pioneer, in that it is one of a very few universities that has a WASC Outreach Committee to disseminate information about WASC to the campus community. I will not insult you by reading the handout to you, but I would like to draw your attention to two items. First, the “Capacity and Preparatory Report” is due to WASC in December 2008, and I am pleased to inform you that we are well on our way to meeting that deadline. Second, it is my fervent desire to obtain broad participation from the campus community in various WASC projects for the “Educational Effectiveness Review.” Thus, in spring 2008, I will be sending out a call for participation. I urge you to take a serious look at the various projects and apply to participate. Please help me make the point that the university does not have to rely on the usual suspects, and that other members of the campus

community are interested, knowledgeable and more than capable of doing the job as well. Moreover WASC requires broad participation.

Conclusion

This summer, I was able to read a fascinating article in the July 2007 edition of the National Geographic titled “The Genius of Swarms” by Peter Miller.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting a summer reading list as has been done in the past, if you know what I mean. The article is simply about how less intelligent life than humans can survive and grow because the smartness is in the collective following simple rules, not the individual capable of complex thought running directionless. It uses examples from swarms of ants, fish, wildebeests, locusts, caribou, and yes, the birds and the bees as well. (No pun intended.)

“A honeybee never sees the big picture any more than you or I do,” says Thomas Seeley, the bee expert. “None of us knows what society as a whole needs, but we look around and say, oh, they need someone to volunteer at school, or mow the church lawn, or help in a political campaign.” The author concludes with the following statement, “If you are looking for a role model in a world of complexity, you could do worse than to imitate a bee.” That got me thinking. What if each one of over 40,000 CSULB community members consisting of faculty, staff, students, and administrators imitated

the bee (not the birds and the bees, because although interesting, could prove disastrous) and performed small tasks daily to improve the university without knowing the big picture and without regard for reward, what could we accomplish? “Imagine all the people,” “You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.” Do you know who sang that song? John Lennon.

I conclude with an adapted quote by a great and charismatic world leader who died before his time, felled by an assassin’s bullet. Nevertheless, in that short time, he ignited the hopes and dreams not only of a nation, but of the world. To tell you who it is would be tantamount to insulting the immense popularity of the person and his quote. So here goes. “Ask not what your University can do for you. Ask, what you can do for your university?”

Thank you and Good Luck