

Installation Address
Western Carolina University
Thursday, March 29, 2012

Reflection and Gratitude

President Ross, University of North Carolina Board of Governors Chair Gage, Western Carolina University Board of Trustees Chair MacNeill, other members of the Boards of Governors and Trustees, students, faculty, staff, colleagues, friends, and family: Thank you.

Susan and I are very grateful for your warm reception both today and since we were introduced almost exactly one year ago. We are grateful for your generous support and for your belief in Western Carolina University and the promise it holds for Western North Carolina and the state as a whole.

Susan and I pledge to devote our energy, our ideas, our ideals, our passion, our laughter, our friendship, and our sense of urgency to this university in pursuit of a future wherein that promise is realized. We are truly proud to be Catamounts.

To be frank, this is a rather heady moment for me personally. I certainly know that this ceremony and the week of activities which has served as its prelude are not about me, but rather about Western, its people, and its future. I hope, though, that you will indulge me a moment of personal privilege to salute a few individuals whose guidance, advice, encouragement, and belief have indeed shaped and influenced the person I am and some of the interesting routes I've taken.

First, my wife Susan, who shares with me every up and down, who challenges me, who loves me no matter what, who is a rock of support, and who is as vested in this university and its success as I am.

My parents, Posey and Jean Belcher, who have always supported and encouraged me; who have modeled genuine leadership and a sincere commitment to serving others; and who instilled in their children the fundamental values of integrity and excellence.

I have been blessed with wonderful mentors throughout my life, and I am touched that a number of them are here today. I wish to acknowledge three who are not:

Dr. David Gibson, my piano professor at Furman University who passed away some years ago. David's the one who told me, while I was sitting at the piano in a lesson one day, that I'd make a good department chair. You can love him or hate him for it, but he's the first person who planted the seed that higher education administration might be a good career path for me – a seed which has resulted in what for me has been a wonderfully rewarding career. David was the ultimate adviser.

Dr. Bernice Warren, my unofficial mentor in my years as a dean at Missouri State University, who passed away several years ago. I became a dean in dramatic fashion on six days' notice when my predecessor, who had only been at the university for five months, discovered she had three-to-six months to live. I was 36 years old, suddenly the dean of the largest college on campus, and the college's eighth dean in 11 years, and I had a total staff of one administrative assistant.

Bernie, a longtime dean of another college, shared history, showed me the ropes, and gave me advice. She was a real colleague.

And Dr. Joel Anderson, chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock who served as my boss during my eight years as provost at UALR. Joel mentored me, provided me with unique leadership opportunities to help prepare me for my own chancellorship, and modeled for me thoughtful decision-making, a fundamental commitment to the academy, and restraint. He has been a wonderful mentor.

And I am grateful to the Bob Scotts, Mollie Molnars, Joel Andersons, Steve Warrens, Joan MacNeills, and Tom Rosses in my life who have hired me for worthy work, and I appreciate their support and that of the many colleagues with whom I have worked shoulder to shoulder over the years.

We do not spring fully formed into the world ready for success but are, rather, individuals shaped by the people in our lives; by the experiences, opportunities, hurdles, and accidents which come our way; and by the choices we make. Mine has been thus far a blessed life – rich and full, and I am grateful to those many friends, colleagues, and family members who have had a hand in making it so.

Defining Our Future in Pursuit of Distinction

It is tempting at such moments for those of us who are members of the Western family to overstate our own importance and significance in Western Carolina University's trajectory. For sure, we are the institution's current leaders, we have a sense of ownership of the university, and we have our various roles to play.

But the university existed long before we arrived on the scene and will exist long after we depart. We are, though, stewards for a time. And so the fundamental question facing us at a moment like this is: What will we do with the time which is ours to advance Western Carolina University to the greatest extent possible in fulfillment of its mission?

An appropriate point of departure in exploring answers to this question is reflection on our context, framed by Western's historical values on the one hand and the parameters of our current realities on the other.

Those of us steeped in Western's history know well the stories of its beginnings in the late 19th century, and we revere the names associated with its founding, among them Madison, Buchanan, and those of the Noble Nine: Smith, Coward, Brown, Norton, Davies, Cox, Wilson, Watson and Henson. Those men were committed to providing an education for the young people in the region and to training teachers to spread education throughout the western part of the state.

The two values inherent in Western's founding – access to education and meeting regional need – have served as sure grounding for Western ever since. We've evolved dramatically in the last 123 years, but our development – from significant expansion of professional and graduate programs to the founding of the Millennial Campus, from the offering of courses in Cherokee, Asheville, Hickory, and Murphy to the celebration and preservation of Cherokee and Appalachian cultures, and from Western's adoption of the Boyer model of scholarship to its demonstrated commitment to engaged learning – all of these developments and

more are grounded in the foundational values of access to education and meeting regional need.

The other half of our point-of-departure equation – the parameters of our current realities – is complex to the say the least, for we are certainly at a moment of fundamental change and challenge. For example:

- Universities have experienced staggering budget reductions stemming from the economic conditions of recent years.
- At a moment when class sizes are rising, course offerings are scaled back, and service functions are reduced to one-deep staffing to accommodate the elimination of faculty and staff positions in RESPONSE to budget reductions, North Carolina has a growing population with thousands more high school graduates anticipated in the coming years. Will they remain in North Carolina to attend university, or will they join a brain-drain exodus to other states that would love to recruit them?
- Tuition and fees are skyrocketing around the country, and while UNC institutions still boast costs among the lowest in the nation, the increases are escalating.
- Simultaneously, state and federal financial aid resources are shrinking as we grapple with our struggling economy.
- Higher education finds itself in increasing competition with business and industry for such professionals as nursing practitioners and IT personnel, among many others.

- Calls for greater accountability abound and focus particularly on the success of students as measured by retention and graduation rates.
- Student swirl, wherein university students take courses at a variety of institutions in face-to-face or distance formats simultaneously and successively, is becoming the norm, and as a result, course transferability, particularly with our community college partners, is a particular challenge.
- The United States is challenged to retain its degree of prominence as the world's flattening accelerates and the country looks to higher education to play a critical role in maintaining our global position.
- And while a higher education degree is still a valued component of the American Dream for many, there is a growing skepticism in some quarters about higher education, its relevance, and its ability as a sector of contemporary society to respond nimbly.

The Western Carolina University of March 29, 2012, holds dear its historic commitments to access and meeting regional need while confronting challenges of enormous consequence.

Where do we go from here? Allow me to provide a glimpse. Western will define its future guided by five principles:

First, Western proudly affirms and pledges its commitment to access to higher education but does so with a concomitant commitment to student success.

Too often, student access and student success are viewed as polar opposites, the former seen as an open door regardless of ability, the latter, as the purview of the capable. This should not and must not be the case. The issue is not access vs. success, but access AND success. Western will define this new paradigm.

Second, Western just as proudly affirms and pledges its commitment to meeting regional need in Western North Carolina.

The tapestry which is Western North Carolina is rich in variety. It is an area which encompasses the rural communities of the extreme western counties and the burgeoning metropolitan area stretching south from Asheville through Hendersonville along the I-26 corridor.

Western North Carolina is an area defined by unique populations: the Cherokee who have age-long ties to the region, their ancestral home; Southern Highlanders, descendants of Scots-Irish settlers who built lives for themselves in a region long isolated by geography which, in turn, fostered a fierce independence borne of necessity; and much more recent arrivals from around the country who retreat to the mountains in the summers – some for weeklong vacations, others for six months at a time.

And Western North Carolina is an area defined by haves and have-nots, towns that struggle to survive and cities thriving with commerce and investment. Western North Carolina is not a homogenous whole, but, rather, a complex collection of distinct pasts, individual presents, and potentially disparate futures.

Western Carolina University will never be – nor should it ever be – THE leader in meeting regional need. But it can and will be a leader in that endeavor.

Western Carolina will partner with local communities, industries, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, and civic leaders to meet individual needs throughout the region.

But Western also will be a catalyst for regional thinking and regional competitiveness and regional cooperation and regional solutions, for the time of town vs. town, county vs. county, and city vs. city competition is over. Regions compete with regions to attract business, industry, investment, tourism, talent, and the creative class.

And regions which coalesce around common goals are those which thrive; those which do not will find it harder to do so. Western's focus on its region, then, will balance focus on individual needs of specific communities, businesses, or nonprofits with a focus on the region as a whole. The university has remarkable intellectual capacity and discipline-based expertise to bring to bear on this special place, and the university will assume responsibility for applying them toward our region's economic and community development.

Third, Western Carolina pledges to focus.

My mantra since arriving at Western last summer has been that we, as an institution, cannot be all things to all people. We never could, but the economic climate of recent years and the resulting budget reductions have made this fact, which we too often have chosen to ignore, a blatant reality.

The 2011-2012 fiscal year has witnessed a major strategic planning initiative at Western, one which has engaged both internal and external constituents in envisioning the next years of the institution.

The strategic planning steering committee has taken quite seriously the charge to help Western prioritize and has presented the university with a DRAFT list of areas for curricular focus in Western's future, among them education; health care; the environment; innovation, technology, and engineering; recreation, hospitality, and tourism; and the arts and culture.

These are not random thematic choices but rather themes which stem from the listening tour which the strategic planning committee conducted throughout our region last fall. These themes represent areas of need, strength, resonance, opportunity, and potential in our region. They distinguish us.

To be fair, these may or may not be the ultimate thematic areas of emphasis for Western's immediate future. We will continue to vet these issues on our campus and with our community in the coming months.

But I articulate them to demonstrate that this is an institution which has already begun, in a holistic way, to demonstrate its commitment to thoughtful and intentional focus, which in turn will steer our efforts in program prioritization, allocation and reallocation of resources, and organizational structure if and as necessary.

And our focus will distinguish us.

Fourth, Western pledges to value, expect, and embody excellence.

I am aware that the word “excellence” is overused to the point of being cliché, but there is a reason that is so. The Beethoven Fifth Symphony is an overperformed work of classical music because it is magnificent; people worldwide have studied the writings of Shakespeare and Plato for centuries because they are timeless.

We pursue excellence because it is worthy of pursuit, among the worthiest of pursuits, not just in and of itself, but rather, in our case, because of its implications for the people we serve. “Good enough” is just not good enough for Western North Carolina.

And so we will assure our students a first-class, rigorous educational experience full of opportunities to apply knowledge gained in the classroom in applied real-world settings.

We will consistently review curricula to ensure their depth and relevance.

Our scholarship and service to the university, to our disciplines, and for our public will represent excellent thinking, innovation, the cutting edge, and high standards.

Our processes will be streamlined and efficient.

We will expend financial resources wisely and strategically.

We will, by golly, have an outstanding football team.

And we will dare to hire faculty and staff colleagues who are as good if not better than we are, people with promise and ambition, individuals who resonate with our vision of where we're headed as opposed to where we've been, the next generation of leaders to whom we can hand this institution off with confidence in their capacity to define and attain the next level.

Western is and will be an institution of ambition and high standards, and will be widely known as such.

Fifth and finally, Western pledges to take care of its people, the faculty and staff who do the real work of this university.

The faculty and staff at Western are incredible. They love this place, they are devoted to our students, they love what they do, and they are indispensable.

The economic conditions of our state and nation have had serious consequences for them. As has been the case in many sectors of our society, our faculty and staff have not had salary increases in three to four years.

Their workloads have increased dramatically because of sizable staff reductions. Faculty members valiantly cope with larger class sizes and larger numbers of class assignments because our enrollment is virtually the same as at the beginning of the economic crisis and is predicted to grow.

Fewer numbers of mechanics and housekeepers and maintenance crews and grounds crews struggle to keep the campus safe, attractive, and functioning.

Staff reductions have resulted in one-deep offices where, when an employee is sick or out of the office for any reason, the work of that office ceases until the employee's return. These staff reductions have unfortunately not been accompanied by a reduction in federal and state regulations.

And, as if this were not enough, some of our best and brightest – staff as well as faculty – are leaving Western and walking out of North Carolina. While hiring at the moment in this state is limited and our flexibility to retain talent virtually nonexistent, universities in other states are raiding us with abandon. It is not a pretty picture, and if North Carolina is serious about coming through this economic crisis with the competitive advantage to which it has grown accustomed, this situation must be addressed.

The economic crisis has necessitated difficult situations for all – we get that. But, inasmuch as North Carolina's future prospects are directly tied to the strength of its public universities, we must address faculty and staff compensation issues. I pledge to you that Western Carolina and I will be squeaky wheels in search of grease.

Taking care of our people is about more, however, than money. It is about consistent professional development and training opportunities. It is about leadership development and succession planning. It is about paperwork reduction and process efficiency to enable faculty and staff to focus their energies on students and job priorities. And it is about facilitating an environment of trust and respect.

Western Carolina University will be distinguished by the way it takes care of its people.

So, five big, overarching commitments: To student access AND student success; to our region and its economic and community development; to focus; to excellence; and to our people.

So, what will these commitments look like in reality on the ground where we really do our work?

In many ways, the answer to that question will evolve over the coming years and will be limited only by our imaginations. Indeed, I see one of my primary roles as chancellor to act as a facilitator for others as they explore their own ideas and possibilities within Western's overall trajectory.

But let me share with you seven ongoing projects which Western will initiate within the next year in pursuit of the fulfillment of these five guiding principles.

One, Western Carolina University will convene a consortium of WNC community college presidents, school superintendents, and leaders from other education organizations such as the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching in pursuit of REAL seamless education.

For nearly 20 years, those of us in the education world have talked the PK-16 language of seamless education with painfully meager results. The consortium we propose is not about creating another organization; indeed, I hope we won't. It is, however, about coming together for real partnerships to target long-festering systemic dilemmas such as, for example, the large numbers of high school

graduates who enter colleges and universities unprepared to succeed in college algebra.

Parenthetically, those of us in higher ed often point our fingers at our K-12 colleagues when such topics arise; I might ask rhetorically, “Who prepares the teachers?”

This project is not about pointing fingers but rather pursuing something along the lines of the advanced placement model wherein vertical teams of subject-specific teachers from the fifth grade through high school work together on a clear curricular continuum to ensure that students are prepared to enter the advanced placement courses by the 11th grade. Such vertical teams should extend into the community colleges and universities, and we should deal with issues of math and literacy and writing, and so forth.

This consortial relationship will not be about periodic meetings of administrators but about enabling the teachers and professors and curriculum specialists who do the real work with the students to pool their intellectual capacity and discipline-specific expertise to figure out solutions that will work.

We are smart people and we can figure out such dilemmas as long as we get out of our silos and target them as a holistic community of educators. And in so doing, Western North Carolina will develop a new model worthy of replication. This project is about both student ACCESS and student success.

Next, Western's No. 1 philanthropic priority will be raising funds for endowed scholarships to make a university education accessible for capable students in perpetuity.

Despite the tuition increases of recent years, Western perennially shows up on the US News and World Report's list of the most affordable universities in the South, a ranking based on the amount of debt our graduates carry away with them when they graduate from Western.

But there are many excellent students who come from modest circumstances and many others whose parents, in this economic climate, have lost their jobs. It doesn't really matter to them that Western Carolina is one of the most affordable institutions in the South; they still cannot afford to attend. Talent, brain power, and ability are terrible things to waste or to thwart, and it is incumbent upon those of us with means to enable these students to attend university.

The relative paucity of endowed scholarships at Western prompted Susan and me to establish an endowed scholarship as soon as we arrived on campus, and this will be the focus of our personal philanthropy while we are here because it is Western's most critical need.

So, friends, think about it – put your name on a chemistry scholarship or a musical theatre scholarship or a special education scholarship or a golf scholarship or an Honors scholarship or a graduate scholarship or a ... well, you get the picture. It's time for us to give back so that Western students will have the resources they need to pursue their educations.

And let me challenge you to resist the charms of instant gratification which might prompt one-time gifts to help a single student in the moment, but rather to ENDOW a scholarship which will generate support for students forever and thus leave a lasting Western legacy.

Third, Western will organize an annual, summer, regional tour for institutional leaders to ensure that the university stays in touch with the region it serves. By leaders, I am not referring to administrators, though some administrators will be included; rather, I am referring to leaders among our faculty, staff, and students.

If we as an institution are serious about our regional mission – and we are – we have to get out of Cullowhee on a regular basis and listen to our region, its leaders, its businesses, chambers of commerce, school districts, community colleges, social service organizations, and nonprofit organizations.

This annual listening tour will both keep Western grounded in and updated regarding our region, its needs and its trajectory AND provide an excellent vehicle for professional development on our campus, which leads me to ...

Fourth: Western will initiate a leadership academy for faculty and staff. This professional development opportunity will not be designed to produce future administrators but to produce, first and foremost, leaders who may indeed become administrators but who may also be: excellent Faculty and Staff Senate chairs; leaders of curricular reform; members of select and targeted task forces; liaisons between the university and community for specific engagement projects; officers in professional organizations; drafters of thoughtful policy; or organizers of academic conferences.

Participants will explore the internal functioning of the university as well as its relationships with the UNC system, the legislative process, and the region Western serves. Participants will study the current big issues surrounding higher education and their local implications. And they will investigate best practices which we can apply at Western.

Yes, this is a professional development opportunity, but it is also a quest to build a community of leaders who will work together, in debate and in agreement, thoughtfully, intelligently, and with substantive understanding of the issues at hand.

Fifth, Western will pursue development of its Millennial Campus as a national model for universities serving rural regions.

As many here will know, my predecessor, Dr. John Bardo, led Western about eight years ago in doubling the size of our campus with the purchase of 340 acres across Highway 107 and in having that property designated as a MILLENNIAL CAMPUS which, by state law, affords the institution the opportunity to invite onto the property so designated private development specifically related to the academic purposes of the university. It is a brilliant model.

We at Western look forward to the opening of our first academic building on that campus this fall – a \$46 million, 160,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art building to house our burgeoning College of Health and Human Sciences. And we anticipate the development of facilities for doctor's offices and clinics and other health-related businesses in close proximity in the near future.

But where to next in the development of this campus? With that question in mind, I asked a group of external and internal leaders with broad perspectives on the future economic and community development of Western North Carolina to form a limited-term task force to consider the future of Western's millennial campus and to help us design processes for decision-making about its future.

As part of their research, they have visited thriving millennial campus projects which have been in place for years, particularly those at North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Those visits have initiated good relationships, introduced us to some best practices, and sparked some intriguing ideas about how we might proceed at Western.

But Western's is a different environment; our rural location will offer unique challenges and opportunities, and Western will grapple with those to realize the benefits of the millennial campus vision afforded us while forging an approach appropriate to our location and region.

Sixth, Western will convene an annual conference of regional leaders and thinkers to explore the kind of regional cohesion which Western North Carolina needs in order to succeed within the new paradigm of regional competition.

This conference will not be a Western Carolina University bully pulpit, though Western is a repository of great talent and expertise across a wide variety of disciplines which can be brought to bear on the range of contemporary challenges we face.

This conference, though, will be a collaboratively orchestrated forum designed to complement the ongoing good work of chambers of commerce, AdvantageWest, the Southwestern Commission, the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, elected officials, and leaders in education, health care, business, and social services.

Western will serve as host for this regional conference, bringing together leadership from across Western North Carolina to grapple with the big issues which we would be wiser to face together than separately, and we will lend of our expertise where helpful and appropriate.

Finally, Western Carolina University will be a present, engaged, consistent, ambitious, and listening partner in the economic and community development of Jackson County.

Western Carolina is far more than a Jackson County university. It is an institution with state impact with a particular focus on the western region of the state. But as it proudly claims and touts its engagement mission and commits itself to regional economic and community development, the institution undermines its credibility if it ignores its own backyard.

So, how will Western build a sustained partnership with depth with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians on the Qualla Boundary?

How does Western really connect with the opposite end of the county – with Cashiers, a wonderful community whose economy is based on hospitality, tourism, and a significant proportion of part-time residents?

How does Western partner with Dillsboro and Sylva to sustain and grow economic vitality?

And how does Western play an appropriate role in the unique place which is Cullowhee, one of the only unincorporated towns in America to play host to a university? Western Carolina University is going to grow and thus, so will Cullowhee. How do we work together and not at cross purposes to manage growth appropriately so as to accommodate growth while sustaining the quality of life which makes this place so unique and wonderful?

These and many others are the questions Western must pursue, not in lecture format, but rather in collaboration with our neighbors – that is, we must if we truly believe in our community engagement mission.

Conclusion

Western Carolina University is a remarkable place of much promise.

This is a university where, in response to the Global Poverty Project presentation last fall by project founder Hugh Evans, faculty, staff, and students such as John Whitmire, Jennifer Cooper, and Andy Miller designed and led a yearlong, institutionwide, grassroots effort to increase awareness of and action toward fighting extreme poverty.

This is the university which placed sixth nationally in terms of the number of undergraduate students whose research was accepted for presentation at the

National Conference on Undergraduate Research being held this weekend in Ogden, Utah; Western is sixth among the 326 colleges and universities who sent students to this year's conference, and this is the seventh consecutive year in which WCU has placed among the top 10 universities in the nation at this conference.

This is a university which attracts remarkable students such as Lauren Gray, a senior majoring in communication, who was elected president of the Public Relations Student Society of America at the organization's national assembly two weeks ago; and students like Andrew Tull, a senior majoring in engineering technology, who worked as an intern with the U.S. Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg last summer where he was responsible for engineering and prototyping battlefield solutions for the Special Forces. He and his WCU colleague Cody Rodgers were assigned the task of solving a classified problem which had plagued the unit and military contractors for years. The team of Tull and Rodgers solved the problem in a matter of weeks, made prototypes, demonstrated its use, and have been awarded a patent for the device which is already in the hands of our soldiers in the field.

This is the university which is home to the Pride of the Mountains Marching Band, which won the 2009 Sudler Trophy, the nation's highest award for college and university marching bands, putting it in league with the elite marching bands of Michigan, Alabama, and Ohio State.

This is a university which, just two weeks ago, was named, for the fifth consecutive year, to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

This is a university whose College of Education and Allied Professions has won the Christa McAuliffe Excellence in Teacher Education Award.

This is a university whose College of Business was listed again this year by the Princeton Review as one of the best schools in the nation for pursuit of an MBA and whose online program in project management was ranked by the national distance education information clearinghouse GetEducated.com No. 1 in terms of quality and affordability.

This is a university whose Center for Rapid Product Realization offers business and industry across the Southeast an array of expertise in adaptive technologies, optoelectronics, intelligent sensor systems, and concept to manufacturing, not to mention an entrepreneurial approach to problem-solving.

This is a university constantly on the lookout for opportunities to meet the educational needs of our region through such initiatives as the MBA cohort program at Harrah's Casino in Cherokee and the consolidation of Western Carolina's Asheville-area programs in a single location at Biltmore Park in South Asheville.

This is a university which offers signature programs in forensic science, forensic anthropology, recreational therapy, entrepreneurship, criminal justice, engineering, engineering technology, public history, nurse anesthesia, physical therapy, Cherokee language, and on and on – superb programs because of the superb faculty who lead them.

This is a university which consistently demonstrates its commitment to strategic partnerships with community colleges, particularly with those which are our closest neighbors including Southwestern, Haywood, Asheville-Buncombe Technical, Tri-County, Blue Ridge, Western Piedmont, and Isothermal Community Colleges.

This is a university whose men's and women's track and field program has, under head coach Danny Williamson, won 21 Southern Conference Championships and whose alumnus, Manteo Mitchell, won a gold medal representing the United States at the Indoor World Championships in Istanbul two weeks ago.

This is a university made proud by such alumni as Michell Hicks, chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; HGTV Vice President Robin Pate; Federal Judge Jim Beaty; Tony White, retired chairman, president, and CEO at Applera Corp. and its successor, Applied Biosystems Inc., the company that accelerated the race to decode the human genome; Carolina Panthers standout Brad Hoover; former La-Z-Boy CEO Jerry Kiser; South College President Steve South; former A-B Tech President Ray Bailey; Frances Owl Smith, the first medical doctor from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; Brad Bradshaw, the former president of Nissan Canada and vice president of Nissan North America; Nora Lynn Finch, the ACC's associate commissioner and senior women's administrator; Gaither Keener, executive vice president and general counsel of Lowe's corporate; Ronnie Carr, who made the first 3-point basket in NCAA history right over here in Reid Gymnasium in the early 1980s; and Gurney Chambers, former Western Carolina faculty member and dean.

Because of the largesse of people with names like Key, Belk, Botner, Elingburg, Hyde, Kimmel, Parris, Phillips, and Spangler, this is a university which boasts 23 endowed professorships which have brought to our campus extraordinary talent, including:

Author Ron Rash whose best-selling novel “Serena” is set to be adapted for the silver screen in a major motion picture featuring actors Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence and directed by Academy Award winner Susanne Bier.

Nationally known educator David Strahan, who has more than 90 publications to his credit and who has collaborated tirelessly with public schools in WNC on initiatives to improve reading instruction in secondary schools and mathematics instruction in rural areas.

Geologist Jerry Miller who has researched water quality issues around the world, focusing on such issues as the environmental impacts of metal mining; the transport of heavy metals and other contaminants in rivers and lakes; and the restoration of river and riparian ecosystems.

And Broadway actor-singer-director Terrence Mann, who originated such Broadway roles as Javier in “Les Miserables,” the Beast in “Beauty and the Beast,” and Rum Tum Tugger in “Cats.” As the star of the show, I’m sure he was a Catamount and not just any old cat.

Western’s endowed professors are incredible resources for an ambitious university.

This is the university whose professor emerita Nancy Helm-Estabrooks led the language therapy team for former U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords.

This is a university where the grounds crews, facilities maintenance staff, human resource personnel, resident assistants, payroll staff, public safety and emergency management personnel, information technology specialists, university center and recreation center staffs, folks in the print shop, the athletics staff, and many others see their roles as integral to the ultimate success of our Western students.

This is a university whose people – faculty AND staff – care fundamentally about students and their work, their futures, their engagement, and the impact they will have on our world.

This is a university whose people understand the PUBLIC nature of the institution and its fundamental obligation to pay attention to the PUBLIC'S needs.

This is a university loved by its students, staff, faculty, and alumni.

And this is a university located in a beautiful slice of heaven.

Western Carolina is a great university with even greater promise, but we have only begun to tap that inherent potential.

It is important to acknowledge that times are indeed daunting, particularly in light of our economic challenges. But as I noted in my opening address to the university community last fall, we are the masters of our own verbs.

We can choose to lay blame or to assume responsibility; to withdraw or to engage; to fret or to act; to fracture or to unite; to obsess over our individual pursuits and agendas or to embrace larger purposes; to evolve incrementally or to envision strategically; to think small or to dream big; to see the glass as half empty or to believe in the promise of its half fullness.

We ARE the masters of our own verbs and, though much lies outside of our control, we can and we will choose our own course.

We cannot do this alone. We seek partners who share our passion for the Western Way, this university's mission, and its future; we seek partners who will support Western's efforts with the resources, public and private, required to realize its potential; we seek those who will partner with us to unleash the capacity and imaginations of our people both at Western and throughout our region; and we seek partners who are unafraid to dream.

A couple of weeks ago, I received a card from Anne Stewart, my eighth-grade English teacher, who wrote to celebrate today's occasion. She shared with me this quotation from Pliny the Younger: "The erection of a monument is superfluous; our memories will endure if our lives deserve it."

I tell you that the life we will breathe into Western Carolina University during our time of stewardship will be worthy of remembrance, not because of the fleeting glory of rankings and statistics, but because of the genuine difference Western will make in the quality of life of the people, the wonderful, resilient, diverse, extraordinary, and ordinary people, we serve. Go Western!

**The remarks as delivered will vary somewhat from the remarks as written.*