

## **Convocation Address 2009**

Delivered by Praveen Soni

Chair, CSULB Academic Senate

### **Introduction**

President Alexander, Provost Para, Friends,

Good morning! And welcome to all of you to the 2009-2010 year.

May you live in “interesting” times!! An old Chinese proverb that fittingly describes our times, although I do believe we are living in “interesting interesting” times. If it got any more interesting than it already is, I doubt I could handle it. Perhaps, you have greater courage and fortitude. Also, according to the Chinese calendar, the year 2009 is the year of the Ox. I know you can make the connection.

### **Special Welcome**

Welcome, especially to the new faculty members who will be joining us this year. We are all very grateful, and delighted that you agreed to come to CSULB even though the state and the CSU are in dire straits. I believe that your anxiety level is likely to be high, but I also know, and I am certain, that we will do whatever we possibly can to reduce your anxiety and make you feel welcome and comfortable. We also applaud your commitment to the noble vocation of teaching and learning, and making a significant difference to the community, state, nation and society. Lord knows we need that more than ever.

Welcome also to the new freshmen, transfer and graduate students who will be joining us this year. You are the lucky ones of more than 60,000 applicants to CSULB, whose hopes and dreams are likely to be fulfilled due to the opportunity and low cost access provided to higher education. Please take full advantage of the universe of opportunities offered in a university.

### **Enrollment Downsizing**

Friends, you may or may not know, but even before the budget cuts were enacted for 2009-2010, CSULB had to manage enrollment down by denying admission to over 1800 eligible but unlucky full time equivalent students. The hopes and dreams of these young, hard working, low income, diverse, first generation California citizens have at the very least been deferred, and for many of them since low cost public education is the only opportunity, it is likely that the “American Dream” may never become reality. And while we closed the “front” door to the 1800 or so students, as a consequence of enrollment downsizing, we had to open the “back”

door and let go the equivalent of over 60 full time lecturers, many for whom the University was the only source of livelihood. And that too into an unkind recessionary economy, perhaps without medical insurance, joining the over 47 million other uninsured Americans. Now, I have never been unemployed, but yesterday I spoke with someone who has experienced layoff earlier in her lifetime and asked her to describe her feelings. According to her, it devastates the psyche, self esteem, and self worth of the individual. You feel powerless and helpless. It makes you feel like “crap.” Sorry!! Those were her words.

For fall 2010, CSULB is poised to reduce enrollment by denying admission to another 3000 eligible full time equivalent students and the CSU system by a whopping 40,000. Yes, these numbers are large and cumulative, and are on top of reductions already implemented. By now you can do the math on the consequent cuts to faculty ranks. However, I challenge anyone, to do the math on the crushed hopes and dreams, or the fractured psyche and self esteem of the affected individuals? I shudder to think of the long term impact to the state and nation. It is a sad commentary that the university, which is the formal system where the quest for knowledge is core to its existence, has simply shut its doors and closed its eyes to large numbers of eligible students and qualified faculty.

### **Fees and Furloughs**

In the summer, CSU students saw their fees rise by 30% over last year, and both faculty and staff voted to furlough themselves resulting in approximately a 10% reduction in salary. The administrative arm also had to accept furloughs and the 10% reduction. In a nutshell, the fees and the furloughs staved off irreparable damage to the CSU and its mission, have allowed students to obtain much needed classes to proceed to graduation in a timely manner, and stemmed the layoffs of hundreds of our colleagues – faculty and staff. Someone had to stop the bleeding, and we all did together. But, we know this is temporary, only a reprieve, before another round hits. Thus, we don't intend to simply wait out for the next hammer to drop, but we have our work cut out for us to strategically plan for the coming years.

### **Academic Senate Retreat**

Thus, I am happy to announce that on October 23, 2009, the Academic Senate Annual Retreat which is always a campus wide, inclusive event focusing on the big issue of the day, will focus on Strategic Planning for the university in the context of our mission, vision, and of course, our budget realities. Provost Para attended the Academic Senate Executive Committee meeting, was instrumental in the discussion, and agreed that such an inclusive collaborative event is most opportune and would be key to dealing with the issues and moving forward. Folks, this is the big issue of the day, and if “we don't hang together, we may end up hanging separately.” (Adapted from Ben Franklin. All puns intended. )

## Questions?

What do we expect to accomplish at this Retreat? Answers!! Solutions!! Panacea! Perhaps not! But, I do expect that we will try and obtain input and recommendations on the substantive issues from across the university spectrum. The one lesson you learn from marketing is that no organization can be all things to all people. So, I can think of a number of questions that we should try and grapple with to understand what we should be, and to whom. Here are some examples:

How do we provide “access” to “quality” education to all eligible California residents to create the leaders as well as the workforce of tomorrow?

What is the balance between teaching and research that will accomplish both access and quality?

What is the balance between teaching and learning on one hand, and services and administrative requirements on the other to accomplish this task?

What should be the balance between undergraduate and graduate programs and students?

How can we increase the diversity among our faculty and our administration even as we may downsize, so to enrich the educational experience provided to our students? This indeed is a WASC imperative.

What is an optimal student faculty ratio?

How can we increase non state revenues to the university to provide and further improve access and quality? , and finally

How to reduce bureaucracy and infuse effectiveness and efficiency throughout the university – in our programs, in our processes, in our services, in our modes of delivery, in our administration, and yes, even in our shared governance processes? Without sacrificing shared governance, I am committed to making it more effective and efficient.

Yes, it is going to be a balancing act, and you can certainly add to this list of questions. E-mail me if you have a bright idea or a great question. Remember, the idea has to be bright, and the question has to be great. Just kidding!!

## Impact of past Retreats

In the past, the Academic Senate has “Retreated” (Can never figure this out? Why do we have to retreat to move forward?), successfully on substantive topics such as Mission/Vision, Student Success, and Sustainability. Following on last year’s highly successful Academic Senate Retreat

on Sustainability, the Academic Senate unanimously approved a resolution for CSULB to become a member of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment. To implement the President's commitment to sustainability, the Academic Senate is working on forming a joint faculty and administrative task force.

### **Value of Shared Governance**

In May 2009, I was awarded the Nicholas Perkins Hardeman Award for Academic Leadership, which is awarded for enhancing the principle and practice of shared governance. I am thankful to the faculty for recognizing my contributions and reposing their confidence in me with such a prestigious award.

Now, my experience as the chair of your Academic Senate for the last three years is that shared governance seems to be misunderstood, and perhaps my understanding about it may also be clouded. However, I do know this. Shared governance is not just about going through the motions of meeting with the committees and councils, and dotting the i's and crossing the t's, while not listening or paying attention to what is being suggested.

Shared governance is not just consultation, it should be joint decision making. At its heart, shared governance is about democracy, and the real value of shared governance comes from RESPECT and TRUST. Respect and trust for the duly elected individuals and the due processes of shared governance, resulting in "buy-in" and making the process of implementation smoother. Yes, these processes can be tedious, but they are designed to be inclusive, open and transparent. This, by the way, is another WASC imperative.

I am glad that both the President and Provost understand shared governance quite well. On many an occasion, I have heard the President talk about it, but recently Provost Para stated that "no one person is smarter than all of us." He said it again today. I could not agree more. Provost Para is a long time citizen of this university steeped in shared governance. That the Academic Senate Retreat will be a meaningful joint exercise can be attributed, in large part to our shared philosophies.

### **Conclusion**

Before I conclude, I do want you to know that, to honor the furlough contract, I have dutifully cut my speech by about 10%, or to be more precise, by 9.23%.

Even though we voted for it, and I believe, are content about the rightness of the decision, I know that to some degree we are all mad and upset at the fact that we have to take furlough days which will result in approximately a 10% salary cut for all of us. I am certain that President

Alexander is not too happy about his 10% cut either, although he can weather his 10% better than all of us.

So, who do we blame? Everybody and nobody!! Don't forget, however, that we are still employed, while the unemployment rate in the nation is over 10%. And 2010 is the year of the tiger. We may just come roaring out of this dark cave.

Perhaps Kahlil Gibran's philosophy on work as expressed in *The Prophet* might soothe you. He says:

"And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge,

And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,

And all work is empty save when there is love;

And when you work with love, you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another,

For work is love made visible."

If that does not move you, another apt saying from childhood comes to mind. "I complained that I had no shoes until I met a person who had no feet."

So, my friends let us pull up our sleeves, jump into the trenches, and get to doing our jobs, for we at the very least have jobs, and can make a difference.

Thank you!!