

President's Fall Convocation Address

OneLeMoyne

Dolphins Soar

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## Question

Dolphins soaring! That is what appears on my carefully selected tie today. I can think of no better imagery for this afternoon as I ask you to consider the most important question now before us: What must we do to sustain and enhance Le Moyne College's remarkable success? That is the question we should be asking ourselves and each other at this exciting moment in our history. Our answers must shape both our individual and collective action.

## Difficult Times

We are living in troubling economic times. Nearly every sector of the economy is suffering, including higher education. Many colleges and universities are struggling to reach enrollment targets. Tuition discounting is rising. Philanthropic giving is down. Fundraising campaigns are stalled. Endowments have eroded. Operating budgets have shrunk. Bond ratings are being lowered. Borrowing is more difficult.

A look at schools in our own region reveals a bleak picture. Some good institutions are in their second or third year of a salary freeze. Many colleges have slowed or frozen hiring. Nationally, the percentage of tenure-line faculty is decreasing. Adjunct use has grown substantially. A number of colleges have been forced to cut positions. In one nearby case, hundreds of jobs were eliminated. Layoffs and furloughs, previously a rarity in higher education, are being employed all too frequently as a cost reduction measure. Sabbaticals are being reduced in number or eliminated. Colleges are delaying, scaling back, or cancelling facilities projects. Discretionary spending is being slashed. And the most vulnerable schools in the nation are closing, merging, or being purchased by for-profit organizations.

In addition to the harsh financial reality, this is a time of increased public concern and scrutiny. At all levels, much of what is being written and said about higher education is skeptical or critical. Good, positive media coverage is infrequent.

Setting itself apart from this grim reality is our beloved oasis, Le Moyne College. We are truly blessed.

## The Extraordinary Le Moyne Reality

Have you ever had a perfect day? A day you will never forget because phenomenal things happened and everything went well? A day so incredible it is hard to believe that so many terrific elements could come together at one time? For me, June 10, 2010 was such a day.

While eating breakfast early that morning I checked my cell phone and found an affirming text message from our Board Chair, Walter Benson. I am sure you understand that there is no better way for a president to start the day than with such a note. Walter was offering congratulations on the impressive article by Glenn Coin in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*. I couldn't wait to read it for myself. When I did I was thrilled.

The article, titled “Le Moyne Reaches for New Heights,” was hard to miss. It was the lead article which captured most of the front page as well as much of a second. Many of our recent achievements—from record enrollments and success in fundraising, to transforming facilities projects and impressive national recognitions—were listed. One media expert in our community later said to me, “You can’t buy press like that article.” Broadcast media immediately picked up on the story and I was asked to do interviews that day and the next speaking to Le Moyne’s many accomplishments. Prominent educational, governmental, and business leaders of our region have congratulated me on the article and the many accomplishments that it outlined—accomplishments for which you are responsible.

After enjoying the excitement generated by the newspaper article, we began the Trustee subcommittee meetings. Each and every committee had significant positive news to discuss. Such an exemplary convergence does not occur often with the Board’s work.

At Student Development we welcomed our incoming vice president, Deborah Cady Melzer, who I introduced to the campus community earlier in the day, and thanked Shawn Ward for his nine years of leadership. At his first Board meeting as our new Vice President for Institutional Advancement, Greg Stahl reviewed the results of our remarkable fundraising campaign. The Finance Committee observed that in this difficult economic environment we had yet again managed our finances prudently and ended the year with a healthy net surplus that would allow for additional investment into our facilities. The Investment Committee celebrated the fact that, for the first time in our history, our endowment, which peaked at \$50 million prior to the 2008 market meltdown, had surpassed the \$100 million milestone earlier in the year. This growth is reflected in Le Moyne having been the number one private college in the country in year-to-year percentage endowment growth (FY07 to FY08) and the number two liberal arts college in the total number of dollars raised in FY 2008—due largely to the amazing McDevitt Gift. Master Plan and Technology analyzed the five major construction projects underway—together they comprise the largest building campaign since the College’s founding. Academic Affairs studied the impressive credentials of our new tenure-line hires, noted that Le Moyne received funding for faculty projects from both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation, and applauded the launch of the new communication and film studies department. The Enrollment Management Committee was struck by Vice President Dennis DePerro’s projection that we were about to enroll, for a second consecutive year, a record class of new full-time undergraduates with another reduction in the discount rate. On top of that we are holding quality constant while seeing a near doubling of the percentage of out-of-state first-year students—an indication of Le Moyne’s growing reputation.

Between the impressive press story and the incredibly good news celebrated across the various subcommittees, everyone was pleased. But the best was yet to come. That night we held a series of events to mark the closing of the *Achieving New Heights* campaign that were superbly planned and executed.

The evening began with a Mass of Thanksgiving, followed by a formal recognition ceremony for all those involved with the campaign and a donor plaque unveiling, then a spirited parade march from Grewen Hall led by a marching band and lined by our students tossing

green and gold confetti. The parade concluded behind the Coyne Science Center where we held the groundbreaking for the building that will substantially advance teaching and learning in the sciences. The ceremony was initiated by Congressman Maffei, who affirmed the importance of Le Moyne to our region, and concluded with Provost LeMura gingerly maneuvering a huge front loader to move the first pile of dirt. Thankful for having survived the provost's operation of a piece of heavy machinery without any injuries or fatalities, the crowd moved to a large tent next to the W. Carroll Coyne Center for the Performing Arts for a grand celebration that was as jubilant in spirit as it was delicious in offerings. I left campus that day feeling a profound sense of joy for this organization, our people, and what the Le Moyne community has accomplished.

### **Differentiating Momentum**

During the June 10<sup>th</sup> celebration, and continuing since, participants in that evening's activities have heaped praise upon Le Moyne. To give but one example, an accomplished businessman in the area recalled the evening while talking to Vice President Roger Stackpoole and me at last month's Gold Wave Dinner. He stated that the activities of that night far exceeded what he had expected and what he was used to here at the College. It was, to his mind, emblematic of what he sees as a new way of proceeding at Le Moyne, one that is at a decidedly higher level of excellence.

The recognition we are receiving extends far beyond Syracuse. For the first time, Le Moyne was included in the list of "Military Friendly Schools" compiled by *G.I. Jobs* magazine. That places us among the top 15 percent of schools nationally that are taking significant steps to embrace America's veterans. For the second year in a row, The Princeton Review named Le Moyne as one of the "Best Colleges in the Northeast." *U.S. News & World Report* rankings raised our position two slots among regional colleges. Even more impressive, Le Moyne is ranked number two in the region for a "strong commitment to teaching" and one of only four such colleges that were so identified.

Le Moyne is also receiving national recognition for our first-year student reading assignment, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—applauding us for assigning a reading of substance, as well as for being thoughtful about the selection and linking it to a significant event: the marking of the centennial anniversary of Samuel Clemens' death. And by now you have all heard about the recently released *Washington Monthly* rankings. Endorsed by a writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Richard Kahlenberg, as important for its focus on social mobility, research and service, the *Washington Monthly's* rankings are an extraordinary affirmation of what you do here at Le Moyne to prepare our students—many from lower socio-economic backgrounds—for success in life and work, including giving back through service. It was thrilling to see that out of 551 master's level colleges that were ranked, Le Moyne was number five, which places us in the top one percent.

We are enjoying the benefits of a momentum that has taken hold across campus, one that differentiates us from most colleges which, unfortunately, are feeling the brunt of these challenging times. In my first address to you as your new president, I stated that "[T]he key to differentiation distills to two crucial imperatives: first, articulating and embracing a

powerful vision grounded in a compelling mission; and second, an individual and organizational single-minded focus on excellence in our programs, processes and outcomes.” At that time I asked you to join together with me and embrace OneLeMoyne, an intense campus-wide dialogue grounded in meaningful discussion and resulting in a vision that is true to our mission. Your extraordinary investment in the process has produced an inspiring statement.

It is, however, not the OneLeMoyne Vision itself that has been, or will be, responsible for our many achievements. It is the fact that you have rallied to its call. As one trained in the study of organizations and collective action, I see very clearly that we are in a dramatically better place in terms of energy, enthusiasm, optimism, collaboration, communication, and performance than we were just two short years ago. You are, individually and collectively, focusing on excellence in our programs, processes and outcomes. The improvements you—the talented and dedicated faculty, staff, and administrators of Le Moyne—have been making are the reason we are doing so well.

If you pause and consider all that is changing, rapidly and deeply, you cannot help but be amazed. Just consider some of what is undergoing change here at Le Moyne: personnel review and compensation practices; reconsideration of the core curriculum; shifting of personnel; extending shared governance; Athletics reclassification; extensive construction; campus-wide changes in the grounds and parking; and program elimination, creation, and modification. I want you to know that I realize that many sacrifices are being made across our College in order to do all that must be done, and done rather quickly, to capitalize on the opportunities of the moment and the strength of our current position. I also want you to know that I realize and appreciate all of the extra effort, inconvenience, and adaptation you have shouldered. I sincerely admire you for it and marvel at both your capacity for change and good will in undertaking it. Thanks to each and every one of you, we are enjoying enormous success at this early stage of our OneLeMoyne transformation. I can only begin to imagine the many good things that will follow.

### **Question Revisited**

Let us now return to the question I posed at the beginning of my remarks: “What must we do to sustain and enhance Le Moyne College’s remarkable success?” In other words, how do we improve upon the heart of what we do, thus keeping our differentiating momentum accelerating along its impressive trajectory? The answer comes down to four essential tasks.

First, at the individual level, each one of us must remain passionately committed to excellence. More than anything else, the success we are enjoying is the result of this dedication. You, the faculty, staff, and administrators at Le Moyne, make all the difference, from the highly visible accolades and improvements to the equally important everyday patterns of interaction. I have heard countless stories about how well people are treated when they visit or work with Le Moyne. I am grateful for your sincere commitment to making Le Moyne better by the day.

Second, we must focus on the OneLeMoyne Strategic Plan—our roadmap for the future. Together we drafted a compelling vision for the College, one that distinguishes Le Moyne as a premier Jesuit, Catholic college. Any vision, regardless of its eloquence and loftiness, is simply a document until it is systematically enacted through a closely aligned strategic plan. It is, therefore, imperative that we take the next step towards realizing our vision by creating a strategic plan. The plan will be based on the six strategic imperatives to which we have committed ourselves in the OneLeMoyne Vision. This strategic plan will not only set our future course, but will provide the projected outcomes against which our success will be measured. Further, the strategic plan will inform the case for future fundraising by inspiring donors to align their philanthropy with our most crucial needs.

Under the leadership of Rev. David McCallum, S.J. and the five vice presidents, the six strategic imperative teams are responsible for developing our strategic plan. Like our OneLeMoyne Vision process, the drafting of the strategic plan is highly inclusive. Nearly 90 members of the faculty, staff, and administration are participating in the six teams. These representative groups will continue to lead a deeply inclusive process through the various meetings that will be scheduled, the focus groups that are being planned, a campus-wide survey, and the [OneLeMoyne portal](#). In addition, the teams will provide regular communication with the campus community to report on their progress. I want to thank everyone who is participating in this effort, particularly the many faculty, staff, and administrators who agreed to be members of the six teams. The key to the success of this effort is to continue to model the spirit of *cura personalis* at the heart of the OneLeMoyne process: listening and speaking in candid, respectful, authentic conversation.

Our third priority this year is the Core Curriculum. Our College's primary commitment is to academic and intellectual excellence. Nowhere should this be more evident for a school like Le Moyne than in our common undergraduate program—Core. Core is the single most important way of differentiating a Catholic, Jesuit education in the Le Moyne way of proceeding.

Last year, Provost Linda LeMura formed a Task Force on Core Curriculum Revision, co-chaired by Drs. John Langdon and Theresa Beaty. The task force began an 18-month process to develop and pass a Core Curriculum that captures our best vision of Catholic, Jesuit higher education grounded in our mission and reflecting our OneLeMoyne Vision. I know that the leaders of the task force have been pleased by the amount of participation and quality of discourse. I encourage you to continue to plan boldly and honestly, transcending the personal interests and divisive academic politics that so often plague such efforts across higher education. I am grateful for your investment in the effort to improve our Core.

The fourth area upon which we will focus is personnel practices. During the OneLeMoyne process it became apparent that we were not employing best personnel practices across all divisions of the College. As I observed last year, it should be axiomatic at any college that performance, promotion and tenure reviews, as well as compensation practices, are consistent, fair, and aligned with best practices in higher education. Over the past year we have made good progress responding to concerns raised about performance reviews, as

well as envisioning new practices in faculty and staff compensation and initiating discussions on faculty rank and tenure policies. This year we must complete our work on these important personnel matters as a means of enhancing organizational excellence. I want to thank everyone who has been involved in the reconsideration and improvement of these policies and practices.

## **Conclusion**

In the midst of these distressing times for higher education, Le Moyne stands apart. We have avoided retrenchments, are undertaking major improvements, and find ourselves celebrating a string of magnificent successes. The reality of this organization, grounded in our many achievements and newfound optimism, is impressive. A momentum that serves to differentiate us as a premier Jesuit college has taken hold upon The Heights. We are on a roll. You, the Le Moyne faculty, staff, and administration, are responsible for it and the Le Moyne student body is the beneficiary.

Together, we have crafted the elegant OneLeMoyne Vision of our collective future while already taking great strides towards achieving it. We are enjoying much recognition and receiving many accolades for our rigorous approach to educating young men and women who leave well prepared for all they will face in life and work. Beckoning us now is the question, "What must we do to sustain and enhance our success?" We must act on the basis of our answers. As we do, the sense of exhilaration I experienced on June 10 should become a familiar one for everyone here at Le Moyne.

May God bless you.